



Psalm 90 - God's Eternity and Human Frailty

A Prayer of Moses, the man of God.

Introduction

This community lament has some unspecified disaster as its background and asks God to have pity on his people and bless them. The title, which ascribes the psalm to Moses, invites the singing congregation to picture Israel around the time of Deuteronomy, as they were about to cross the Jordan River and enter the Promised Land. Their parents had followed Moses out of Egypt, through the parted Red Sea – and yet they rebelled, so that God swore that they would not enter the land; refer to Numbers 14:20-36. For the Israelites to accomplish their mission and for God to establish the work of their hands would require that the people embrace the covenant and live in faith toward God. Those who sing this should see themselves as the heirs of that generation, seeking like them the blessing of God so that they can carry out their mission.

This psalm stresses time and how it passes, as can be seen from the various time words throughout: days and years; this is seen through the description of God as eternal and unchanging in all generations, for he is from everlasting to everlasting. The awareness of how short human life is leads to earnest prayer for God's help, without which his people can accomplish nothing of lasting value.

This psalm is the basis of the familiar hymn, 'O God, Our Help in Ages Past.' The title points to this lament as a prayer by 'Moses, the man of God,' which is confirmed in Deuteronomy 33:1 and Joshua 14:6. Generally, the OT uses the expression 'man of God' for a prophet, e.g. 1 Samuel 2:27 and 9:6, 1 Kings 12:22, 13:1 and 17:18, and 2 Kings 4:7. Moses was, of course, a prophet par excellence.

Some commentators think this was not the famous and familiar Moses, but the evidence is much stronger for believing that this was indeed the great leader of Israel. This is the only song of Moses in the Psalms, but there are two others in the Pentateuch; refer to Exodus Chapter 15 and Deuteronomy Chapters 32-33.

If the psalm is connected with any particular time in the life of Moses, the best suggestion is that the historical setting is probably best understood by the incidents recorded in Numbers Chapter 20: (1) the death of Miriam, Moses' sister; (2) the sin of Moses in striking the rock in the wilderness, which kept him from entering the Promised Land; and (3) the death of Aaron, Moses' brother. Charles Spurgeon wrote of the phrase, 'The man of God': "Moses was peculiarly a man of God and God's man; chosen of God, inspired of God, honoured of God, and faithful to God in all his house, he well deserved the name which is here given him."

Psalm 90:1-2 - The Lord Is Eternal.

The Lord is the dwelling place, i.e. the home and refuge, for his people in all generations because he himself is eternal. He has been God since before the creation. That God is the creator is assumed, and that the Lord has always been God indicates that he always will be, i.e. that he will never change.

¹ Lord, you have been our dwelling-place
in all generations.

Psalm 90:1

Lord, you have been our dwelling-place. The title indicates this is a prayer of Moses, almost certainly written during the wilderness years on the way to Canaan. In all those years Israel lived in constant need of refuge, shelter, and protection. More than their tents and their armies, Israel had God as their dwelling place, their refuge and their protection.

Our dwelling-place in all generations. Moses understood that Yahweh's help to his people did not begin with the exodus from Egypt. From their pilgrim beginnings under their patriarch Abraham to the days of Moses, God had been their dwelling place, their refuge and protection: <<*The Lord is the strength of his people; he is the saving refuge of his anointed*>> (Psalm 28:8), <<*God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble*>> (Psalm 46:1), and: <<*O Lord, my strength and my stronghold, my refuge on the day of trouble, to you shall the nations come from the ends of the earth and say: Our ancestors have inherited nothing but lies, worthless things in which there is no profit*>> (Jeremiah 16:19).

It is not a good thing to say of anyone, homeless. Spiritually speaking, that need never be the state of the believer. Christians have their home in Jesus, and home should be a place where they rest, where they can be themselves, where love and happiness dominate. All this should mark their relationship with God. Charles Spurgeon commented, "In this Eternal One there is a safe abode for the successive generations of men. If God himself were of yesterday, he would not

be a suitable refuge for mortal men; if he could change and cease to be God he would be but an uncertain dwelling-place for his people.”

- ² Before the mountains were brought forth,
or ever you had formed the earth and the world,
from everlasting to everlasting you are God.

Psalm 90:2

Before the mountains were brought forth. In the wilderness on the slow route to Canaan, Moses saw mountains on the horizon and reflected on the truth that God was there before those mountains. It was God who formed the earth and the world: <<*In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters*>> (Genesis 1:1-2), and: <<*In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people*>> (John 1:1-4).

From everlasting to everlasting you are God. Before anything existed God was. From eternity past through eternity future, i.e. everlasting to everlasting, he exists, independent of all his creation.

Psalm 90:3-6 - But Man’s Life Is Fleeting.

In contrast to God’s eternity, human life – even the longest imaginable, i.e. a thousand years (v.4) – is insignificantly brief as expressed in the images of a watch in the night, a flood, a dream and grass. Refer also to Job 14:1-2, Psalm 103:15-18, Isaiah 40:6-8 and James 1:11. The psalm evokes God’s sentence in Eden on the sin of Adam and Eve (v.3), which means that the fleeting life span is due to the entry of sin into the world, i.e. it is not an inherent part of being human.

- ³ You turn us back to dust,
and say, ‘Turn back, you mortals.’

Psalm 90:3

You turn us back to dust. Moses had seen the judgement of God turn man to destruction. He saw it with wicked Egypt and disobedient Israel. The eternal God who created all things was and is a God to be appropriately feared and respected by man. He takes interest in the affairs of men and exercises his holy judgement. Even though the word ‘dust’ here, Hebrew *dakka*, is not the same as that in Genesis 3:19, where the ordinary Hebrew word *apar* is used, the coupling of turn or ‘return’ with a word for loose soil makes the reference to Genesis clear.

Turn back, you mortals. This was not a call to repentance; it was a command of man to return to the dust from which he came, an echo of: <<*you are dust, and to dust you shall return*>> (Genesis 3:19b).

- 4 For a thousand years in your sight
are like yesterday when it is past,
or like a watch in the night.
- 5 You sweep them away; they are like a dream,
like grass that is renewed in the morning;
- 6 in the morning it flourishes and is renewed;
in the evening it fades and withers.

Psalm 90:4-6

For a thousand years in your sight are like yesterday when it is past. Having introduced the idea of God's eternal being, living outside of time with no beginning or end, Moses poetically repeated the idea. For the eternal God, a thousand years seems like a single day, and a single day in the past, not the present. The apostle echoes this view: <<*But do not ignore this one fact, beloved, that with the Lord one day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like one day*>> (2 Peter 3:8).

You sweep them away. From God's eternal perspective the days and the years and each millennium passes quickly. In fact, for God time does not exist at all and he can see the beginning from the end: <<*'I am the Alpha and the Omega', says the Lord God, who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty*>> (Revelation 1:8), and: <<*I am the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end*>> (Revelation 22:13). For Moses and Israel in the wilderness time seemed to pass slowly, but Moses knew this was not God's perspective. From God's perspective, a thousand years passes quickly just like a dream.

Like grass that is renewed in the morning. Moses used many poetic pictures to describe God and time. In God's sight a thousand years was like yesterday, like a watch in the night, like a flood, like a night of sleep. He added this picture: that a thousand years is like grass which grows up in the morning and in the evening it is cut down and fades and withers. God's perspective of the passing of time is very different from that of people. Spurgeon noted, "We are not cedars, or oaks, but only poor grass, which is vigorous in the spring, but lasts not a summer through. What is there upon earth more frail than we!"

Psalm 90:7-11 - We Are Brought to an End by Your Wrath.

The people of God reflect on the unfaithfulness of past generations in which they harboured iniquities and secret sins (v.8), which resulted in God's anger and wrath. The whole body of God's people suffers from the presence and influence of its unfaithful members, and God's judgements that purge them from his people are hard even for the faithful to endure. Hence the whole people experience toil and trouble during their brief span of life.

- 7 For we are consumed by your anger;
by your wrath we are overwhelmed.
- 8 You have set our iniquities before you,
our secret sins in the light of your countenance.

Psalm 90:7-8

For we are consumed by your anger. In the first section of this psalm Moses connected the ideas of God's eternal nature and his judgement upon man. In this section the two ideas are repeated. The God who stands over time and sees a thousand years as yesterday, certainly has the right and the authority to judge mankind, and especially his own people. In the wilderness Moses and the people of Israel felt consumed by God's anger and overwhelmed by his wrath. It must have been remarkable for Moses to see a whole generation melt away in the wilderness, dying away under the judgement of God: *<<Say to them, 'As I live', says the Lord, 'I will do to you the very things I heard you say: your dead bodies shall fall in this very wilderness; and of all your number, included in the census, from twenty years old and upwards, who have complained against me, not one of you shall come into the land in which I swore to settle you, except Caleb son of Jephunneh and Joshua son of Nun. But your little ones, who you said would become booty, I will bring in, and they shall know the land that you have despised>>* (Numbers 14:28-31).

Spurgeon commented further, "This was specially the case in reference to the people in the wilderness, whose lives were cut short by justice on account of their waywardness; they failed, not by a natural decline, but through the blast of the well-deserved judgements of God."

You have set our iniquities before you. The judgement of God came against his people because of their iniquities. When the eternal, holy God saw and considered them, the response was his anger and wrath. Moses understood that God's anger against his people was not unreasonable or unjust.

Our secret sins in the light of your countenance. It was not only their obvious iniquities but also their secret sins that God saw. Such sins were not secret before God and his judgement.

9 For all our days pass away under your wrath;
our years come to an end like a sigh.

10 The days of our life are seventy years,
or perhaps eighty, if we are strong;
even then their span is only toil and trouble;
they are soon gone, and we fly away.

Psalm 90:9-10

For all our days pass away under your wrath. With power and poetry Moses compared the eternal nature of the holy God with the frail, temporary nature of sinful man. God stands forever, but long days have passed away in his wrath and human life ends like a sigh.

The days of our life are seventy years. Moses lived to 120 years according to Deuteronomy 31:2 and 34:7. He did not say this as either a promise or a limit, but as a poetic estimate of a lifespan. The emphasis is on the futility of life; even if one should live past the norm of seventy years and live eighty years, the end of it all is only labour and sorrow, toil and trouble.

They are soon gone, and we fly away. Moses described the short and often futile sense of this life. The deep cry of Moses seems to anticipate important themes in Ecclesiastes.

11 Who considers the power of your anger?

Your wrath is as great as the fear that is due to you.

Psalm 90:11

Who considers the power of your anger? Moses connected the ideas of a relatively short and frustrating life to the fact of God's righteous judgement. He especially saw and lived this in the wilderness. Spurgeon commented, "Moses saw men dying all around him; he lived among funerals, and was overwhelmed at the terrible results of the divine displeasure. He felt that none could measure the might of the Lord's wrath."

Psalm 90:12-17 - Teach Us Wisdom and Establish Our Work.

These considerations lead to eager prayer for God to guide his people in faithful living (v.12), to draw near to them and make them glad (vv.13-15), and to bless their endeavours (vv.16-17).

- 12 So teach us to count our days
that we may gain a wise heart.

Psalm 90:12

So teach us to count our days. When Moses considered the frail nature of humanity and the righteous judgement of God, it made him ask God for the wisdom to understand the shortness of life. In view of the theme of the psalm, this refers especially to the ability to make the most of one's days, since they are so few.

So teach us means that this wisdom must be learned. It is not automatic. Most people live with little awareness that life is short and their days should be numbered. This is a theme that is demonstrated well in 'Time' by Pink Floyd. Young people especially often think their days have no number and give little thought to what lies beyond this life.

That we may gain a wise heart. The heart of wisdom would enable the faithful to live by the right priorities, i.e. the 'fear' of God (v.11). Learning to count our days will give God's people a heart of wisdom. This is wisdom not only for the mind, but for the heart as well.

- 13 Turn, O Lord! How long?
Have compassion on your servants!
- 14 Satisfy us in the morning with your steadfast love,
so that we may rejoice and be glad all our days.
- 15 Make us glad for as many days as you have afflicted us,
and for as many years as we have seen evil.

Psalm 90:13-15

Turn, O Lord! How long? This psalm of Moses carefully considered the judgement of God. The prayerful response to that consideration is a plea to God for his presence, for his compassion, and for his mercy or steadfast love - the *hesed* of Yahweh, his loyal covenant love. Turn in the sense of return, i.e. come back to us, turn from your anger, as Moses had cried out in order to save the Israelites from righteous judgement when they had sinned: <<**Why should the Egyptians**

say, "It was with evil intent that he brought them out to kill them in the mountains, and to consume them from the face of the earth"? Turn from your fierce wrath; change your mind and do not bring disaster on your people>> (Exodus 32:12).

In v.3 God spoke to mankind in judgement, telling him to return to the dust. Now in prayer Moses asked God to turn or return. It is as if Moses said to God's people, "If you continue in sin you will return to the dust; your only hope is for God to return to you."

How long? This was a meaningful question. Moses asked God not to delay in bringing his presence, compassion, and mercy to his people. It was a bold question, almost accusing God of being late in his help. Again Spurgeon commented, "When men are under chastisement they are allowed to expostulate, and ask 'how long?' Our fault in these times is not too great boldness with God, but too much backwardness in pleading with him."

Satisfy us in the morning is probably a metaphor, where the current situation is the night and the singers look eagerly for the light of morning (as in Psalm 30:5, 46:5, 59:16, 130:6, and 143:8), the time when God will make his steadfast love clear to his people. Then they will be able to rejoice and be glad all their days.

Make us glad for as many days as you have afflicted us. Many were the days of their affliction; Moses asked that the days of their gladness would also be many. He hoped the days of gladness would be so long that God's glory would be evident even to their children, i.e. to all their future generations.

¹⁶ Let your work be manifest to your servants,
and your glorious power to their children.

¹⁷ Let the favour of the Lord our God be upon us,
and prosper for us the work of our hands –
O prosper the work of our hands!

Psalm 90:16-17

Let your work be manifest to your servants is a call for God to display his love towards his people in great deeds of power that enable them to flourish.

And your glorious power to their children. God made his covenant with Abraham and with his offspring, who must themselves embrace the covenant, and the OT faithful seek the continuation of the people through their own pious children; refer to Psalm 78:3-8, 103:17 and 145:4.

Let the favour of the Lord our God be upon us. Earlier in Psalm 90 Moses spoke of God's people being consumed and terrified. He prayed that the gracious God would exchange that misery for his own favour or beauty. The favour of the Lord our God is great beauty. It is impossible to think of a higher level of beauty or goodness. Favour, Hebrew *no'am*, is translated 'beauty' in Psalm 27:4. God's own beauty is on display through his faithful servants.

The work of our hands is the work that God's people do in pursuit of their calling: <<*the Levites, because they have no allotment or inheritance with you, as well as the resident aliens, the orphans, and the widows in your towns, may come and eat their fill so that the Lord your God may bless you in all the work that you undertake*>> (Deuteronomy 14:29), <<*For seven days you shall keep the festival to the Lord your God at the place that the Lord will choose; for the Lord your God will bless you in all your produce and in all your undertakings, and you shall surely celebrate*>> (Deuteronomy 16:15), and: <<*When you reap your harvest in your field and forget a sheaf in the field, you shall not go back to get it; it shall be left for the alien, the orphan, and the widow, so that the Lord your God may bless you in all your undertakings*>> (Deuteronomy 24:19). The final aspect of blessing Moses prayed for was for the permanence of the work of God's people. Without this blessing, their work and its effectiveness pass quickly and are of little impact. Spurgeon also commented, "Good men are anxious not to work in vain. They know that without the Lord they can do nothing, and therefore they cry to him for help in the work, for acceptance of their efforts, and for the establishment of their designs." The apostle Paul once wrote: <<*For even when we were with you, we gave you this command: Anyone unwilling to work should not eat*>> (2 Thessalonians 3:10).