

Series FolkSongs of Faith

This Message Only the Loving Compassion of God Sustains Our Lives

Scripture Psalm 90

Today is the beginning of a new series of messages. We are going to focus on a group of Psalms which present the eternal, universal, and righteous reign of God over the earth. Today we will think about Psalm 90, which is a prayer. We will conclude this series with Psalm 100, which is a statement of praise and thanksgiving. The message today is a description of the plight of mankind and Psalm 100 is a celebration of mankind in God's victorious presence.

Read Psalm 90

Psalm 90 is attributed to Moses. Conservative scholars accept his authorship, but liberal scholars do not. Liberal scholars assume the Psalm had to be written many years after the time of Moses. I see no reason why the authorship of Moses should not be accepted, and I am proceeding with this message on the assumption Moses is indeed the author. For me the more interesting issue is when during his lifetime Moses might have penned the words of the Psalm. Let me mention the two most discussed possibilities advanced by conservative scholars.

Most commentators who believe that Moses was the author assume that the Psalm was written during the forty years of Israelite wanderings in the desert of Sinai. You know that Moses was the man selected by God to lead the Israelites out of Egypt and to the land which had been promised to them. The Israelites could have entered the land of Canaan about one year after their exit from Egypt. However due to their lack of faith, they were condemned to wander around the Sinai wilderness for about 38 years.

I'm sure you also know about the 12 men who were sent by Moses to investigate the fertility of the promised land and report on the cities and people who would have to be displaced by the Israelites. Upon their return, all 12 of the spies were excited about the productivity of the land, but 10 of the men gave a negative report, saying that the Israelites did not have the ability to displace the inhabitants because the cities were fortified and the occupants were powerful. Only two of the men who investigated the promised land urged the people to immediately take possession of the land because God would go before them and protect them.

Unfortunately, the people of Israel believed the report of the 10 men. The people were unwilling to trust God, and, in fact, were ready to choose another leader to take them back to Egypt. This was the incident which made the LORD angry. He said to Moses, "How long will these people refuse to believe in me, in spite of all the miraculous signs I have performed among them?" and He declared that every person among the Israelites 20 or more years old would die in the desert and that it would be the next generation who would enter the promised land (*See Numbers 13-14*).

In the opinion of many commentators, the depressing circumstances of the people, their lack of faith, and the hundreds of thousands of deaths which occurred in the following years, caused Moses to reflect on the relationship between God and His chosen people. That's one possible context behind the writing of this Psalm.

Another smaller group of commentators have suggested that Psalm 90 was written by Moses before the exodus — written even before his call by God to be the man to lead the people out of Egypt. These scholars point out that the exodus and the miracles leading up to the exodus, are not mentioned in the Psalm. This is considered to be especially significant because of the importance of the exodus in the history of the Hebrew people. The exodus was the Old Testament standard by which God revealed His greatness and power and mercy to the Israelites. Therefore, if Moses had written Psalm 90 during the years of the wilderness wanderings, according to this group of scholars, he would undoubtedly have interceded for the people with statements such as, "God, please act toward us with the mercy and grace You demonstrated during the time of our exit from Egypt." However, there is no such reference in Psalm 90.

There is a second reason to think that Moses wrote this Psalm before the exodus. Notice verses 13 through 17. These verses indicate that Moses was looking for the LORD to take action on behalf of the Hebrew people. Notice the words of Moses' prayer: "Relent, O LORD! How long will it be? When will you have compassion on your servants?" Verse 15 indicates that Moses was asking God to give relief to the people from their "many years of affliction and trouble." Verse 16 is a request for God to manifest His power to His people.

These are not the prayer requests of a man who had just a few months' previously observed God's incredible judgments on Egypt and the release of the Israelites from slavery. Rather, this Psalm may have been Moses' prayer on behalf of his people who were still being oppressed by the Egyptians.

In view of this evidence, this second group of commentators have concluded that this psalm was written before the confrontations between Moses and Pharaoh, possibly written during the years when Moses was tending the flocks of his father-in-law in the vicinity of Mount Sinai (*see Exodus 2:15-25*). You will recall that Moses fled Egypt at age 40 and spent the following 40 years in exile in the desolate region of the Sinai Peninsula.

If this second scenario is the correct one, then this Psalm provides us with a fascinating insight into the personal concerns of Moses, and, also, into God's response to Moses' prayer. Did Moses pray for the redemption of the Hebrew people? Did God respond by meeting Moses at the burning bush with the words, "I have indeed seen the misery of my people in Egypt. I have heard them crying out because of their slave drivers, and I am concerned about their suffering. So I have come down to rescue them from the hand of the Egyptians ... So now go. I am sending you to Pharaoh to bring my people the Israelites out of Egypt" (*see Exodus 3:1-10*). In essence, God might have been saying: "Moses, I heard your prayer and I am going to use you in my answer to your prayer." *[There is something both exciting and frightening about God wanting to use us as the answer to our own prayers!]*

Other than plausible evidence, we don't know if either of these scenarios is correct. Both give us a possible context in which to interpret Moses' words. What we do know is that Psalm 90 is the oldest Psalm in the Bible, and the only one attributed to Moses, and that it is a prayer. Now let's analyze what he wrote.

The Psalm begins with an affirmation of God as “the Lord,” the One who has been “our dwelling place (or refuge) throughout all generations.” By the time that Moses came on the scene of history, quite a number of generations had come and gone. Moses understood that if God had not honored His promises and initiated specific actions to preserve the human race, and also withheld His judgment against people because of their sinful ways, mankind would have long before been eliminated.

Verse 1 seems to refer back to the creation account in Genesis chapters 1 and 2. Those are the chapters which reveal that God created the universe and then placed within it creatures with whom He could interact and fellowship. That’s why Adam and Eve were created in God’s own image and likeness, and, initially, they were able to interact with God in a close fellowship.

Moses also addressed this Psalm to the Creator and Ruler of the universe — the One who existed before creation, “before birth was given to the mountains; before the bringing forth of the earth.” Moses acknowledged the God who was from eternity past and who will be “everlasting.”

The first two verses of the Psalm provide the backdrop against which Moses, in the following verses, contrasts the finiteness and limitations of mankind. Because of the disobedience of Adam and Eve, the original perfect environment in which God could dwell with mankind was corrupted. Adam and Eve could no longer associate with their holy Creator. The ground was cursed, and human life was filled with burdensome toil. In His condemnation of Adam, God had said, “By the sweat of your brow you will eat your food until you return to the ground, since from it you were taken; for dust you are and to dust you will return” (*Genesis 3:17-19*).

In contrast to the omnipotent, everlasting, self-existing God, humans are identified as physical, fragile, and transient, made from the ground, subject to death, with physical bodies destined to return to “dust.” Of course, this was not the outcome God intended. People were created for eternity. Moses did not specifically mention Adam’s fall into sin, nor give the reason for Adam’s loss of eternal life, but we understand the reason: Adam’s sin had made him unqualified to continue in fellowship with God. Perhaps Moses assumed that his readers knew the first three chapters of Genesis so well that there was no need for explanation. Moses puts the emphasis on the effect, not the cause, of the mortality of mankind.

Verses 4 through 6 of the Psalm might hint at information in Genesis chapter 5. In the beginning of the history of the human race, men lived much longer than in any other era. For examples, the Scripture informs us that Adam lived a total of 930 years. His son Seth, 912 years. A few generations later, a man named Jared lived 962 years. And the most famous individual in the early generations, Methuselah, lived 969 years.

I think Moses is saying, in his comparison between the eternality of God and the limited lifespan of mankind, that even if a person lives to be a thousand years old, it is no more than a single day to God. It is like a few hours of watchfulness compared to the lifetime of the individual. The brief lifespan of people is also likened to new grass which springs up full of life in the morning, only to be parched and withered by the hot sun during the day. These are illustrations of the way in which God “sweeps men away in the sleep of death.” *[The actual Hebrew words are, “You flood men away,” possibly an allusion to the flood described in Genesis chapters 6 and 7.]* From the standpoint of eternity, the duration of a person’s life is hardly a blip on a timeline.

In verses 3 through 6 Moses contrasted the infinite nature of God with the finite nature of mankind. In verses 7 through 10 the contrast is between the righteousness and holiness of God and the sinfulness of mankind. When the iniquities of people are set before God, God reacts with anger and wrath. He cannot tolerate anything that is less than 100 per cent holy. His anger is an expression of His righteous indignation. Verses 7 through 10 explain the reason for the brevity of human life. Literally, people are mortal because of their sin.

When Adam and Eve disobeyed God’s instructions in the Garden in Eden, God was immediately aware of the change in His relationship with them. He could no longer dwell in close fellowship with them. Death was the consequence of their disobedient decision. Death, initially spiritual but eventually physical, was the judgment God pronounced to them. The brevity of human life was, and still is, the result of God’s judgment.

There is one more consequence mentioned in verses 9 and 10. Not only is life shortened by sin, it is also soured by pain and sadness. Moses wrote, “We finish our years with a moan,” a sigh of unfulfilled dreams and disappointments. And, even though “the length of our days may be seventy or eighty years ... yet their span is but trouble and sorrow.”

Once again we are reminded of the Book of Genesis. The consequence of Adam and Eve's sin was not only their return to dust, but to live out their years with toil and pain. In pronouncing His judgment to Adam, God said: "Cursed is the ground because of you; through painful toil you will eat of it all the days of your life. It will produce thorns and thistles for you, ... By the sweat of your brow you will eat your food until you return to the ground, since from it you were taken" (*Genesis 3:17-19*).

Moses understood the grim realities of life. Our lives here on earth are marked by physical limitations, hard labor, sufferings, and all too frequent disappointments and dissatisfactions. The connection of sin, God's wrath, and judgment is prominent in all of Moses' teaching in the books of Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy, just as it is summarized in this Psalm. This is the situation, the plight of mankind.

Fortunately, Moses did not stop with this dark picture of humanity. Verses 1 through 10 are background to the petitions he makes in the remainder of his prayer. Verses 11 and 12 call attention to both the basic problem and necessary solution to the desperate plight in which people find themselves. The problem is that people generally do not pay attention to God and His divine laws of sin and retribution. As a result, people neither understand nor appreciate just how great is God's wrath against sin and how great is the peril in which they live. The greatness of God's wrath should evoke great fear, and that fear should be commensurate with a person's understanding of the greatness of God.

The truth is that no person can know and appreciate the full extent of God's wrath against sin, but this does not mean that people should avoid thinking about God's righteousness compared to their own spiritual inadequacies. There is a Proverb which states, "the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom" (*Proverbs 9:10*). Verse 12 explains that the wise person will seek understanding. The reference to "numbering our days" has the meaning of "evaluating and appraising circumstances." Wise people will seek to comprehend themselves and their circumstances. They need to better recognize the infinite differences between themselves and God, and then decide, in view of their limitations, to live before God in an acceptable way. The "heart of wisdom" will come when people acknowledge their weaknesses, dependence, and accountability to God and then place themselves under His divine authority and Lordship.

Moses makes several specific requests on behalf of his people in verses 13 through 16. The first word in these verses is “relent.” This was a plea for God to turn back from His anger and to adopt a posture of favor toward His chosen people. Just as the first part of this Psalm had focused on the zeal of God in exercising His righteousness in judgment, Moses, in his prayer, asked God to focus on mercy and grace. In asking, “How long?” Moses wanted to know when God would bring to an end the suffering of the Israelites under the hands of the Egyptians. Moses pleaded for God to act with “compassion” toward His people.

Moses associated the current experience of the Israelites to a nighttime filled with seemingly endless anguish. He asked that God would bring a new day of satisfaction to the people by filling it with His “unfailing love.” This term, “unfailing love,” translates the Hebrew word “hesed,” which is the all-encompassing word which indicates God’s steadfast goodness, lovingkindness, and faithfulness toward His people. In the Old Testament the word “hesed” was linked to God’s covenant relationship with His people.

Moses boldly asked that God would be merciful to His chosen people. In contrast to their nighttime gloom of trouble and sorrow, He wanted God to give the people opportunity to celebrate the goodness of God for “as many days as He had afflicted them.”

Verse 16 was a plea for God to reveal Himself to the people through His deeds. This is probably a reference to supernatural deeds. From the standpoint of the Hebrew slaves in Egypt, it had been a long time since God had worked miracles on behalf of His people. In the days of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, there had been occasions in which the power and glory of God had been revealed. Unfortunately, the power of God had not been displayed to the Israelites for about 400 years. The descendants of Abraham, all of whom were in bondage in Egypt, had never experienced the awesome and majestic deeds of God. Moses asked God to manifest His greatness on behalf of the people.

In the final verse, Moses asked that “the favor of the Lord would rest upon the people.” The word “favor” can also mean “beauty.” How might the favor and beauty of the Lord “rest upon His people?” It would be recognized through the rescue of the Hebrew people from their slavery and the fulfillment of the purposes for which God had called them.

God had chosen Abraham and his descendants to be His representatives among the people groups on earth, to be “lights to the Gentiles.” They had been called to make the ways of God known throughout the world. Moses recognized that the Hebrew people were not in a position to be God’s global witnesses as long as they were in bondage to the Egyptians, and he pleaded with God to “establish” for them the opportunity to carry out their covenant responsibilities.

Moses looked forward to the time when God would again break into history, reveal His strength and glory on earth, and advance His purposes and goals. Moses understood that God was committed to working through His chosen people, and so he prayed that God would lay aside His anger against the people and get on with the fulfillment of His eternal purposes.

The Psalm began with the statement that the Lord had been the dwelling place of God’s people throughout all generations. The Psalm ends with the prayer that God will once again be with and resume His work through His covenant people.

God answered Moses’ request in what was, for Moses, an unexpected way — by calling him to be the leader of the people who would be rescued from Egypt. This is a topic which cannot be explained in this message. It is a topic which appears in Exodus chapter 3.

Let’s encourage ourselves by praying the last four verses of the Psalm. They make a wonderful benediction.

Read verses 14-17 in unison.

Three summary thoughts:

*We must make the Lord our dwelling place (verse 1)

*We must number our days aright (verse 12)

*We must allow the Lord to establish the work of our hands (verse 17) so that we might be witnesses to God for the sake of our own children and the people around us.

May all that we are and stand for be passed on to the next generation.