

**A PRAYER
OF MOSES**
A DEVOTIONAL STUDY OF PSALM 90

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A PRAYER OF MOSES: A DEVOTIONAL STUDY OF PSALM 90
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Dedication and Acknowledgments

To the Elders, Board, and congregation of Bible Fellowship Church, who generously provided me with a sabbatical and allowed Doris and I to remain in Greenville during the time without phone calls or interruptions. It was a *delight* to be able to worship each Sunday in my favorite church with my favorite people, and yet work unhindered on my studies. It's a great privilege to serve as the teaching pastor of this wonderful assembly! Thank you!

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Soli Deo Gloria!

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Introduction

At some point—years ago—as a new Christian I encountered Psalm 90. While everything in the Bible was new and fresh, this poem stood out. At that time I was using the King James Version and verses 11 and 12 grabbed hold of my attention and have never turned loose: *Who knoweth the power of thine anger? even according to thy fear, so is thy wrath. So teach us to number our days, that we may apply our hearts unto wisdom.*

There was something there that had surpassing literary beauty and compelling spiritual power. It has stayed with me ever since. When the church of which I am the teaching pastor generously granted me a sabbatical in 2011, I spent the time reviewing Hebrew; my Hebrew skills had become very rusty since seminary (unfortunately, in the intervening months since my sabbatical my language skills have resumed their rusty condition—it's a fallen world). The review was intended to enable me to translate several psalms; I had five in mind. I got stuck in Psalm 90 and wound up spending the entire time chewing on Moses' prayer. It was time well spent.

Psalm 90 presents a balanced portrait of God as the Creator and Sustainer of life, the Wrathful Judge, and the Covenant Comforter. The Church today is comfortable with all of those vignettes except for the one concerning His wrath. We've lost an appreciation for God's

terrible fiery judgment, as though it's something about which we should be embarrassed. Worse, some even deny that God expresses anger, as though it would render Him unworthy of our love.

The result of “sanitizing” God of His wrath is that we have diminished His holiness and righteousness. We've rendered God safe and the cross less necessary, or even unnecessary. In so doing we stand in danger of worshipping a god of our own making rather than the God revealed in Scripture. I believe that a careful study of Psalm 90 can go a long way toward restoring a proper appreciation of God's righteous wrath, which will bring us back to a high view of His blazing holiness. And along the way we will discover, to our unending joy, that everything in the psalm points us to Jesus Christ who delivers us from the wrath to come.

This study is intended for the church. Although I do brush up against academic issues at various points the layman is my intended audience. There are some important topics I have omitted. The earliest drafts of the manuscript contained references to the exilic audience of the psalm, in keeping with its placement at the head of Book IV in the Psalter. I have removed these references in the interests of brevity and simplicity. As a consequence, this treatment is lacking any consideration of the placement of Moses' prayer in the larger context of the book of Psalms.¹

1 The arrangement of the Psalter is a matter of great interest and reveals something of the compositional history of the book. Psalms is divided into five

Psalm 90 is the prayer of Moses, the man of God. And Jesus is God's abundant answer to the prayer of His servant.

Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in Thy sight, O LORD, my rock and my Redeemer. (Psalm 19:14)

“books.” Psalm 1 begins Book I, Book II begins with Psalm 42, Psalm 73 marks the start of Book III, Psalm 90 stands at the head of Book IV, and Psalm 107 begins Book V. It is believed that Book IV was intended to minister to the exiles in Babylon in the sixth century BC, answering the many questions they had, such as “How long will our exile be? Have we been abandoned by God?” Even though Psalm 90 was written centuries before the exile, its placement at the head of Book IV gives an indication of how the ancient Jews understood its message.

Outline of Psalm 90²

1. God the Eternal Creator, 1-2
2. God the Wrathful Judge, 3-12
 - A. The Origin of Judgment is the Fall, 3-7
 - 1) The condemnation is sovereignly enforced by God, 3
 - 2) The brevity of life is evidence, 4-6
 - 3) Divine wrath results in death, 7
 - B. The Cause of Judgment is Sin, 8-11
 - 1) Our sins are comprehensively known to God, 8
 - 2) The brevity of life is evidence, 9-10
 - 3) Divine wrath is overpowering, 11
 - C. Conclusion: In the light of coming judgment, help us live according to wisdom, 12
3. God the Covenant Comforter, 13-16
 - A. A Plea for Covenant Compassion, 13
 - B. A Plea for Covenant Lovingkindness to overpower the misery of chastening, 14-15

2 Leupold's comment, "No one has yet found a theme that is big enough for this prayer" (H. C. Leupold, *Exposition of the Psalms* [1959; repr., Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1969], 642), should be kept in mind when examining this or any other outline for Psalm 90. I determined to focus on what the Psalm says about God, though many other useful approaches could be employed.

- C. A Plea for Covenant Continuity, 16
- 4. God the Gracious Sustainer, 17
 - A. A Plea for Grace, 17a
 - B. A Plea for Permanence, 17b

Translation of Psalm 90³

- 1 A Prayer of Moses, the man of God.
Lord, you have been our dwelling place in
all generations.
- 2 Before the mountains were born or you
brought forth the land, or the world, even
from everlasting to everlasting, you are *the*
mighty God.
- 3 You cause man to return to dust, saying,
“Return, sons of man!”⁴
- 4 For a thousand years in your eyes are as a
day, like yesterday, because it has already
passed, or as a watch division in the night.
- 5 You sweep them away and they die; in the
morning they are as the green grass sprout-
ing anew.
- 6 In the morning it flourishes and sprouts
anew; at evening, it languishes and withers.

3 This translation and the ones that appear at the head of each chapter, are mine. All other bible texts used in this study come from the *New American Standard Bible*, unless otherwise noted, and are used by permission. Where poetry is quoted at the head of a session, it comes from the various verses of Isaac Watts’ hymn, *O God our Help in Ages Past*, and is in the public domain.

4 Literally, “sons of Adam.”

- 7 For we have come to an end by your anger, and by your burning wrath we have been terrified.
- 8 You have set our iniquities before you, our secret sins in the light of your presence.
- 9 For all our days decline through your overflowing fury; we complete our years like a sigh.
- 10 The days of our life are seventy years, or if due to strength, eighty years, though their best is but trouble and sorrow, for it passes quickly and we fly away.
- 11 Who knows the strength of your anger, or your overflowing fury according to the fear due you?
- 12 So teach us to number our days that we may gain a heart of wisdom.
- 13 Return, O LORD; how long? Have compassion on your servants!
- 14 Satisfy us in the morning with your lovingkindness, that we may cry out with joy and rejoice for all of our days.
- 15 Cause us to rejoice according to the days you have disciplined us; *according to the* years we have seen misery.

A PRAYER OF MOSES

- 16 Let your work appear to your servants, and your splendor unto their sons.
- 17 May the delight of the Lord our God be upon us, and establish the work of our hands upon us, indeed, the work of our hands, establish it.

Chapter 1: Thinking about . . . death

Psalm 90 is about the frailty of life, a frailty whose consequence is certain death, and that long before we are ready for it. For example, verses 5-6 use the imagery of grass—here today, gone tomorrow—which leads Moses to the point of such frailty: “we have come to an end” (v. 7). At every opportunity the prophet directs our attention to the reality of our own approaching death.

Most of us don't readily think about this topic. It usually takes the death of someone close to us, or perhaps a brush with death personally for us to seriously contemplate that most final of all earthly events. But we should consider death while we are still able to change the manner in which we approach it. Moses says, in Psalm 90, *teach us to number our days, that we may gain a heart of wisdom*. Psalm 90 is going to meditate on the problem of death, so let's begin by thinking about our own encounters with mortality.

Though I have experienced the death of friends, church members, and more distant family members, I have had two particularly intimate experiences with death. My first was traumatic. Doris, my wife, was in her last trimester of pregnancy. We had already named the baby *Jessica Lea Cobb*; she was our third child. Jessica was born at home, prematurely, and we were both unprepared for this. Doris had been feeling poorly all morning, and then began to have contractions. We called the rescue squad and though they responded rapidly, it seemed they were forever in arriving. Doris was in la-

bor and in pain; I was clueless and worried; we were both afraid. Just in time the paramedics arrived and delivered little Jessica.

My wife was placed in one ambulance, the baby in another, and off they roared to Hershey Medical Center in Hershey, Pennsylvania. Close friends stepped in to watch our children, Dani and Josh, then just five and three. I raced alone to the hospital not knowing what I would find. Hospitals are places where the forging of our character progresses far more rapidly and painfully than we would wish. I was not looking forward to the experience.

After I located Doris we began the long wait to learn what was going to happen to our little girl. At some point there was a miscommunication with the medical staff, or it could be that my hearing problems were beginning to manifest themselves. In any case, when the doctor came out to tell us of Jessica's status I thought I heard something to the effect that, "it's going to be a rough road but we think she will make it." I was relieved and began to hope; but it was not to be. Jessica died about ten hours later from a massive infection which was determined to have been the cause of her premature birth. All of our hopes and dreams and preparations for that little girl came to a screeching halt that fateful day. It leaves you . . . empty.

My heartbroken wife remained in the hospital that night under observation lest she, too, experience problems

from the infection. I stayed with her until late in the night. As I drove home alone my mind was gnawing on a question: *what in the world was God doing?*

The house had been in chaos when we all raced off to the hospital earlier in the day. I returned to a dark, empty home. I climbed the stairs wearily to my little study and discovered that our loving friends had already cleaned up the mess in the bedroom. Sitting at my desk I opened my Bible and began to read the psalms, looking for comfort. Somehow by the grace of God Psalm 119:68 spoke clearly to my heart. It was not what I was looking for but it was what God had prepared for me and it was satisfying. In the midst of my grief I found rest and contentment: *Thou art good and doest good; Teach me Thy statutes.*

I'd been to Bible college and was a careful student of the Word, but that night I learned the most profound theology at the feet of the psalmist: God is *good*, and what He does is *good*. I didn't know what He was doing but I rested in His goodness. It was enough to know that *He is good*.

My second intimate encounter with death was in February of 2011. My dad's health was rapidly failing; a defective heart valve began to threaten his life. He was at the point where we never knew if he would rally the next day or draw his last breath. Thankfully, he was alert until the very end. He knew that he was dying and had the blessed experience of saying his goodbyes to

my mom, his beloved wife of 65 years, and to all of his children and grandchildren.

I had the privilege of being with him, mom, Josh, Dani, and my brother Lou the day before he died. Somehow I knew it was the last I would see him, and I wept briefly in my mother's arms. I have a treasured photo of Josh and Dani saying goodbye to grandpa (our youngest, Lauri, had been there several weeks earlier but was unable to return for this trip). We left and made the long drive back to Ohio.

There was a procedure that might help correct the damaged heart-valve and dad was scheduled to go for testing at UVA Medical Center early the next day. He never made the trip; he died in my brother's arms very early that morning. Dad's life was a life well-lived, a life lived to the fullest. He served his country as a fighter pilot in World War II, remaining in the Navy until he retired in 1966. He then went back to school and was trained to serve as an Episcopal priest, in which capacity he served until his retirement from that ministry in 1988. He was eighty-seven when he died.

Death is the ultimate abnormality; it is the clue that something is very, very wrong with this creation. Those who know the Bible understand that death is the result of sin. The first man, Adam, chose a path of rebellion against God, and all Adam's progeny have inherited the guilt of his sin as well as his evil, rebellious nature. Even little Jessica had a sinful nature from the time of

her conception, just like her daddy and mommy, and like her daddy's and mommy's parents, and their parents and so on.

Aging and death interrupts fruitful lives all too soon. The brevity and transitory nature of human life, the inevitability of death, and God's wrath against man's sin are among the major themes of Psalm 90, the prayer of Moses. Death is not something about which we are willing to think deeply. But we must learn to do so. Moses' prayer forces us to go down that path.

Why do we need to think about death? There may be many reasons, but the most important one is that when we begin to consider death, we begin to think about God Himself. For some of us it might be the only time we do. We need to learn of His wrath that we might be willing to hear of His mercy and flee to His Son. I hope that this study will encourage you to do just that.

A brief introduction to Psalm 90

We typically associate the psalms with David, and for good reason: no fewer than seventy-three of the psalms are ascribed to David's authorship in their captions.¹ However many are unaware that the great lawgiver, Moses, wrote more than the Pentateuch (Gene-

¹ The psalm caption, or superscription, is the title that precedes the first verse and is normally set in a smaller font in an English bible. For example, if you turn to Psalm 90 you will see the caption, "A prayer of Moses, the man of God." There is on-going debate about whether or not the captions of the psalms should be considered part of the inspired text. In any case, it is part of the Hebrew Masoretic text and for our purposes I am considering it authoritative.

sis-Deuteronomy); he also wrote a prayer that was included in the book of Psalms, specifically, Psalm 90.

Some scholars doubt that Moses himself wrote Psalm 90. In some cases they base their disagreement on the language and style of the psalm, others appeal to bits of the content (such as the claim that Moses could have hardly stated, as he did in verse one, that “all generations” have found God to be their dwelling place). None of the arguments I have seen are convincing. The content of the psalm argues (decisively, in my opinion) for actual Mosaic authorship. I agree with Delitzsch, who says: “There is scarcely any written memorial of antiquity which so brilliantly justifies the testimony of tradition concerning its origin as does this Psalm,”²

It is, perhaps, the earliest of any of the psalms. Leupold points out that this powerful psalm does not borrow from other psalms “or have any affinity with them.”³ If correct, that is a significant testimony of early (meaning, Mosaic) authorship. It also positions Moses as the human writer who brought to prominence the common biblical motif which represents the frailty of man as the grass of the field.⁴ There are connections between this psalm and Moses’ other writings: compare Psalm 90:1

2 Franz Delitzsch, *Psalms*, vol. 5 of *Commentary on the Old Testament*, trans. James Martin (1867; repr., Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1986), 3:48.

3 H. C. Leupold, *Exposition of the Psalms* (1959; repr., Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1969), 641.

4 Bildad the Shuhite in Job 8:11-13 is actually the first to use the metaphor equating man’s life or deeds with a fragile plant. Evidently it must have been a common figure in early Hebrew culture.

with Deut. 33:27, Psalm 90:3 with Genesis 3:19, and Psalm 90:7-12 with Genesis 3 as a whole.

Of this majestic psalm Derek Kidner says, “Only Isaiah 40 can compare with this psalm for its presentation of God’s grandeur and eternity over against the frailty of man. But while Isaiah is comforting, the psalm is chastened and sobering, even though the clouds disperse in the final prayer.”⁵

MacLaren, cited by Leupold, says, “The sad and stately music of this great psalm befits the dirge of a world. How artificial and poor, beside its restrained emotion and majestic simplicity, do even the most deeply felt strains of other poets on the same theme sound! It preaches man’s mortality in immortal words.”⁶

Isaac Watts’ great hymn, “O God Our Help in Ages Past” is a paraphrase of Psalm 90. It was written in the backdrop of the sufferings of the dissenting congregations at the hands of a human monarch, Queen Anne.⁷ Watts’ own father, a deacon in a dissenting congregation, was jailed for his religious views. The setting of the hymn is appropriate to this psalm, which laments God’s righteous anger against sinful man. The text of the hymn is included in this commentary at appropriate

5 Derek Kidner, *Psalms 73-150*, vol. 16 of *Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries*, ed. Donald J. Wiseman (1975; repr., Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2008), 359.

6 Alexander MacLaren, *The Psalms*, in *The Expositors’ Bible* (New York: Hodder and Stoughton, [no date]) (no page number), quoted in Leupold, 641.

7 The Dissenters were the congregations and individuals who separated from the state church, the Church of England.

places.

As to genre, Psalm 90 is characterized by Stuhlmueller as a “communal lament,” although the absence of any statement about life after death and the lack of specific references to God’s great historical deeds also gives the psalm an affinity to the wisdom literature.⁸ VanGemerren divides the psalm into three parts (a “hymn of praise,” 1-2; a “lament on the transience of life,” 3-12; and a “prayer for the restoration of God’s favor,” 13-17), and indicates that a “wide variety of literary genres” are represented in that division.⁹ Wilson finds “wisdom concerns” in the psalm.¹⁰

An encouraging theme that will emerge as we work our way through Psalm 90 is that *Jesus Christ is God’s answer to Moses’ impassioned prayer*. Though it may not appear so at first glance, our study will demonstrate that the psalm is decidedly Christ-centered.

Creative writing possessing great pathos, especially poetry, is forged in the crucible of the poet’s own experience. We must enter the author’s world if we hope to understand his words. If we would understand Psalm 90, then, we must review who Moses was and what he

8 Carroll Stuhlmueller, *Psalms*, in *Harper’s Bible Commentary*, ed. James L. Mays (San Francisco: Harper & Row, and Society of Biblical Literature, 1988), 90:1 (accessed in Logos).

9 Willem A. VanGemerren, *Psalm 90: Teach Us to Number Our Days* in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary, Volume 5, Revised Edition*, eds. Tremper Longman III and David E. Garland (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 2008), 689.

10 Gerald Wilson, *Psalms-Volume 1*, in *The NIV Application Commentary*, ed. Terry Muck (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002), 74.

did. Acts 7:1-45 provides a succinct overview in Stephen's sermon to the Sanhedrin. The much longer account is found in the Old Testament books of Exodus through Deuteronomy. In the next chapter we will explore Moses' remarkable life as we gather information that will help us understand his prayer.

*“Who understands the power of Thine
anger, and Thy fury, according to the
fear that is due Thee? So teach us to
number our days, That we may present
to Thee a heart of wisdom”*

Psalm 90:11-12

Food for Thought

1. What have been your memorable encounters with death?
2. What thoughts or questions did your mind gnaw on following this experience?
3. What do you believe about death? Is it final, or is there conscious existence beyond it?
4. How does the reality of death influence the way you live your life?
5. Why might it be valuable to meditate on the brevity of life?