

Psalm 90 A prayer of Moses

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[0:00] You don't need a degree in philosophy or theology to relate to the theme of this psalm. And in fact it's not difficult to find quotes from our contemporary culture that talk about the futility of things in general.

But this is one of my favourites actually from Woody Allen so I thought I'd quote this one. He said, I don't want to achieve immortality through my work, I want to achieve immortality by not dying. Woody Allen quip but you see where he's coming from. He says that in a sense what use is it to achieve immortality through my work? I mean I'd be dead and gone. And this is what Psalm 90 is about basically.

It introduces book four of the psalms. It's headed a psalm of Moses as you can see.

I'll say a bit about that in a minute. And the theme of it, of Psalm 90 and also as I say of Psalm 103.

[1:24] The two psalms kind of bracket the first part of book four or most of book four on the theme, dealing with this theme of the fragility of human life and the shortness of it.

And it's something we all relate to I guess. It's reported that Bertrand Russell said his greatest fear was that he'd be forgotten in a hundred years. I guess most people not even like to be remembered that long.

It's a thing that we all wonder about, isn't it? If life is so short, how can it really have any meaning at all?

And it is also a psalm in the wisdom tradition. It talks about wisdom, as you probably noticed when we read it through.

And it actually has some similarities or some sort of common themes with the book of Ecclesiastes. And for example, Ecclesiastes 3 verse 11 says the following, He that is God has made everything beautiful in its time.

[2:39] He has also set eternity in the hearts of men. Yet they cannot fathom what God has done from beginning to end. That's what the teacher writes in the book of Ecclesiastes.

And this eternity thing is the heart of it, isn't it? It's not an issue that seems to trouble our fellow creatures on this planet. They're content it appears to live in the moment.

A tiger lives perhaps for the hunt. A wildebeest perhaps lives to run. And if the tiger catches the wildebeest, the wildebeest may suffer for a moment.

But it's momentary. And it's merciful and it's over. But humans have this nagging sense of eternity. And one might almost think that this prayer was written perhaps by the teacher of Ecclesiastes or by the writer of Job. To have its roots in the wisdom literature. And wisdom certainly is its aim.

[3:50] We see that in verse 12. But the psalm is attributed, as I said, to Moses. Of course the critical commentators would want to tell you it can't possibly be that old.

But in fact, they'd rather get hoist on their own petard here because examination of the text does support the attribution to Moses. There are clear references, for instance, to Genesis 1 to 3 in verses 1 to 4.

Talking about creation and about man returning to dust. There's an oblique reference to the flood in verse 5. You might or might not have spotted that. But it is a reference to the flood.

And while I'm no Hebrew scholar, I read in a commentary that verse 15 uses a Hebrew construction that's elsewhere found in the Old Testament, only in the Song of Moses, in Deuteronomy 32, verse 7.

And the lack of a clear picture of an afterlife also suggests perhaps an early date for this psalm. [4:59] Although there are hints of it, of course. So let's say that this psalm is indeed being written by Moses. And it certainly fits in with his life, or what we know of his life.

He lived his early life, of course, as a prince in Egypt. But that came to an end with what I suppose was the mother of all midlife crises. When his Hebrew parentage led him to take the side of a Hebrew slave.

And resulting in the death of an Egyptian slave master. And he ran away to the desert. And so the middle part of his life was completely different.

He lived that as a shepherd out in the desert. Hardly anybody knew he was there. He was indeed hiding. He didn't want anybody to know he was there in case the Egyptians came after him. And then in his old age he became a leader of a people who must have caused him far more problems than the sheep ever did.

They were far more troublesome. He was well acquainted with the fragility and the changeableness of human life. How nothing can change in a moment.

[6:13] And presumably as he grew up he saw his future in the Egyptian royal family. But as I say it changed in a moment. We don't know exactly when in his life this prayer was written.

But it was probably towards the end. I mean one tends to write wisdom literature as one gets older I think. It's probably towards the end of his life. What about the structure of the psalm?

It's roughly but not rigidly chiasmic in that verse 17 kind of matches with verse 1. And as the versified version in our hymn book emphasizes actually quite usefully.

the requested return of the Lord in verse 13 contrasts and balances the return of the children of Adam to dust in verse 3. And verse 3 can be read that way.

It says return to dust those sons of men. It is actually I think masculine. Well in fact it's Adam. It says return to dust you children of Adam.

[7:21] Basically here's what it says. And so I say it's not a rigid chiasmic structure.

But it does encourage us to look for the key to the psalm in the centre section. As is often the case in this sort of poetry. And we do find the heart of the problem there.

But of course the underlying theme of this prayer is the contrast. Between the eternal God. As Moses says to whom a thousand years is nothing. And our all too mortal lives.

This brief span of 70 or 80 years. So we'll look at the psalm. It divides fairly naturally into three parts.

So in verse 1 to 6 we have the description of the problem. And in verse 7 to 12. And in verse 7 to 12. Moses tells us what the heart of the matter.

[8:23] The heart of the issue is. Which may be not what we thought it was. And then in the final verses. He invites us to take a different perspective. And indeed he prays to God that we might indeed have a different perspective.

A different way of looking at our lives. And so that's what the final part is about. So we'll look at it under those three headings.

So first of all in verses 1 to 6. The problem is described. What's the most permanent long lasting thing you can think of?

I don't know the answer to that. But a mountain would certainly be a good candidate. Wouldn't it? The life of rock is slow. Yet before there were any mountains.

Before there was even a blue planet to have any mountains. Before there was a place for the generations of man to live. God was and is and will be.

[9:27] Moses reminds us of that in verse 2. At least that's the claim. And you can reject it if you want to. But if you reject that claim.

You need to remember that without God. This world can really make no sense at all. There's nothing in science or philosophy or politics.

That can create meaning if the meaning is not there in the first place. And that's why we need to look at the works of God. Without that as I say going back to Ecclesiastes.

We can really only agree with the teacher. Meaningless, meaningless says the teacher. Uttingly meaningless. Everything is meaningless. That's how Ecclesiastes starts more or less. Ecclesiastes 1 verse 2. Pretty depressing way to start your lecture. But that's how he does it. Meaningless, everything is meaningless says the teacher. And Moses goes on here to emphasize the point, doesn't he?

[10:30] He says, in contrast to God, who is older than the mountains. Who outlasts the rock. We're just dust. Dust blown away by the slightest breeze.

Or we're washed away by the flood. In fact, we're that strange hybrid, as some modern writer have said.

That we're half ape and half angel. But we're all dust. That's what we're made of. And that's what God says we will return to.

And our problem really, as I say, is that we don't live in the moment. We can't. We measure time. As far as we know, the other creatures don't measure time in any meaningful sense.

I mean, they presumably note the passing of the seasons. But they live in the moment. But we measure time, as verse 4 implies here. We measure time by years and days and nights.

[11:39] And the watches of the night. As a watchman might be consulting his watch. Oh, is my shift over yet? You know, we measure time like that, don't we? And it's because of that that we understand the concept of eternity.

We have eternity in our hearts, as Ecclesiastes says. We have it in our minds. But we don't possess it.

And as he's going to say, we have a sense of right and wrong. But we find that we're not moral. In fact, by our very finiteness, by our very creatureliness, we're bound to the cycles of this world.

And again, Moses reminds us of that in verse 5. I think I put in verse 4 there, but I meant verse 5. When he says, we like the grass of the morning. In the morning it springs up new. By evening it's dry and withered. We may last a bit longer than grass.

[12:48] But in the same way as the grass, we're bound to the cycles of life in this world. So is that all that can be said?

Well, the world would try and tell us that that is all that can be said. But it's a meaningless universe. That the universe is uncaring. But the Bible tells us, well, maybe the universe is uncaring, but there is a caring God. Who rules the universe.

And the world says, there ain't no justice. But the Bible replies, oh yes there is. And that's just your problem.

The issue is not just one of time and our fleeting lifespans. It may appear to be that that's the case. But actually, Moses wants to look at it differently.

[13:56] The problem is deeper than that. The real reason, he tells us, and the scripture throughout tells us, that our lives seem so futile, is because of sin.

Because of disobedience to God. And in a sense, in verse 7 and 8, he's exaggerating for effect. We are consumed by our anger and terrified by your indignation.

You have set our iniquities before you. Our secret sins in the light of your presence. All our days pass away under your wrath. We finish our years with a moan. I'm not saying in one sense, I suppose that's an exaggeration.

But it does feel like that. And he's saying, really, if you're suffering, or even if you're not suffering, you should still number your days.

And should remember that it is God who is the Holy One. Moses well understood that, didn't he?

[14:59] The fickleness and unbelief that lies in the human heart. He struggled with it all through the Exodus. Again and again. Again and again.

In fact, even before that. Because if you remember, when he killed the Egyptian slave driver, he was more or less his own countryman who got cross about it and said, you know, are you going to kill me too?

They didn't understand that he was trying to defend them. All the way through, he found the people both ungrateful and disobedient.

What did he do? He took his eyes off them for a moment and they were up to some inventive new way of turning aside from the Lord. Let's build a golden calf. You know, that's really creative, isn't it? Humans are creative. The trouble is they're usually creative in the wrong way. Constant grumbling there was.

[16:01] Mutiny. And then finally it all culminated in the refusal to go in and take possession of the land as God had told them to. And that, in a sense, was part of the reason why Moses himself would never enter the land and maybe it was that sense of futility, perhaps, even that prompted this prayer.

I don't know. One thing is certainly the case. Moses constantly predicted, you've only got to read his words in Deuteronomy and the other books of the Pentateuch.

He was constantly predicting that the very law which God had provided, which should have made them wise, which should make them wise, which should make them holy, which should have other people around admiring them and saying, look what just and great laws this country has, look what a great God this country has, this nation has.

But actually, the same Moses was always predicting, it was very likely to have exactly the opposite effect. And of course, that is exactly what it did do. It simply drew attention to their disobedience and their idolatry.

And so Moses wants to tell us here that the problem is not so much physical death as spiritual death, a life lived out under God's anger.

[17:37] So verse 10 really is central to the message of this psalm. The length of our days is 70 years or 80 if we have the strength, yet their span, or it possibly can be translated, their pride or even the best of them or something like that, is but trouble and sorrow, for they quickly pass and we fly away.

I guess actually you can do a lot in 80 years, and indeed many people do achieve a lot in 80 years. But all of it is under the shadow of death.

And we end with a sigh, not even a cry of defiance, as Dylan Thomas said, rage against the dying of the light, but we don't actually.

We end with a sigh. Was it all worth it? Why have I, you know, was it worth being here? So verse 10 literally says, their pride, the pride of our days, is but trouble and sorrow.

Even the best of days are marked out by the shadow of death and God's disapproval. So Moses suggests that we do our spiritual mathematics and count our days.

[18:53] Verse 12. God doesn't need to mark the passage of time, but we do. And then perhaps we might achieve wisdom.

But then we might ask, well, okay, what wisdom exactly is it we're going to achieve? Is there actually any point? Is the best we can do? Resignation. Perhaps the only wisdom to be had is that that again we find in Ecclesiastes set out by the teacher.

So I saw there is nothing better for a man than to enjoy his work, because that's his lot. For who can bring him to see what will happen after him? And he goes on to say, what's the point in building anything when your sons might be a, you know, might be a fool and might throw it all away?

And for how many people is that true? Indeed, if the teacher is Solomon, as he's kind of suggested, that was exactly the case, wasn't it?

His sons threw away all that he had built. So is that the best that can be said? Eat, drink and be merry, for tomorrow we die. But even the animals can say that, can't they?

[20:08] Is the man no better in the end than the creatures of this earth? Is he really just a clever ape? Just a clever animal, one who's really too clever for his own good?

Is that all that can be said? But no. Moses wants to suggest that we should have a different perspective on life.

Exactly what view of resurrection and afterlife Moses had is not entirely clear.

Of course, the Egyptians had some idea of an afterlife. So whether Moses was talking about, in verses 14 and 15, whether he's talking about future blessing in this world or future blessing after death is perhaps not entirely clear.

but one might say, well, how could this possibly be answered? How could this prayer possibly be answered as if there's not some idea of a world in which things are put right?

[21:31] I mean, if we've lived out our 80 years in this troubled world, how can there be another 80 years in which it is put right unless there is some view of the future?

But whether he's talking primarily about what we do in this age or in the age to come, he's saying either way, what matters is that it is done from God's perspective.

What was it Jesus said? He said, do not be afraid, little flock, for your father has been pleased to give you the kingdom.

Sell your possessions and give to the poor. Provide purses for yourselves that will not wear out, a treasure in heaven that will not be exhausted, where no thief comes nor near and no moth destroys. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. Notice, of course, here that Jesus is talking about the kingdom as it operates in this world because, after all, it's here that we're selling our possessions and giving them to the poor.

[22:41] it's not that the kingdom is both here now and to come and he's saying invest in the kingdom to come by what you do now.

So, it's our works, if you like, in this life that are established in one sense and that perhaps that Moses is praying will be established.

but he also says that we need to see them in the light of the kingdom and the city that is built by God. And so, the important thing in these last verses of Psalm 90 is the shift in perspective.

How can we mortals really be like God? Because that's what Adam and Eve wanted, wasn't it?

They, when they took the tree of knowledge of good and evil, they said, I want to be morally independent, I want to have moral knowledge.

In fact, I want to be a God. Is that possible? How can we be beings of eternal significance? We're certainly creative, but how can our creations have every real meaning?

[23:52] And verse 13 is, of course, the answer to that. Return, O Lord. That mirrors the verse verse 3, where it says, Return to dust, O sons of men.

Unless the Lord returns, then we are dust. But, Moses mirrors that by saying, Return, O Lord. Return to your people.

This is the only place in the Psalm where God's covenant name, Yahweh, is used. You can tell that in our translations by the fact that Lord, here in verse 13, is in capital letters and that signifies that it is God's covenant name, I am, the name I am that was revealed to Moses.

And that's the only place in the Psalm where it's used. If man is not to return to dust, then the Lord must return to his people. Contact must be re-established.

And this prayer is for the life of God to be experienced among his people. That's what it says, isn't it? It's not all about keeping some rigid law. On the contrary, it's about being satisfied with God's unending love.

[25:20] It's about singing for joy and be glad all our days. so if we're to sing for joy and be glad all our days instead of passing them off in trouble and sighing, then it is necessary that we have a relationship with the covenant God, with the Lord himself and that we understand his unending love.

And how does that work then? Well, he goes on to tell us. He says, make your deeds shown to your servants, your splendor to your children.

how is meaning to be found in what we do? In the things that we do in this three score years and ten?

Well, it's in participating, isn't it, in the work of God himself. And if his servants down the generations are able to see what God is doing and to live under his favour, then the work of their hands will indeed be significant because it will be established by the eternal God.

And there is a sort of paradox here because he says in verse 16, let your work be shown to your servants and then in verse 17, establish the work of our hands.

[26:51] So what's he saying there? He's saying it's the city built by God that is the truly human city. It's the city built by God that has the tree of life for the healing of the nations.

And John tells us that in Revelation 21. I've put the last couple of verses there up on the board, but I'll read a bit more of it out to you. What does John say about this city?

He says, the nations will walk by its light and the kings of the earth will bring their splendor into it. On no day will its gates ever be shut for there will be no night there.

The glory and honor of the nations will be brought into it. Nothing impure will ever enter it, nor will anyone who does what is shameful or deceitful, but only those whose names are written in the Lamb's book of life.

Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life as clear as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb down the middle of the great street of the city.

[28:01] On each side of the river stood the tree of life, bearing twelve crops of fruit, yielding its fruit in every month. And the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations.

No longer will there be any curse. the throne of God and of the Lamb will be in the city and his servants will serve him. Moses had part of the answer.

He understood that the Lord had said, I am, I will be what I will be. He understood that the steadfast love of the Lord never fails.

What he didn't have a clear view of was how that curse will be removed. He understood what the curse was. And he knew that there had been a promise that the serpent will strike the heel of the, of the, I can't remember the exact words now, you shall strike his heel and he will bruise your head.

There will be a prophet who's come who's the serpent would strike at his heel but would bruise the serpent's head. Moses only had a sort of foreshadowing of that, he didn't understand it in its fullness.

[29:16] But now we see how this works. We see how the city that God builds as I say is the truly human city and the city in which the glory of the nations have a meaning because because the curse is removed through Jesus Christ because God himself became a man because he subjected himself to the futility of death but as our pioneer who went through it and so in this city, in the city that God builds, I say the human city, then there is no futility.

The work of our hands is established because nothing enters it that is evil or deceitful or lying but only that which is true and which has an eternal meaning.

so this is the end I suppose of the end of the Brighton Festival or coming to the end of the Brighton Festival and doubtless many of us have been to some of the events of the festival and marveled at the creativity and the talent that people have and yet perhaps we're all so saddened that it's all cursed by death that in the end it's all futile there is no lasting beauty that can be created by man alone but it's only when we we produce things by faith as it were when we what we do by faith when we labour in the building of the city whose architect and builder is God that our lives can truly have meaning and that what we do can have true significance so I'm going to stop that

I could make it a more personal appeal I think but and it is a personal appeal of course to for each of us to trust in the living God but in a sense it is more our humanity as the people of God as a community that Moses I think has in mind here as representing the true humanity the true way to live in this world as living in fellowship with the living God so let's sing ending Thank you.