Psalm 90: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0:00] Psalm 90, A Prayer of Moses, the Man of God Lord, you have been our dwelling place in all generations. Before the mountains were brought forth, or ever you had formed the earth and the world, from everlasting to everlasting, you are God.

You return man to dust, and say, Return, O children of man. For a thousand years in your sight are but as yesterday when it is past, or as a watch in the night.

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.

For we are brought to an end by your anger. By your wrath we are dismayed. You have set our iniquities before you, our secret sins in the light of your presence. For all our days pass away under your wrath.

We bring our years to an end like a sigh. The years of our life are seventy, or even by reason of strength eighty. Yet their span is but toil and trouble.

[1:04] They are soon gone, and we fly away. 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.

Return, O Lord. How long? Have pity on your servants. Satisfy us in the morning with your steadfast love, that we may rejoice and be glad all our days.

Make us glad for as many days as you have afflicted us, and for as many years as we have seen evil. Let your work be shown to your servants, and your glorious power to their children.

Let the favour of the Lord our God be upon us, and establish the work of our hands upon us. Yes, establish the work of our hands. Psalm 90 is the first psalm of Book 4 of the Psalter.

Book 4 is the shortest of the five books. It is also the only material attributed to Moses in the whole of the Psalter. Such attributions are not necessarily inspired, and may well be later additions.

[2:06] Most scholars have rejected Mosaic authorship of this psalm, dating it to the post-exilic period, although some, like Mitchell de Hood, date it much earlier. Alan Ross is among those who make a case for the traditionally accepted Mosaic authorship as the most likely.

He considers that the suggestion that the psalm is a composition that imagines how Moses would pray were he in the nation's current condition, is unnecessarily contrived. In the books of Exodus and Deuteronomy we have songs of Moses, but this prayer is only found in the book of Psalms.

The description of Moses as the man of God is also found in Deuteronomy chapter 33 verse 1. Beth Tanner is an example of someone who does not accept Mosaic authorship, but thinks that a dedication to Moses is apt.

She writes, In addition, a theme of this psalm is that God is angry at the people, and if Clifford is correct, has been for a long period of time.

If this is the case, it is possible that this superscription and connections in the psalm to Exodus and Deuteronomy are an attempt to imagine how Moses might have interceded again for Israel, as he did in the wilderness, another time where God was angry with the wayward people.

[3:28] Of course, Tanner's argument could be reworked to make a case for the great resonance of a psalm of Mosaic authorship in a much later context. Other scholars see the figure of Moses as an especially prominent one behind the material of the fourth book, a collection which includes exilic and post-exilic material.

Marvin Taits suggests that book four of the Psalter might be termed a Moses book, with the Exodus and wilderness narratives being particularly important and prominent theological background, situating material that emphasises the Davidic covenant relative to this older covenant framework.

Scholars differ over how to classify this psalm in terms of its genre. While its style is consistent, some scholars have seen a disjunction in its logic, and have suggested that it is actually two psalms joined together, verses 1-12 and verses 13-17.

There is no reason to suppose that this is the case, though. It begins with the eternity of God, in terms of which human finitude and fleetingness will appear in the sharpest of relief.

God himself is the dwelling place of his people, the one in whom they can find security. He is not subject to the changeableness of his creation. He is firmer and more enduring than the mountains themselves.

[4:39] He pre-exists the creation itself. Even in the dislocation of captivity or exile, his people can dwell in him. At many points in the Psalms, Zion and the temple are presented as the site of God's dwelling, and the places where people can flee to no communion with and refuge in him.

However, at points like this, the fact that God does not dwell in temples made with hands, but is himself the dwelling place for his people, comes into very clear view.

In such verses, we are given a vision of God's transcendence, the fact that he can't be contained within any of the horizons of his own creation, whether physical or conceptual. He far exceeds them all.

While the scripture does not typically adopt the modes of expression employed by classical theism, at points like this, we get a better sense of their conceptual proximity, their theological compatibility, and perhaps also their mutually illuminating character.

God is above the order of the temporal creation. He is not subject to the forces of change. He is not circumscribed by locality, but is the one in whom all creatures live and move and have their being.

[5:45] He is the dwelling place of his people in a special sense, as the one who sustains them, protects them, empowers them, and surrounds them. The temple may be a focal symbol of God, as the one who gives his people refuge, but God himself far exceeds and cannot be contained by this symbol.

Meditating upon the import of such descriptions of God, and the fundamental claims about God as the uncreated creator of all things, theologians have recognised the limitations of all of our attempts to capture God in human or created categories, realities, or language, as God so vastly exceeds them all.

However, in his grace, God has condescended to come near to us, and has given himself to be understood truly by us, in a manner that is analogical and never comprehensive. In contrast, the eternity, immortality, and immutability of God, mankind's transitory nature, his mortality and frailty, are most apparent.

Man was created from the dust, and God can return man to pulverised dust. The word for dust here is not the same as that in Genesis chapter 3. Spans of time that are almost incomprehensible to man are as nothing to God, like a few hours of the night might feel to us, or as a single day passing.

The transient character of life is comparable to the passage into a dream, or to the grass that flourishes in the morning and fades and withers by evening. Human life is fleeting, and God sweeps it into the sleep of death.

[7:14] We are barely awake to ourselves and reality until we pass into deep sleep. Like grass in the morning, we are born and we rise up. Like grass in the evening, we wither and pass into the night of death.

The same imagery as we see here is also famously employed in Isaiah chapter 40 verses 6 to 8. All flesh is grass, and all its beauty is like the flower of the field.

The grass withers, the flower fades, when the breath of the Lord blows on it. Surely the people are grass. The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God will stand forever.

The brevity of life is related to God's wrath and anger in verses 7 to 12. William Brown comments upon the employment of the imagery of God's face in these verses.

God's face is often sought by the psalmist, who longs for God's reviving presence in his distress. However, here we see a different aspect of God's countenance. As Brown observes, the divine light of God's face not only exposes hidden sins, it consumes life itself.

[8:15] The psalmist seems to be speaking here of something more than merely mortality as such, even mortality as a result of the fall. This is life lived in alienation from God's favour.

It's a thin, pale, shadowy thing beneath the searching light of God's consuming holiness. This is a doomed generation of the children of Israel dying out in the wilderness, or Judah in captivity in Babylon.

Life slips away and ends like a sigh, a surrendering of a final breath, so light and fragile a thing is human existence. Perhaps we might cling on to life for a little longer, an extra decade perhaps, but we will have little to show for such gains.

Such years are no less fleeting and typically afflicted with added pain. Tanner argues that verse 11 is a rhetorical question, asking how long God's anger will continue. The point is to provoke a sense of the greatness of the anger of an immortal God.

She argues following Richard Clifford. He notes that based on Ugaritic and Akkadian uses of cognates, the phrase to count the days does not refer to the span of life, but to a specific preset period of time.

[9:23] Verse 12 then is not a plea for God to teach the humans wisdom, but a plea for the humans to accurately tally the days of God's wrath, so that they will understand there is indeed an end to it.

Other interpretations have been proposed for these verses. Ross suggests that it refers to the need to consider the experience of the wrath of God, our pronounced frailty and mortality according to the fear of the Lord.

In this context, numbering our days involves evaluating our lives rather than simply passing through them insensibly. We must consider the limits of human life, be aware of the death that awaits us, and consider the passing of our fleeting time as we hasten towards it.

Reflection upon the brevity of life and the finality of death is an important theme in the wisdom literature, especially in the book of Ecclesiastes. For instance, in Ecclesiastes chapter 7 verses 1 to 4, A good name is better than precious ointment, and the day of death than the day of birth.

It is better to go to the house of mourning than to go to the house of feasting, for this is the end of all mankind, and the living will lay it to heart. Sorrow is better than laughter, for by sadness of face the heart is made glad.

[10:33] The heart of the wise is in the house of mourning, but the heart of fools is in the house of mirth. In numbering our days we abandon our denial, and consider our lives in the light of God's character.

Death, as the manifestation of our physical finitude and mortality, forces us to reflect upon our end in a fuller sense, upon what it means to be frail creatures of a holy and eternal God, considering what we have been created for.

The psalm ends with an extended plea to the Lord. The psalmist pleads with the Lord to return to his people in grace and mercy, having pity upon them. There might be an allusion here to the petition of Moses in Exodus chapter 32 verse 12.

Turn from your burning anger and relent from this disaster against your people. He petitions the Lord's favour, that God's steadfast love would satisfy his people in the morning, that the brief span of their lives would be lived under the smile of his kindness.

They have suffered and wasted away under his displeasure for years, but he prays that the Lord would turn their fortunes around, permitting them to enjoy his goodness for a time of equal measure to their sorrow.

[11:40] God's goodness seems so very distant, so he prays that he would visit them and their children, revealing his work and his glory to them. A prominent theme in the book of Ecclesiastes is the way in which human labours vanish, leaving no trace behind, the futility of our attempts to make anything to last, or to leave anything behind us.

Life is like a mist, it vanishes without residue or mark. Recognising our inability to establish our legacy, and the trials of our current lives, it can be easy to despair.

The psalmist ends by turning to the Lord, requesting that he would establish the work of their hands, ensuring that their labours are not in vain, or soon brought to nothing. Our years and our labours are in the hands of the Eternal God, and he can establish them.

A question to consider, how would you further develop the connections between this psalm and the wisdom material of Scripture?