

GOD, MAN, AND TIME

A DEVOTIONAL VIEW OF PSALM 90

Every New Year's Eve millions of people, most of whom are not so fortunate as to be Scottish as I am, sing the song, Auld Lang Syne. Probably most of those who sing it do not know what the words of the title mean, but they sing anyway. The words literally mean "long time since;" in idiomatic English the meaning would be "a long time ago," or we might just say "once upon a time." The song is a reference to time –time that has gone by, and perhaps time yet to come. The song tells us that we are passing from the old year and transitioning into the new year.

The 90th Psalm also has to do with the passage of time, from the viewpoint of both God and man. This Psalm is, in its ancient title, described as "a prayer of Moses, the man of God." It is probably true that the old inscriptions of the Psalms are not themselves inspired, but were added by editors unknown to us. However, it is generally held by scholars, especially conservative ones, that most titles bear the stamp of accuracy. In the case of this particular Psalm, we cannot know for certain that Moses is the author, but the Mosaic authorship is strongly defended by scholars, both old and recent. F. Delitzsch argues that the Psalm comes from the closing period of the wilderness wanderings, and was preserved in some ancient book. W. VanGemeren does not give a firm opinion, but writes, "The spirit of Moses' concern is certainly present in the psalm's deep sense of life's furtive passing; the connection between sin, suffering, and the wrath of God; and the submission of man in prayer for God's favor" (EBC vol 5). I know of no evidence that would require us to believe that the inscription is in error or that Moses did not write the Psalm. So, while acknowledging the impossibility of absolute certainty, I shall refer occasionally in this study to what "Moses" has written.

This Psalm has to do with the passage of time, and the transition from one period of life to another. It emphasizes the transitoriness of life, and the frailty of man's hold on life as his years accumulate. The Psalm is full of time markers; points in the life of human beings are called to the attention of the reader. Now, none of these time markers are applied to God, and the Psalm starts out by making that very clear.

THE TIMELESSNESS OF GOD

The Psalm starts with praises for God's everlasting, timeless, nature. Verse 2 speaks to God himself, acknowledging that "from everlasting to everlasting you are God." This just means that he is without beginning or ending. As finite beings we have a great deal of difficulty comprehending the concept of eternity. Small children often ask their parents, "Who made God? If God made everything, then who made him?" We usually answer simply that nobody made God, for he always existed. We cannot expect the mind of a child to grasp the idea of eternity, for our adult minds cannot fully take hold of the thought of one whose existence has neither beginning nor ending. For this reason, Moses gives us a starting place and an ending place. He tells us what the first "everlasting" means and what the last "everlasting" means.

In vv 1, 2 the first "everlasting" is pinpointed as being before the creation of the world. *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.* So we can look back and conceive of the world having a beginning. We can think of man as having been created at a particular point. That is the starting place in thinking about the existence of God. He was here before all of the work of creation was done, and he is the one who did the creating.

The ending point in our thinking about God as everlasting is stated in v 3: *You turn us back to dust, and say, Turn back, you mortals.* God will be here when the full end of

humankind has come. He will be here when we no longer live on this planet, and the world itself has been brought to a full conclusion. Moses is referring to very nearly the same thing the Preacher in Ecclesiastes mentioned when he spoke of the individual human being's body returning to the dust from whence it came, and his breath to God who gave it (Ecc 12:7). There is a time coming when all of us will be dissolved bodily. But God will still be in his heaven when we are gone from here.

God, we see, is divorced from time. Time is a created force, from which its Creator is exempted. Look at v 4: *For a thousand years in your sight are like yesterday when it is past, or like a watch in the night.* The writer of 2 Peter 3:8 evidently makes an allusion to this Psalm: *But do not ignore this one fact, beloved, that with the Lord one day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like one day.* This means that God does not inhabit time at all; he has no life span. He cannot be thought of in terms of the time continuum. Think of time in a linear fashion. Now, this may be a simplistic way of thinking about time, in this post-Einsteinian era. But it is the way Moses would have spoken of it, using as he often did, the language of phenomena. Think of time as a straight line that has a beginning and an ending. We live somewhere on that time line, although we do not know exactly where. Even if we figure out when time began, when the world started, and how far along the line we presently are, we still do not know how close we are to the end of the line. And where is God on that line? He is not there at all! God does not live on a timeline. He is not confined to that spectrum. God is somewhere far above time, and from his high place can observe the entire course of time from beginning to end. He does not feel the passage of time. He does not change with the times as we do.

Further information about God's timelessness is given in vv 5, 6: *You sweep them away; it is like a dream, like grass that is renewed in the morning; in the morning it flourishes and is renewed; in the evening it fades and withers.* This means that God, from his point of advantage watches the passing of human years. He takes note of what is happening to us as we go along day by day and year by year. Moses here uses three figures of speech to describe the passing years as God views them. Only two are seen here in the version I am quoting (NRSV), but other versions add, "like a flood," following "You sweep them away." So the first figure is that of a flood of water. You know that a flood can come very suddenly and unexpectedly. Sometimes there is not time to make preparation for it. The flood waters come and work their destruction. We saw it in New Orleans, and in the Asian tsunamis. As God sees it, the years of man go by like flood waters coming upon us. Perhaps Moses, who wrote of the Noachic flood in Genesis 6-9, was thinking of that. So far as God is concerned, that is what human life is like: the flood comes upon us and sweeps us away, so that we are no longer here. But he, the eternal watcher, remains.

The second figure used in these verses is that of sleep. The reference here is to the dream quality of life. Sometimes we have very vivid dreams. Not everyone is aware of dreaming every night. I seldom remember on waking that I have dreamed. If the dream I have is unpleasant, I worry that it might come true. But of course dreams are not reality. I realize that there are credible psychological theories that hold that dreams have meaning that affect our conscious lives. In any case, dreams do have a quality that is quite different from waking reality. And that's what life is like for human beings in many respects. Do you ever, when things do not work out for you as you wish they would, ask the question, "Is this all there is to life?" It is just like a dream; it does not seem real. What is my purpose for being here? God looks on our lives and sees them as having a dreamlike quality. Life is like a sleep. But we are going to wake up.

The third figure is that of grass that springs up in the morning, but by evening has been cut down and has withered. This may not be fully appreciated by those of us who live in a moderate climate. But when Moses led the children of Israel in the Exodus, he led them through desert country. The wilderness had very little rain. Until God miraculously provided it, the people had to search constantly for water, and it was a great blessing

when they found it. In the Negev of the holy land rain falls twice a year. When the rain comes, the grass springs up suddenly, and one can see greenery all around. But just as soon as the rain stops and the sun comes out, it begins to scorch the grass and cuts it down. The grass withers and is gone. That is the way God sees human life. So God is described as timeless, viewing us from outside the span of time. Now Moses comes to write about man.

THE SHORTENING OF MAN'S TIME

We look now at vv 7-9. *For we are consumed by your anger; by your wrath we are overwhelmed. You have set our iniquities before you, our secret sins in the light of your countenance. For all our days pass away under your wrath; our years come to an end like a sigh.* This is telling us something important: that the length of human life has decreased because of man's sins. The persistent sinfulness of people has resulted in our lives being shortened. If sin were not prevalent we would have been permitted to live longer than we do. Let us review the history. The first man was created directly by the hand of God, and he lived 930 years. With Adam sin entered, yet for a time God was forbearing and patient, so man continued to live for a very long time. One man lived longer than Adam. That was Methuselah, who lived 969 years. There was, however, a reason he lived so long. The suggestion is that God kept him alive as a witness and a warning that the flood was coming. He did not die until the flood waters were upon the earth; he died the same year that Noah entered the ark. Then, immediately upon conclusion of the flood record, we find in Gen 10 that the life span began to decrease. It became 400 years, then 200. By the time Moses led the exodus from Egypt, it was just over 100 years.

Moses himself lived 120 years, divided into three sections: 40 years in Egypt; 40 years taking care of Jethro's sheep in Midian; and 40 years leading the children of Israel. But by the time Moses died, his life span was considered remarkable. That is why it is commented that his vision had not dimmed or his strength abated. It was unusual that one should live that long and still be strong and active. And during the wilderness wandering, when God had decreed that that entire generation would die without entering the promised land, man's life span decreased even farther. We might say that God's patience with his people had begun to wear thin. By the time Psalm 90 was written, the length of life could be described in v 10: *The days of our life are seventy years, or perhaps eighty if we are strong; even then their span is only toil and trouble; they are soon gone, and we fly away.* By the time Moses wrote this man's life span had come down to 70 years, or if he is strong and healthy he might live to be 80. Of course, there are slightly shorter lives in some periods of history, and longer ones in other periods when medical science enables people to live a little longer. But at best we do not live a great deal longer. Those of us who have already passed 70 now find, as Moses said, that labor and sorrow accompany our last years. Living becomes more difficult, it is harder to walk about, and to accomplish the things that we want to accomplish. The things we could do when younger are no longer easy or even possible. As the text says, once we pass the decreed limit our years become filled with toil and trouble.

I am thinking of someone very close to me who made it a point, through 40 years of work and two different careers, to be wise in the use of money. He was generous with others, but careful about saving. He invested well and made sure there would be plenty when retirement time came. So he accumulated a good deal of money. Do you think that once he passed 70, his life would be virtually sorrow-free? Unfortunately, it did not happen that way. A friend who was known to be quite competent in a special field of work needed some financial infusion into his business to purchase equipment for expansion. The brother lent his friend well over \$100,000 dollars, secured by a lien on the new equipment. It was learned only afterwards that the lien was not good, as everybody around had liens on the same property, and the United States Government was making attachments. The brother will never recover a penny of the money he lent.

He had to return to work in his advanced years. Old age came, and he lived beyond the decreed 70 years but, as Moses said, along came the labor and sorrow.

We need to understand that there is found here no promise at all of a full 70 or 80 years of life. Many people die younger, even in these days of medical advancement. A while back I became friends with a young man in his 20s who operated a business in the city. His business dealt with a product in which I am especially interested. If anyone guesses that he ran a used book store, you might be right! I would visit him frequently, and we would talk about religion. He was Jewish, so I felt a desire to tell him about Jesus the Messiah. He began asking serious questions. We reached the point where he agreed that on the following Sunday he would go with me to church services, and that on the Monday evening we would begin a regular study of the New Testament Scriptures. I was confident that he would eventually be led to Christ. On Friday afternoon I went by his place of business to be sure our arrangements were still on. There was a sign on the door informing us that the day before, the young man had been struck by a car and killed. Could I perhaps have been more zealous in urging on him the claims of our Lord Jesus Christ? Perhaps. But it is too late for that. No one expected him to die at that young age, but he did. Most of us know of some similar cases.

But suppose one does live to be 80 and, being a faithful Christian, knows he is prepared for death, and ready to meet the Lord. Even so, death comes unexpectedly. I can make mention of a person, actually a relative of mine, who was in that position. As a child of God, he had no doubt that he was prepared to leave this life. Everything was in readiness. Do you think he expected to die? One week before he died he went down town and purchased an expensive large screen television set; something to provide diversion and entertainment for the remaining years of his life. Spiritually he was ready to die, yet somehow death took him by surprise. The point of these examples is that we simply do not know when our time will have run its course. There are some thought-provoking Bible examples too. In Luke chapter 12 we read of a man who thought—and said—that he had many years to live. He was building large barns to store the crops his ground had brought forth abundantly. He wanted to say to his soul, “eat, drink, and be merry.” But God said to him, “You fool! This very night your life is being demanded of you.” James 4:14 also has something to say about this matter: *[Y]ou do not even know what tomorrow will bring. What is your life? For you are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes.* That is what life is like.

But unexpected death is not the only thing that may shorten our time here on earth. Have we forgotten that the world will one day come to an end? Has not Jesus promised to come again, and that as a thief in the night? We should, in fact, be praying that he will come soon. The New Testament ends with the prayer, *Amen. Come, Lord Jesus* (Rev. 22:20). Paul ends the book of 1 Cor with the prayer, *Our Lord, Come*. As marginal notes (and other versions) reveal, he actually used the Aramaic phrase that we usually pronounce ***Maranatha***. How was it that a church in Greece were using an Aramaic term? Obviously, because they were regularly praying for the coming of our Lord. If one does not look forward to the coming of Christ with great anticipation, and pray for it, he is out of synch with the early Christians and the primitive church. Our Lord could break the clouds of glory at any moment, bringing earth-time to a close. One way or another our lives here are coming to an end. Time is running out.

The two verses of the Psalm with which we shall close this study provide us with the practical application of all that was previously said. V 11 reads, *Who considers the power of your anger? Your wrath is as great as the fear that is due you.* This means that a Day of Judgment is coming. Many today ignore, or even deny that there will be a future Judgment Day. I am not as concerned about that as I am about you and me. Do we, in practical terms, really believe that we are going to face a God who is angry about sin? In view of the assurance God has given that there will be a time of accounting, do we put sin out of our lives—use all remaining time wisely? We do need to understand this and

pay reverence to him whose wrath we are in danger of incurring if we are not prepared. This being true, what shall we do to get prepared?

Vs 12: *So teach us to count our days that we may gain a wise heart.* We should reflect on the brevity of life and use every fleeting moment to acquire hearts that are full of wisdom. But it must be the wisdom that is from above. There is a wisdom that is devilish, fleshly, and earthly (Jas 3:15). There is human wisdom, things we have philosophized about and concluded. But there is also a wisdom that is from above. James writes: *But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy.* If we can be taught to so number our days as to develop that kind of wisdom—actually to accept it when offered from heaven above—then life will have been worth the living and eternity will hold no threat for us. The time that is so short will have been properly used.

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