

“Our Dwelling Place”

A Sermon on Psalm 90

Texts: Psalm 90; 1 Corinthians 15:50-57

Life is fleeting. The average life span of an American is 78.2 years (75.6 for men, 80.8 for women). That seems like a long time until we consider that the last veteran of World War One (1914-1918) died last year. World War 2 ended sixty-seven years ago. My high school class is holding its fortieth reunion this summer. 9-1-1 occurred more than a decade ago. When viewed in that light, an average life span of 80 years is not all that long. Yet, time keeps marching on. As each and every day goes by we struggle with our sins, we face suffering and calamity, we wonder what tomorrow holds (given the mysterious providence of God), and we worry about facing the wrath of God when we die. In Psalm 90, Moses speaks to this struggle of daily life as he exhorts us to number our days and to live this life in light of eternity.

Throughout our study of the Psalter we have covered select Psalms associated with various authors (David, the sons of Korah, etc.) and Psalms with different content and purposes (royal Psalms, wisdom Psalms, Psalms used in worship in the Jerusalem temple, and so on). As we have done throughout our series, we will look first at the historical background to the composition of Psalm 90, then we will work our way through the text of the Psalm, before we look at the application of this Psalm to the Christian life. We've also sung each of the Psalms we have covered during this series—something the Reformed and Presbyterian churches are well-known for doing, since Reformed Christians consider the Psalter to be the primary hymn book of Christ's church.

We will now take up Psalm 90, the only Psalm written by Moses, which likely makes Psalm 90 the oldest Psalm in the Psalter. As for the historical background to this Psalm, recall that Moses lived about 1500 BC, and David about 1000 BC., so the origin of this Psalm goes back to that time described in the closing chapters of the Book of Deuteronomy when the people of Israel arrived on the plains of Moab, just across the Jordan River from the promised land of Canaan before they crossed the Jordan and conquered Jericho. This puts the composition of Psalm 90 about 500 years before the temple was built in Jerusalem, and well before Israel's kingdom extended all the way from Damascus to Egypt (under David and Solomon). This is why Psalm 90 has such a different feel than the other Psalms.

Psalm 90 is the first Psalm in Book Four of the Psalter (i.e., Psalms 90-106). Most of the Psalms in Book Four are anonymous (the so-called “orphan Psalms”), except Psalm 90 which was written by Moses, and several Psalms which are attributed to David. The Psalms in Book Four tend to deal with difficult questions about human frailty and the meaning of life, the nature of justice and God's faithfulness, and the difficult question of why it is that God does not immediately punish the wicked. These difficult questions about life in a fallen world were raised in Psalm 89 (which closes out Book Three of the Psalter, and which is a Psalm of lament because of Israel's sin). These questions are addressed, in part, throughout the various Psalms found in Book Four.¹

The Psalms we find in Book Four (except for Psalm 90 which was written much earlier) look beyond the glory days of David's kingdom to Israel's day to day struggle with sin, and with the failure of Israel (and

¹ See the discussion in VanGemeran, *Psalms*, Vol. 5, 687-689.

her kings) to obey the covenant God made with them at Mount Sinai. These Psalms deal with God's wrath against sinful people in light of human frailty and weakness. These Psalms powerfully remind us that God is eternal, and we are not. These Psalms tell us that God is holy, and that we are not. These Psalms tell us God rules over all of creation, while we can hardly take care of ourselves. All of these difficult contrasts are raised by Moses in Psalm 90.

Some scholars compare the themes of Psalm 90 (the greatness and glory of God in the light of human finitude) with similar themes found in Isaiah 40 (where Isaiah speaks of God's comfort in light of human weakness and sin). Unlike Isaiah 40, however, Psalm 90 seems to chasten the reader until the final verses of the Psalm. In this Psalm we are reminded that life is harsh at times, and that death is an inevitability. Despite the difficult truths which confront us in this Psalm, Psalm 90 points us ahead to something much, much better—namely the resurrection our bodies and to life eternal in the presence of God. In many ways, this Psalm reflects similar themes to those found in creation account (Genesis 1-3), which should not come as a surprise, given that Moses was the author of both this Psalm and Genesis.²

Psalm 90 has three major sections. The opening verses (1-2) are a hymn of praise to the Lord (“Adonai”), while verses 3-12 lament the transitory nature of life. In the concluding section of the Psalm (vv. 13-17), Moses speaks of the restoration of God's favor toward us, his fallen and sinful people. The Psalm opens as it closes, with a powerful reminder that the eternal Lord is our God, and it is in him alone that we find our hope. Despite the fleeting nature of life and all the suffering and change we must endure, this Psalm reminds us that God never changes and that this life is never futile (despite appearances to the contrary) because this life prepares us for eternal life as depicted in the Psalm. To leave this life is to return to the presence of our creator and redeemer (our dwelling place), which is why this Psalm is so often read or used as a text for Christian funerals.

The 90th Psalm opens by directing us to the sovereign Lord (*Adonai*) who is eternal and the creator of all things. “*Lord, you have been our dwelling place in all generations.*” God is our dwelling place, or our habitation. We are creatures bound to both time and place, while God is bound to neither. Given the troubles of life and the fact of human sin and weakness (to be addressed later on the Psalm), we are directed beyond human existence to that one who created us and who is sovereign over all things. To a Jew of Moses' day used to wandering in the wilderness for forty years, a safe dwelling place meant a good place to camp, with plenty of shade and water. Such a dwelling is a refuge from the harsh environment around us in a sense, and has been for all generations.³ This is similar to Moses' final blessing of Israel, found in Deuteronomy 33:27. “*The eternal God is your dwelling place.*”

The vast difference between God and his creatures begins to come into view in verse 2. “*Before the mountains were brought forth, or ever you had formed the earth and the world, from everlasting to everlasting you are God.*” When we speak of God as eternal (without beginning or end) and immutable (without change), this is why. This is how God reveals himself to us in his word. Before anything was created, God already was. He always was. But all things which exist (heaven and earth) were “brought forth” by God. From this comes the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo* (out of nothing). God created all things, and in him all things hold together.

² Kidner, Psalms 73-150, 327.

³ VanGemeren, Psalms, Vol. 5, 690.

Because we live in an age when people doubt God's existence (i.e., the rise of the so-called "new atheism"), we forget the importance of this verse (and its doctrine) in its original context—the Israelites who worship YHWH are about to enter Canaan, where virtually everyone worshiped false gods. Because God is sovereign and eternal and brought forth all things, his people cannot worship the sun, moon, stars, or any created thing, as do the Canaanites who surround Israel. God's people worship the creator, not the creation. We do not worship the things (in heaven and on earth) which God created and which he brought forth. We worship the true and living God as directed in the first commandment. The closing phrase, "you are God," is a confession of faith in the true and living God (YHWH Adonai), as well as a renunciation of El (the Canaanite deity thought to be the father of all the other pagan gods, and of Baal, who was the chief son of El).⁴ There is no God but the Lord God, who created all things, and his people will dwell with him for all generations. Moses is not condemning modern atheism, but ancient paganism.

In verses 3-12, the focus of the Psalm dramatically shifts from the greatness of God to the frailty and sinfulness of humanity. God is eternal. Not so with us. As we read in verse 3, "*you return man to dust and say, 'Return, O children of man!'*" We are but dust, which reminds us of the fact of Adam's fall into sin and the resulting curse which is death.⁵ Dust we are, and to dust we return. Although it is not stated here, it is certainly implied that our sin is the basis for God's wrath, and it is because of Adam's sin that we will die and return to the dust (the curse).

In verse 4, the stark contrast between the Lord and his creatures comes into view. "*For a thousand years in your sight are but as yesterday when it is past, or as a watch in the night.*" God is outside of time. He alone is eternal. A thousand years—a dozen consecutive life times of modern Americans—is nothing to God. A thousand years to God is like yesterday to us, like a night which has passed when we awake in the morning. Like a swollen stream or river, we read that "*you sweep them away as with a flood; they are like a dream, like grass that is renewed in the morning: in the morning it flourishes and is renewed; in the evening it fades and withers.*" Moses reminds us that we will be washed away by the flood of time. We are bound to time, and time passes. Our lives are like dreams which end each morning when we awake. We are like the tender shoot of a plant, which springs up with the dawn and then is quickly scorched by the afternoon heat of the sun. We have been put in our place. We are mere creatures. We live for a time, and then we are gone. Just think for a moment about how many people have lived before us, how many are alive now, and how many are yet to be born. Everyone of them have died, or will die.

The gulf between God and humanity (often called the creator-creature distinction) is great by the very nature of the fact that we are creatures. Yet, there is the additional factor we must consider. As a race, we have, in Adam, used our creaturely freedom to rebel against our creator. It is because of human sin that our days are numbered, and we must give an account to our Creator on the day of judgment. We are not only finite, we are guilty. We may take sin lightly, but God does not. We read in verse 7, "*for we are brought to an end by your anger; by your wrath we are dismayed.*" No one wants to think about the wrath of God, much less face it. But Moses reminds us that God is angry with us, and that it is God's holy wrath which brings us to our end. We die because we are sinners. And because we are sinners we must face the wrath of an angry God on the day of judgment.

Our sinful condition is made worse by the fact that there is nowhere to hide. God knows everything

⁴ VanGemeren, Psalms, Vol. 5, 690.

⁵ Kidner, Psalms 73-150, 328.

about us, including our intentions and even our deepest, darkest, secrets. As we read in verse 8, “*you have set our iniquities before you, our secret sins in the light of your presence.*” God sees those sins we seek to hide. He reveals what we seek to deny. There is a reason for God’s wrath and anger against us. God is holy and we are sinful. It is the knowledge of this fact which weighs so heavily upon us that Moses can say in verse 9, “*for all our days pass away under your wrath; we bring our years to an end like a sigh.*” There is perhaps no better, or for that matter, no more troubling description of the futility of life than that found here. The days pass, God’s anger against us remains, and we come to the end of our lives with no possibility of escape—if left on our own without the redeeming work of Jesus Christ.

The futility of life is something we all feel at times. At times it overwhelms us. Moses captures this sense of futility in verse 10. “*The years of our life are seventy, or even by reason of strength eighty; yet their span is but toil and trouble; they are soon gone, and we fly away.*” Eighty years seem like such a long time to us. Anyone who dies before they reach that age seems to have been robbed of something. Yet a thousand years pass for God, and it is like one night or a passing dream for us. Our finitude and God’s majesty come into full relief in this verse. He is eternal. We will die. The inevitable reality of this smacks us in the face like ice cold water. We don’t want to consider this. We don’t want to deal with this. Yet we’ve all felt it, we all fear it, and we all seek to avoid it. But this is the lot of sinful creatures who have rebelled against the holy God. Our years will come to an end with a sigh.

The preacher of wisdom says much the same thing about the apparent futility of life in Ecclesiastes 12. “*Remember also your Creator in the days of your youth, before the evil days come and the years draw near of which you will say, ‘I have no pleasure in them’; before the sun and the light and the moon and the stars are darkened and the clouds return after the rain, in the day when the keepers of the house tremble, and the strong men are bent, and the grinders cease because they are few, and those who look through the windows are dimmed, and the doors on the street are shut—when the sound of the grinding is low, and one rises up at the sound of a bird, and all the daughters of song are brought low—they are afraid also of what is high, and terrors are in the way; the almond tree blossoms, the grasshopper drags itself along, and desire fails, because man is going to his eternal home, and the mourners go about the streets—before the silver cord is snapped, or the golden bowl is broken, or the pitcher is shattered at the fountain, or the wheel broken at the cistern, and the dust returns to the earth as it was, and the spirit returns to God who gave it. Vanity of vanities, says the Preacher; all is vanity.*” If we live this life without a sense of what awaits us in the next, then all of life is vanity and we will return to the dust as though we never existed.

It is only when the grim reality of our true condition is brought to mind that we finally face the truth and are forced to consider what we might do about it. As we read in verses 11-12, the good news comes in a declaration that those who fear God and seek his wisdom will find relief from the overwhelming burden of the harsh realities of life and the certainty of death. In this light, Moses exhorts us to examine ourselves accordingly. “*Who considers the power of your anger, and your wrath according to the fear of you? So teach us to number our days that we may get a heart of wisdom.*” Those who seek to be wise will pray for understanding so that we learn to number our days (i.e., make them count), precisely because we don’t know how many days will be given us, and because of the fact that this life is far shorter than it should be (because of the curse). God’s people should learn to seek a “heart of wisdom,” so that we can see beyond the futility of this life and our fear of God’s wrath, and begin to grasp the greatness of the Lord, as well as the wonders of the next life where the Lord God is our dwelling place.

Indeed the one who seeks such wisdom from God will certainly find it. Here is the answer to human finitude and human sin. In the final section of the Psalm (vv. 13-17), we find a prayer with three

petitions: that God restore us to his favor, that the Lord restore to his people the joy of their salvation, and then finally that God's people will live their lives in the light of God's favor. In these verses, Moses implores God to grant his people relief from the sense of futility of life and their fear of God's wrath described in verses 3-12. In fact, the three petitions in this prayer are imperatives.⁶ Moses is not 'ordering' God to act, but as covenant mediator for Israel, at the very least, Moses is imploring God to keep his covenant promise and take pity on his burdened people.

In the first petition in verse 13, Moses implores the Lord God to restore hope to us, that God take away this sense of futility of life and the fear of his wrath after death. Recall that in verse 3, God had rebuked the fallen children of Adam, *'Return, O children of man!* Here, in verse 13, Moses cries to God using the same language. *"Return, O Lord! How long? Have pity on your servants!"* Moses pleads with God to return to his sinful creatures (even as God commands us to return to the dust), only this time not to return in wrath and judgment, but in mercy. This same plea is found in the so-called Song of Moses in Deuteronomy 32:36. *"For the Lord will vindicate his people and have compassion on his servants, when he sees that their power is gone and there is none remaining, bond or free."* Many times, Moses had witnessed God vindicate his suffering people as well as vindicate the just nature of his purposes on behalf of his people, Israel. Moses now implores God to grant relief to his people because of our burden.

Moses' prayer continues in verse 14 with a second plea. *"Satisfy us in the morning with your steadfast love, that we may rejoice and be glad all our days."* In verse 9, Moses told us that all our days are lived under the cloud of God's wrath. We know that our time is short and we feel the futility of life. Yet, because of God's covenant promise—"I will be your God and you will be my people"—Moses can implore God to ensure that all our days be joyful.⁷ In effect, Moses is asking God to ensure that his people may awaken each day with a profound sense of joy, not with the fear and dread depicted earlier in the Psalm. And so Moses prays that we, as the people of God, may rejoice in the knowledge of God's love toward us, and that may we be glad all our days—that is, all the days we live.

To put it another way, Moses prays that the burden of daily life and the fear of God's wrath will be lifted from us. In verse 15, Moses asks that God, *"make us glad for as many days as you have afflicted us, and for as many years as we have seen evil."* We might paraphrase Moses' prayer as "may the joys of knowing the love of God, balance the reality of human sin and frailty." May our trials and suffering be balanced by the joys of life. May the funerals, sickness, suffering, and bad news be balanced out by the sweetness of births and birthdays, weddings and anniversaries, graduations and promotions.

In verse 16, Moses pleads of the Lord, *"let your work be shown to your servants, and your glorious power to their children."* What gives us confidence that Moses' prayer (and ours) will be answered is an awareness that God always keeps his covenant promises. We are not praying to some pagan deity who doesn't exist and who has no real power. We are praying to the Lord God, the Creator and sustainer of all things. We are praying to the same covenant-keeping God who sent his son Jesus Christ to die for all of our sins, and who raised Jesus from the dead for our justification. As we saw in our study of Hebrews 11, the saints of God all believed the same covenant promise—that God will save us from the guilt, power, and even the consequences of our sin. So even though Moses had not seen the coming of Jesus Christ, he saw God deliver his people from the Egyptians, and take them to the very edge of the promise land of

⁶ VanGemeran, Psalms, Vol. 5, 694-695.

⁷ Kidner, Psalms 73-150, 331.

Canaan. His prayer is, “let your people see your saving work on their behalf.” “Let our children see your glorious power.” In the person and work of Jesus Christ we have seen far greater things than Moses saw.

In the concluding words of the Psalm, Moses offers yet another prayer; “*let the favor of the Lord our God be upon us, and establish the work of our hands upon us; yes, establish the work of our hands!*” If the Lord’s favor rests upon us, then our lives will not be in vain. God will also establish the work of our hands—i.e., what we do in this life will not be futile. What we do will count for something. There is no doubt that life is nothing but futility and vanity for those who live out their eighty years and then die, only to face God’s wrath and anger for their sins. But those who seek God’s wisdom and who know God’s favor (through faith in Jesus Christ), the futility of life will disappear when God answers these prayers of Moses which we find in the 90th Psalm, prayers which we too must make our own.

And so as we wrap up, we are right back at the place from which Moses began, the eternal and sovereign God is our dwelling place. How does this knowledge give our lives meaning and chase away the gloom of human weakness, sin, and the reality of a life-span of a mere eighty years?

If we do not learn to number our days, our lives will be futile. Day after day will come and go, and we will have nothing to show for them. This sad set of circumstances is the basis of our sense of futility. If we seek God’s wisdom (revealed in his word), then we will be satisfied. If we seek God’s wisdom, we will be glad. If we seek God’s wisdom, then we will know that God has poured out his love and favor upon us in the person of Jesus Christ. It is only in the light of the suffering and death of Jesus Christ, for us, and in our place, we understand that God has given us callings and vocations which fulfill, in part, the purposes for which he created us. Only then do the comforting words of Paul in Romans 8:28 make sense. “*And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose.*” Life will be tough, and we will struggle with sin. But the sense of futility and vanity of life departs once we believe that when God promises that all things in this life work together for good, he also secures for us all of the blessings of the next.

If a Jew living in the days of Moses saw in the language of a “dwelling place” safety from the elements and plenty of shade and water, then we see in this language something much different. As Paul writes of the resurrection in 1 Corinthians 15 (our New Testament lesson), “*I tell you this, brothers: flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable. Behold! I tell you a mystery. We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we shall be changed. For this perishable body must put on the imperishable, and this mortal body must put on immortality. When the perishable puts on the imperishable, and the mortal puts on immortality, then shall come to pass the saying that is written: ‘Death is swallowed up in victory.’ ‘O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting?’ The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.*”

Although we may learn to number of days and gain an eternal perspective on the struggles of daily life, nevertheless our days are still numbered—they will come to an end. Barring the second coming of Jesus Christ, we will die. What gives us hope, joy, and gladness in the face of this is the knowledge of God’s favor toward us in Jesus Christ. Jesus’ death takes away our fear of God’s wrath, and Jesus resurrection give us the hope that the sovereign and eternal God will be our dwelling place. Just as Jesus has been raised, so we too shall be raised from the dead, and so too we will dwell in the house of the Lord forever. In knowing that the Lord God is my dwelling place, everything I do in this life now has meaning and purpose. No longer is life mere vanity and endless futility. Teach us, Lord to number our days. Make us

glad. Show your favor to us, and establish the work of our hands. For you are our dwelling place.