

PSALMS

Chapter 90

Book Four

From Everlasting to Everlasting

A Prayer of Moses, the man of God.

Lord, you have been our dwelling place in all generations. 2 Before the mountains were brought forth, or ever you had formed the earth and the world, from everlasting to everlasting you are God. 3 You return man to dust and say, “Return, O children of man!” 4 For a thousand years in your sight are but as yesterday when it is past, or as a watch in the night. 5 You sweep them away as with a flood; 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. 7 For we are brought to an end by your anger; by your wrath we are dismayed. 8 You have set our iniquities before you, our secret sins in the light of your presence. 9 For all our days pass away under your wrath; we bring our years to an end like a sigh. 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. 11 Who considers the power of your anger, and your wrath according to the fear of you? 12 So teach us to number our days that we may get a heart of wisdom. 13 Return, O LORD! How long? Have pity on your servants! 14 Satisfy us in the morning with your steadfast love, 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. 16 Let your work be shown to your servants, and your glorious power to their children. 17 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!

Ps 90 A prayer to the everlasting God to have compassion on his servants, who live their melancholy lives under the rod of divine wrath and under his sentence of death—a plea that God will yet show them his love, give them cause for joy and bless their labors with enduring worth. No other psalm depicts so poignantly the dismal state of man before the face of God, holy and eternal. Yet there is neither defiance nor despair; honesty acknowledges guilt (God’s anger is warranted), and faith knows of God’s “unfailing love” (v. 14) to which appeal can confidently be made. That Israel’s 40 years of enforced sojourn in the “vast and dreadful desert” (Dt 8:15) on its pilgrimage to the promised land (see Nu 14:26–35) should evoke such a prayer ought not be surprising. (CSB)

Two stanzas descriptive of the human condition under God’s aggrieved anger (vv. 3–6, 7–10) are framed by two couplets (vv. 1–2, 11–12) that, by their implicit contrasts, highlight the major polarities over which the intervening stanzas brood: 1. The Lord, who has ever been our “dwelling place” (v. 1), has shown us the power of his wrath (v. 7). 2. God is the Everlasting One (v. 2), while we must come to terms with the small number of our days (v. 12). These reflections lead to the prayer with which the psalm concludes (vv. 13–17). (CSB)

Does not name any specific event or crisis, so this psalm is suited for any time of lament, when the frailty of life stands in stark contrast to God’s eternal strength. (TLSB)

Format: Vv 1–2, God’s eternal nature; vv 3–6, brevity of human life; vv 7–11, human sinfulness causes the dismal state of the human race; vv 12–17, prayer for wisdom and grace. (TLSB)

Psalm 90 is best taken as a communal lament, even though it has some characteristics of wisdom literature. The lament is written from the intense awareness of mortality and sin; apparently the nation had been enduring prolonged affliction from God because of sin, and do they cried out for God to put an end to it and instead give them a joyful and productive life. In spite of their terrifying awareness of human frailty, they hold fast to their faith. (A Commentary on the Psalms – Ross)

This psalm is a fitting introduction to Book III of Psalms, since Moses and Israel’s experiences in the wilderness are mentioned frequently in this book. (PBC)

90 *man of God*. A phrase normally applied in the OT to prophets including Moses (see, e.g., Jos 14:6). (CSB)

90:1-2 – The opening verse of the psalm briefly proclaim the eternity of God so that it may be contrasted with the mortality of mankind. (PBC)

90:1 *dwelling place*. See 91:9. The Hebrew for this phrase is translated “refuge” in 71:3. (CSB)

In contrast to the temporary and uncertain nature of human life, God is a refuge for all generations. He is the One to go to for security, for He is before creation and will be for eternity (cf Heb 13:8). (TLSB)

He addresses God as “Lord,” emphasizing the sovereignty and majesty of God. And he identifies him as their dwelling place. The metaphor for a place of protection (see Deut. 33:27) would have been most meaningful in the earlier setting when the newly formed nations of Israel had no home and no refuge apart from God. But this was no empty platitude, for God had proven himself to be both from generation to generation. (A Commentary on the Psalms – Ross)

Church = Nave = Boat

90:2 *earth and world* – Repetition emphasizes that the everlasting God made all things. (TLSB)

It is unusual to say that God gave birth to the world, but in poetry it is not impossible to use such language to describe God as the source of all life (see Deut. 32:18). (A Commentary on the Psalms – Ross)

Everlasting – It is was the Eternal One who created the world and initiated time. God has called the world into existence, is our dwelling place. In everlasting, mighty God the congregation of the Lord is secure. (Stoeckhardt)

Moses begins this psalm with an admission of Gods’ greatness and consistency. He created time and stands outside it. From eternity He will continue to watch over His people forever.

So while the faithful know all too well that human life is fragile and fleeting they find comfort in the fact that God is always present. Their comfort is the fact that God is always present. Their

comfort is not simply in the fact that God is everlasting, but in the fact that this means he is their perpetual dwelling place. (A Commentary on the Psalms – Ross)

90:3–6 Man lives under God’s sentence of death—“dust ... to dust” (Ge 3:19). (CSB)

As punishment for the first sin in Eden, death now runs through the whole human race, indeed, the whole creation. In Gn 3:19, death is pictured as a return to the dust out of which God created Adam. The focus in this psalm, however, is not so much on death, but on the shortness of life and, in vv 7–11, the difficulties of life under this divine sentence. (TLSB)

90:3 Here God’s eternity is contrasted with man’s frailty. The first verb is in the future (imperfect) but we translate it with the present tense. The term “Aenosh,” here used, denotes man as subject to change and decay. Man is taken from dust and returns to dust. (Stoekhardt)

It is said of human kind in general that it dies and returns in such a manner that while some die others always come to take their place. Some go, others come. Man’s development and progress is a continual going and coming. One generation returns to dust, the other arises in its place. (Stoekhardt)

Luther also interprets this expression in this way. He says: “The expression points to this, that as men daily die, so others are daily born, however, in the same condition, as those that have died. (Stoekhardt)

Here the word for “dust” is stronger; the text signifies the state of one crushed, and not merely returning to dust. (A Commentary on the Psalms – Ross)

People may not think of the brevity of life when all is going well; but death comes quickly and they are quickly gone. (A Commentary on the Psalms – Ross)

90:4–5 *For ... You.* Perhaps better “Though ... , you”: Though for God 1,000 years are like a watch in the night, which man sleeps through with no sense of the passage of time, he cuts man’s life short like new grass that shows itself at dawn’s light but is withered away by the hot Canaanite sun before evening falls. (CSB)

God is beyond time. Psalmist contrasts God’s permanence with human life. From God’s perspective, a thousand years is fleeting. Some rabbis later concluded that God had a “day” that lasted a thousand years. This conclusion led to speculation and computation about the ages of the earth and God’s timing for Judgment Day. Such speculation cannot be based on this text. Augustine: “No one may imagine a thousand years are reckoned by God as one day, as if with God days were so long, when this is only said in contempt of the extent of time: he adds, ‘and as a watch in the night:’ which only lasts three hours” (NPNF 1 8:442). (TLSB)

This is not just an endless time, but independence from time. (PBC)

90:4 *thousand years...day.* Here the eternity of God is further described. The Hebrew “ki” (for) is used to introduce the explanation. A thousand years in God’s sight are not only as one day, but as the memory of yesterday that is passed. Our time is a vanishing entity to God. A day seems very short to us. It is nothing. A thousand years to Him are like the memory of that short yesterday. There simply is no time with God. (Stoekhardt)

watch in the night. According to Roman reckoning the night was divided into four watches: (1) 6:00–9:00 P.M., (2) 9:00–midnight, (3) midnight–3:00 A.M. and (4) 3:00–6:00 A.M. The Jews had only three watches during the night: (1) sunset–10:00 P.M., (2) 10:00 P.M.–2:00 A.M. and (3) 2:00 A.M.–sunrise. (CSB)

night – Suggests sleep, where there is no sense of time passing. (TLSB)

At night one sleeps, and the whole night seems short to the sleeper. A watch in the night is much shorter than a whole night. It is like a fragment of something of which there is no consciousness. This is what a thousand years seems like to God. God is not affected by time. He is eternal, above time. (Stoekhardt)

90:5-6 Human frailty and mortality are like a dream quickly forgotten or grass withering in a day's heat. Time carries life away like a raging flood sweeps away everything in its path. Taken with vv 3–4, we face the harsh and despairing reality that life is too quickly gone. (TLSB)

90:5 The Hebrew word “zaram,” signifies flood, inundation. It is derived from the very stem used here. The meaning is not, that men sink away into the sleep of death, but rather that time sweeps them away life like a flood. Suddenly God causes them to be snatched away. (Stoekhardt)

Sweep them away – The verb that people are so frail that they are easily swept away, as with a downpour, or with a flood. But the verb is figurative for death in general: “You sweep them away, they are as a sleep.” (A Commentary on the Psalms – Ross)

Like a dream – The idea seems to be that as soon as God sweeps people away, i.e., then they leave this life, they become sleep. “Sleep” is often figurative in the Bible for death (and so an implied comparison is in use here; (see Dan. 12:2; Ps. 17:15 perhaps: Luke 8:52; Jon 11:11-14; Acts 7:60 and 1 Cor. 15:51). The point is that they pass over into the sleep of death – they become death. (A Commentary on the Psalms – Ross)

Grass...renewed – People are like the new grass that springs forth (passes on) in the morning, that is, in the beginning vigor of their lives they develop like new grass. (A Commentary on the Psalms – Ross)

90:6 This flower blooms only for the length of a day. When evening comes, then the grass with its flower is mowed down and withers. So is man. He is born into the world, blooms and flourishes for a short period, and unfolds for a short time her power and beauty. Then death approaches and violently cuts off life. In death, man is forced to give up his life, as body and soul are separated. However, death is not a natural, but an unnatural experience, before which men shudder. When death has made an end to life, then follows dust and corruption. (Stoekhardt)

The expressions “morning” and “evening” are figurative of the beginning and ending of life. (A Commentary on the Psalms – Ross)

1 Peter 1:24, “For, “All people are like grass, and all their glory is like the flowers of the field; the grass withers and the flowers fall.”

Isaiah 40:7, “The grass withers and the flowers fall, because the breath of the LORD blows on them. Surely the people are grass.”

90:7–10 Even life’s short span is filled with trouble, as God ferrets out man’s every sin and makes him feel his righteous anger. (CSB)

It’s not just the brevity of life that brings such despair. God’s anger over sin causes life’s transient nature (Gn 3). Just to survive is burdensome, characterized by toil and trouble as sin wreaks havoc in the whole creation. Life comes to an end with a sigh, probably referring to the somber sounds of mourning. Worse, though, is God’s wrath, which consumes human life and consigns the sinful to eternal death. (TLSB)

90:7 *anger ... indignation* – Death is a judgment of divine wrath. God wants men to so look upon death. (Gen. 3:17-19) (Stoekhardt)

90:8 *set our iniquities before you* – Nothing is concealed in darkness or secrecy; even our most secret sin are known openly and fully by God. . (A Commentary on the Psalms – Ross)

secret sins – Sins that are “hidden from our thinking unless it be revealed in the law of God” (Chem, *LTh* 1:276). God’s wrath brings to light every violation of His holy will. (TLSB)

At this point Moses employs the terms “we” and “our.” This is the confession of the congregation. The real cause of death is hidden to the world. It is unaware that man’s sin has brought death about, that sin is such a terrible thing. Only the congregation realizes and confesses this, and submits to the judgment of God’s wrath. (Stoekhardt)

light of your presence. The holy light of God that illumines the hidden corners of the heart and exposes its dark secrets. (CSB)

90:9 *pass away under your wrath* – The real cause of death is not natural weakness, sickness, or human violence. All of these may be secondary causes, but the real cause of death is God’s judgment against sin. (PBC)

90:10 *length of our lives* – Different cultures describe ideal ages. E.g., in Egypt the ideal life span was 110 years. Archaeologists conclude that a typical life span for this era was c 40 years. (TLSB)

eighty. Hebrew poetic convention called for 80 following 70 in parallel construction. (CSB)

Because of sin the lifespan of human beings is short. Seventy or eighty years are not a long time compared with God’s eternity or even compared with human history. Often human life is much shorter than seventy years. It can be snuffed out in an instant. Compared to what it could have been if Adam and Eve had obeyed God, the life of human beings is a fragile and short as the life of a flower which blooms beautifully but soon withers. (PBC)

Only a few attain to such a long span of life. Even such a long life is relatively short. God really grants men only a few days on earth. (Stoekhardt)

their span. Lit. “their pride” – What men prize in their years. The thought could be: All their health, joys, riches and honor are soured by trouble and sorrow. (CSB)

Man aspires to accumulate wealth, to climb up to places of honor and prestige, to indulge in all kinds of luxuries and pleasures. To acquire this costs “toil,” much hard work and exertion of body and mind. There is no lasting treasure, no really satisfying pleasure in what man toils for

and acquires. In fact, such earthly goods are often acquired in some sinful way, their enjoyment brings on a bad conscience, pain and suffering, or leave a bitter after taste. At best such pleasures endure only for a moment. (Stoeckhardt)

Tee Shirt – The man with the most toys wins. The man with the most toys still dies.

How much will you be missed? Put your hand in a bucket of water and then pull it out again. The hole that is left is how much you will be missed.

Matthew 6:25-34, ²⁵ “Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothes? ²⁶ Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they. ²⁷ Can any one of you by worrying add a single hour to your life? ²⁸ “And why do you worry about clothes? See how the flowers of the field grow. They do not labor or spin. ²⁹ Yet I tell you that not even Solomon in all his splendor was dressed like one of these. ³⁰ If that is how God clothes the grass of the field, which is here today and tomorrow is thrown into the fire, will he not much more clothe you—you of little faith? ³¹ So do not worry, saying, ‘What shall we eat?’ or ‘What shall we drink?’ or ‘What shall we wear?’ ³² For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them. ³³ But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. ³⁴ Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own.”

Solomon and all that he had – Rehoboam – Ecclesiastes

sorrow. Or “emptiness.” (CSB)

For those with spiritual insight the evils of life are a daily reminder of the seriousness of sin and greatness of God’s anger against sin. (PBC)

Fly away – Poetic language that again evokes the despair of life’s all-too-rapid flight into death and God’s everlasting punishment. (TLSB)

The implied comparison of death with flying away captures the idea of the fleeting life and the finality of death. . (A Commentary on the Psalms – Ross)

90:11–12 *Who knows ... ? ... Teach us.* No one has taken the measure of God’s anger. But everyone ought to know the measure of his (few) days or he will play the arrogant fool, with no thought of his mortality or of his accountability to God (see Ps 49; 73:4–12). (CSB)

90:11 *fear that is due you* – A conventional phrase equivalent to “true religion.” “Fear” in this phrase has the sense of reverential trust in God that includes commitment to his revealed will (word). (CSB)

90:12 *teach us* – This request for wisdom leads to a series of petitions, beginning with a true understanding of human life, that we realize how few are the days we actually have and how we need to turn to God for security and refuge. (TLSB)

Because people do not know the full power of God’s wrath, they need to know how to live a life pleasing to God. And since wisdom begins with divine revelation, the appeal is for God to teach them, “cause [us] to know.” (A Commentary on the Psalms – Ross)

to number our days – The infinitive “to number” means more than simply counting days; it includes planning, carrying out, and evaluating those activities in that period of time – 70 or 80 years. By teaching them to number their days, God would be making them realize how short, how fleeting, life actually is, and how important it is to plan out how to use that time. (A Commentary on the Psalms – Ross)

gain. Or “harvest.” (CSB)

The verb rendered “gain” is literally “that we may bring it in. (A Commentary on the Psalms – Ross)

Wisdom – The word “wisdom” (s.v. 19”7) has the sense of “skill”; om wisdom literature od describes a life that is disciplined, devout, and productive. A heart (s.v. Ps. 111:1) characterized by wisdom signifies a person who has the right affections and makes the proper choices – it is a life of faith. (A Commentary on the Psalms – Ross)

90:13–17 Prayer for God’s compassion—from him comes also joy and gladness. (CSB)

Prayer for God to turn His anger into steadfast love. (TLSB)

We do not deserve to have our life prolonged, but we pray that God will give us the time and the wisdom to serve him faithfully on this earth. (PBC)

90:13 *Return* – The plea is for God’s punishment to last no longer and to end the despair that goes with it; the psalmist longs to see God’s glorious power. (TLSB)

God is to have pity on His people and change their sad lot. (Stoekhardt)

Now the psalmist prays for God to “return” or “turn back” from his course of judging his people in anger over their sins. (A Commentary on the Psalms – Ross)

How long – It expresses the lament that this affliction has been going on far too long. They want to know when the anger will cease. (A Commentary on the Psalms – Ross)

Have pity – Here the only way that God will turn fro the righteous judgment will be by a favorable compassion towards the people. (A Commentary on the Psalms – Ross)

The favor of God is particularly known as his “unfailing love” or covenantal love. (Expositor’s Bible Commentary – Psalms)

90:14 *satisfy* – To satisfy them would be to fill them up with the benefits of his love so they lacked nothing. (A Commentary on the Psalms – Ross)

in the morning. Let there be for us a dawning of your love to relieve this long, dark night of your anger. Perhaps Moses pleads for the promised rest of the Promised Land (see Ex 33:14; Dt 12:9). The final answer to his prayer comes with the resurrection (see Ro 5:2–5; 8:18; 2Co 4:16–18). (CSB)

A picturesque reversal from grass withering in the evening (v 6) to the renewal God brings in the morning. (TLSB)

The congregation implores God for His mercy and grace, which blots out their sin and appeases His wrath. “Morning” here indicates the time of salvation, as it does in Psalm 46. His servants can again praise Him and be glad all the days of their life, even unto death. (Stoekhardt)

90:15 *make us glad* – The prayer is ultimately that God will make them glad, not just for a little while, but for as many days as he afflicted them. In a sense God would be numbering the days they were afflicted (and the years that they saw “trouble” s.v. Ps. 10:15 so that their lives could be filled with gladness and not lamentation. (A Commentary on the Psalms – Ross)

Prayer that life’s joys will balance out life’s sorrows. God’s answer to this prayer goes much further (Rm 8:18–39). (TLSB)

The Church is placed into the midst of the troubles of this world, implores God, and not only for His grace, but also for the seasons of refreshment and joy after days of suffering and sorrow. When the Church prays then God will hear this prayer and grant the members of the Church relief filling their heart with gladness. The Church should ever remember that it has a gracious God. After days of distress, God will bring days of joy. He provides for His own many good days, that they might enjoy their life. (Stoekhardt)

90:16 *deeds ... splendor* – That is, deeds-of-splendor. For a fuller description of such deeds see the whole of Ps 111. (CSB)

God’s work of salvation (cf 96:2–3). The psalmist seeks deliverance from crisis, whether famine, enemies, sickness, or injustice. Ultimately, the answer to the prayer is Jesus, who shows God’s glorious works of salvation in loving and merciful fullness. (TLSB)

The glory that is meant is that which reveals itself in this particular work. It is a great comfort to the congregation that God in this time performs a “work,” in her own midst, the work of salvation. (Stoekhardt)

to their children. As to past generations (v. 1). (CSB)

90:17 *favor* – In conclusion the psalmist prays for God’s beneficence and asks that his “beauty” (i.e., favor”; cf. 27:4) may rest on his people. (Expositor’s Bible Commentary – Psalms)

establish. As you only have been our security in the world (see v. 1), so also make our labors to be effective and enduring—though we are so transient. (CSB)

Burden of work that comes from the first sin is replaced with enduring service in the Lord’s wisdom and name. (TLSB)

God preserves His favor to the congregation. God has not only favored His congregation in the past, but He will continue His favor in such a way that He will establish the church’s work. Here a special work of God is referred to. God Himself has a work here on earth. The servants of God have been given this particular work. God has assigned it to them. This God-assigned work has the object to promote the work of the kingdom of God on earth. God performs His work on earth through the hands of His servants. The congregation prays for this with confidence that its prayer

is heard. Even though death reigns on earth and one generation after another perishes, God's work goes on through time. This work of the congregation never comes to a halt so long as this world endures. (Stoeckhardt)

Work of our hands – This means to live in the pleasure of God's work and that their labor is not in vain (1 Cor. 15:58). (A Commentary on the Psalms – Ross)

Ps 90 How quickly life flies by: grass withering in the summer heat, leaves falling and blowing away in autumn, trees standing bare in winter. Even more heartbreaking is to stand by a casket and stare at a lifeless body or to look in a mirror and see age steal youth and energy. Yet in spring the flowers bloom and the grass turns green. The grave is empty on Easter morning. Jesus has risen! God has taken pity on us and given us everlasting life in Christ. • Lord, give us wisdom to number our days as Your servants, so we will look forward to dwelling with You from everlasting to everlasting. Amen. (TLSB)