

Psalm 90 PM

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[0 : 00] Let's pray. Father, we ask now that you'd open our hearts to hear your words, and that we would respond in repentance and faith, that you would renew our joy and satisfy our longings this evening.

We pray this all in Jesus' name. Amen. You may be seated. So if we've not met before, my name's Will. I'm one of the ministers on staff here at St. John's.

And if there's anything that comes up in the sermon or from today's Bible readings that you'd like to chat about, questions you have, I'd love to talk over ice cream after, or just meet you and say hello.

So for the last few weeks, we've been turning to the Psalms to consider what it means to be human. And the Psalms, I think, are an ideal place to address this question because the Psalms give us a true reflection of our human experience in relationship to God and the whole breadth of our human experience in relationship to God.

And Psalm 90 is a brilliant example of this, and we'll spend the rest of our time together here in Psalm 90, and it would be helpful if you could have your Bibles open to page 496 and follow along.

[1 : 14] So in Psalm 90, which is a psalm of Moses, in light of God's infinite glory and goodness, Moses prayerfully reflects on two things that are absolutely basic to our human nature, and that's our limits and our longings.

Our limits and our longings. To be human is to be limited in all sorts of ways, but also to long for things that take us beyond those limits.

We are finite creatures who long for transcendent things like beauty and purpose, belonging, meaning, and legacies.

And so to flourish as people, and I think that's the point of this series, right? We aren't just asking what it means to be human in some sort of academic sense. We're asking what it means to be human so that we can flourish as human beings under God.

And to flourish as people, we need to learn how to satisfy the good longings that God has given us while not exceeding the good limits that he's placed upon us.

[2 : 22] And Moses shows us how to do this in Psalm 90. And you'll notice he begins with praise. He says in verse 1 and 2, 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. If we want to know what it means to be human, we actually need to begin with God.

Because God is the one permanent, unchanging reality in all the universe. Everyone changes, and everything will pass away. But God is unchanging in both his glory and his grace.

You notice Moses says, God is the creator of all, and also the refuge, the dwelling place for his people in all generations. And God's infinite glory and mercy does two things in this Psalm.

It reveals our limits, and it also shows us how to satisfy our longings. We can say that in this Psalm, God's infinite glory and mercy is both the reality that humbles us, and the hope that satisfies us.

[3 : 40] And we'll look at both of those in turn, but we'll start with the reality that humbles us. And we see this in verses 3 to 12. Moses pulls no punches in this Psalm.

He laments, as he comes before God in prayer, he laments that our lives are short and full of trouble and toil because we live under the wrath and judgment of God.

These verses are not easy to hear, but I think they're necessary and important. Moses refers to death repeatedly in these verses, using different images to show how frail and short and fleeting our lives really are.

As we say at our Ash Wednesday service at the beginning of Lent, we are dust, and to dust we will return. We have a set amount of time in this life and in this world, and in the grand scheme of history and eternity, that time will prove to be short and easily forgotten.

This is what verses 4 to 6 are all about. For God, a thousand years are like a day, Moses says. He says we're like a dream that slips away from your consciousness as you wake up, or grass that grows in the morning and withers in the evening.

[5 : 00] All of the things that cause us so much stress and anxiety in this life, all of the things that we give our lives to feverishly pursuing will one day fade and be forgotten.

I was listening to a podcast this week in the car, and there was a comedian talking, and he said, isn't it a bit unnerving to think that after your funeral, the first question that some people might ask is, where's the potato salad?

I thought it was funny. I mean, you can always trust a comedian to face the difficult realities of life head on. I mean, the truth is, I laugh, but this is deeply unsettling for many of us, and I think it should be.

I think the reason that our lives actually can feel so short, so unsatisfying, so frustrating at times, is because we live in a world that's under the judgment of a holy God.

We see this in verses 7 to 10 of our reading. 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.

[6 : 14] 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 70, or even by reason of strength 80, yet their span is but toil and trouble.

They are soon gone, and we fly away. We see here that death isn't just the result of our biological systems running their course.

Things like death, decay, sighing, toil, and trouble are all reminders that we live in a world that's groaning under the curse of sin and the judgment of God.

Our lives and our work are often plagued by restlessness and dissatisfaction because in one way or another, all of us have sought joy and peace and meaning outside of the bounds set for us by God.

To play on the story of Genesis 3, we think the grass is greener outside of the garden when in reality all that we find there are thorns and thistles and death and sighing and toil.

[7 : 23] Moses asks in verse 11, who considers the power of your anger and your wrath according to the fear of you? I think the implied answer is no one.

No one out there is living like this, and if we're honest, most of us in here probably aren't either. The Christian tradition has taught that to live faithfully is to live *Coram Deo*.

This is a Latin phrase that means in the presence of God or before the face of God. To live *Corum Deo* means recognizing that everything we think, everything we say, everything we do is known by God, it's seen by God, and it happens under his authority and judgment.

Look again at verse 8. Our iniquities are always before God, and our secret sins are in the light of his presence. This is like Psalm 139, which we read a couple weeks ago, that God knows our thoughts before they come to us or our words before they leave our mouths.

And this is true. It may not be a particularly pleasant truth. It may be a hard truth for us to come to terms with, but it's true nonetheless. To be human on this side of heaven is to live with the reality of sin and death before the face of a holy God who sees and knows all things.

[8 : 52] And so how can we or how should we respond when faced with these realities? Well, I think we can do one of three things. Denial, defiance, or dependence.

We can deny that we have any limitations at all. And our society works very hard at this. We work very hard to keep death out of sight and out of mind.

We hide death. We idolize youth. We cover our aging. But all of these things are at best deceptive and temporary measures. So we can deny we have limitations, but we can also become defiant toward God.

When faced with their mortality, some people respond by reasserting even more a sense of independence and autonomy. They throw off any and all limits or constraints and live their life to pursue pleasure wherever they can find it.

Or they just become bitter and angry toward God or toward the universe if they don't believe in a particular God. I hope we can see that neither of these responses lead to wisdom or lasting peace and joy.

[10 : 06] But there is a third option, and that is to allow a recognition of our limits to lead us into greater dependence upon God. And I think this is what we see in verse 12 of our reading, which you have printed on the front of your bulletins.

Moses prays, This prayer is about more than simply recognizing that our lives are short.

Moses is asking God to teach us, to teach his people, to live before his face and under his authority and grace. And we need to be taught because this isn't something that comes naturally to us.

Choosing to live before the face of God, to consciously live before the face of God, means denying all of the impulses within us to run or hide or to seek power and pleasure apart from God.

But we cannot become wise unless we are willing to face reality. And so we need God, in his grace and glory, to teach us to number our days.

[11 : 27] Because until we learn to actually embrace the limits that God has placed upon us, we cannot gain the heart of wisdom that leads to flourishing and peace.

So we've talked about our limits, but what about our longings? Does living before the face of God, does recognizing the seriousness of our sin, the reality of death, lead to a life of fear, anxiety, and dread?

I don't think so. Doesn't need to. I don't believe that's what God wills for us. I think that's clear in the rest of scripture. God wills for his people to live lives of hope and joy and peace and love.

And this brings us full circle to God's own glory and grace. Remember, I said at the beginning that God's glory and grace in the psalm doesn't just reveal our limits, it also satisfies our longings.

And so God teaches us here to number our days so that we would seek to satisfy our longings in him and him alone. We see, again, Moses model this in verses 13 to 17 of our psalm.

[12 : 41] Following verse 12, Moses asked God for seven things. He prays, Return, O Lord. Have pity on your servants. Satisfy us.

Satisfy us with your steadfast love. Make us glad for as many days as you have afflicted us. Let your work be shown to your servants. Let the favor of the Lord be upon us and establish the work of our hands.

Yes, establish the work of our hands. So having been taught by God to number his days, Moses is able to turn and bring all of his deepest desires and longings before God who has been and is his refuge and dwelling place.

And this is, I think, very important for us to see. Desire in itself is not a bad thing. We are hardwired by God to long for things like beauty and belonging and intimacy, meaning and purpose.

God has set these desires in our hearts to lead us to himself. The problem is not that we long for things that take us beyond ourselves, beyond our limits.

[14 : 00] The problem is that we try to satisfy these longings on our own, apart from God and outside of the boundaries that he has set for us. And this ultimately is always a losing game.

First, because we don't actually know what's best for us, and God does. And second, because everything in this world will always leave us hungry and wanting more.

Look at some of what the world holds out as being profoundly fulfilling. The pursuit of money and material wealth, status, the power and right to define our own identity, unlimited access to information and digital relationships, unrestrained sexual expression that's divorced from the obligations of children or family.

If you've tried to pursue your longings through any of these paths, if you've tried to satisfy your desire for beauty or intimacy through sex or pornography, or your desire for legacy and lasting meaning through obsessive work, you will know just how empty these pursuits can leave us.

What our society is doing just isn't working. The modern project of throwing off all limits and all restraints and pursuing our desires wherever they lead has produced generations of young people who've grown up in broken families and are now plagued by anxiety and depression, who do not know how to be at peace in their own bodies or in the world that they find themselves in.

[15 : 40] We are like the people of Israel in the time of Jeremiah. We have forsaken God, the spring of living water, and tried to dig our own broken cisterns that cannot hold the water that we so desperately thirst for.

But the Christian response to this deeply human problem, which I think in some ways is the problem of our time, is not to deny our longings.

It's not to kill the desires within us, but to turn to God and satisfy them in the infinite well of his glory and grace. And as Christians, we see this, we experience this most fully and clearly in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Let me read a few verses from 1 Corinthians 15. When the perishable puts on the imperishable and the mortal puts on immortality, then shall come to pass the saying that is written, death is swallowed up in victory.

O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting? The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.

[16 : 59] And then listen to what Paul says in response to those glorious truths. Therefore, my beloved brothers, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord, in the Lord, your labor is not in vain.

So this, this is where we go to fulfill our deepest desires for the most wonderful beauty, for the most dear intimacy, for life's purpose and meaning, to have work and purpose in life that won't fade when we die, but will actually go into eternity in and through our Lord Jesus Christ and the eternal unchanging grace and glory of God.

But to come to this well, to drink the living waters, we first need to embrace and face the realities of our limits. We need to come to the end of ourselves and only then turn to God in humble prayer and say, return to us, O Lord.

Lord, have pity on your servants. Satisfy us in the morning with your steadfast love. Make us glad for as many days, many, many more days than you have afflicted us.

Let your work be shown to your servants. Let your favor be upon us, O Lord, and establish the work of our hands in and through your Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, and for his glory.

[18 : 35] Amen.