

**Psalm 90**

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## Psalm 90

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.

You return man to dust and say, "Return, O children of man!" For a thousand years in your sight are but as yesterday when it is past, or as a watch in the night.

You sweep them away as with a flood; they are 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.

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.

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 seventy, or even by reason of strength eighty; yet their span is but toil and trouble; they are soon gone, and we fly away. Who considers the power of your anger, and your wrath according to the fear of you?

So teach us to number our days that we may get a heart of wisdom. Return, O LORD! How long? Have pity on your servants! Satisfy us in the morning with your steadfast love, that we may rejoice and be glad all our days. Make us glad for as many days as you have afflicted us, and for as many years as we have seen evil. Let your work be shown to your servants, and your glorious power to their children. Let the favor of the Lord our God be upon us, and establish the work of our hands upon us; yes, establish the work of our hands!<sup>1</sup>

"Oh God, our help in ages past, our hope for years to come!"<sup>2</sup>

That may be the best quote to sum up what this Psalm communicates to its readers. As one digs into the Psalter they find this sentiment sprinkled throughout, nowhere more evident however than in Book Four of the Psalter which we find ourselves just beginning with Psalm 90. The Psalm is perhaps the oldest psalm in the Scriptures, it is classified as a wisdom psalm because though it seems to have been written because of a particular occasion in the life of Moses, it is very applicable to the frailty of human life in general, and, in singing it, we may easily apply it to the years of our

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<sup>1</sup> All Scripture is taken from the ESV unless noted otherwise. (Psalm 90)

<sup>2</sup> Isaac Watt

passage through the wilderness of this world. It furnishes us with meditations and prayers very suitable to the solemnity of a funeral.<sup>3</sup> We are not God, we have an end, just like we had a beginning. This wisdom of understanding this, and then living in light of it is unparalleled. For the purposes of this paper we will walk through six different lenses used to interpret the meaning that God would have us exegete from the Psalm. It is imperative for us to read without a cloudy 21<sup>st</sup> Century Western viewpoint in order to extrapolate the richness of the Hebrew poetry, the culture that surrounded the writing of this psalm, its placement in the canon of Scripture, and how Jews and Christians have historically read this Psalm in light of their own experiences and the experience of Jesus. I submit that we will see that Psalm 90 has much to say to us today, primarily that God is the unchanging refuge for a constantly changing culture.

#### The Compiler and the Nation of Israel

Only a basic study of the Psalms would leave us to conclude that the book had an editor, or perhaps a safer name, a compiler. Whether this was one scribe, one community, or perhaps many scribes over the course of history it is evident that God used more than just the authors of each Psalm to communicate truth to us within this book of Holy Scripture. The organization and structure of the Psalter and consequently each of the five books or sections of Psalms that make it up is astounding when one considers the history and culture of Ancient Israel. Psalm 90 is the first psalm of Book Four. Its appeal is clear: Psalm 90 and the subsequent 16 psalms is the one cohesive answer to the problems Book Three left us with. What are those problems? Wrought with emotion as both the North and South nations have been defeated and taken into exile, it appears that the Davidic Dynasty has not only come to an end, but has completely failed both people and God Most High. Book Three leaves us with a depressed Israel, the Temple has been destroyed, the prophets

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<sup>3</sup> Matthew Henry, *Matthew Henry's commentary on the whole Bible: complete and unabridged in one volume* Peabody: Hendrickson, 874.

that we refused to listen to were proven right. Everything held dear to us has been taken away, and now our very lives are at stake as we are being dragged away to a foreign land to live and work for a pagan King. No more are we near the House of the LORD, no more are we worshiping with instruments and incense. It is a march of monody.

The opening lines of Psalm 90 however sing a different tune. The mention of Moses as the author is perhaps the strongest instrument in this new symphony, a point that will be addressed below. The opening lines of the poem however act like a crashing cymbal of hope that shakes the mourning nation out of its funeral dirge, “Lord, you have been our dwelling place throughout all generations. Before the mountains were born or you brought forth the whole world, from everlasting to everlasting you are God.” God has certainly not abandoned His people, for how could He? He is our dwelling place! Walter Zorn notes the significance of this statement,

When one reflects upon the history of Israel, he or she can appreciate the significance of this statement. In the ancient Near East, a stranger visiting in the domicile of a native in the land would receive both hospitality and protection from the householder. These would be assured him so long as he remained under the roof of his benefactor. Consequently, the dwelling place was a place of refuge for the guest. Therefore, to say God is our dwelling place is to say our sustenance and our preservation derive from him.<sup>4</sup>

But this is not some ordinary god who has decided to take Israel as his own, this is not a god like that of the nations that surround Israel. This is not a god like the Babylonians or Assyrians worship. This is the Creator Himself. The appeal from Moses that this is the God who was before the mountains, the one who brought forth the whole world and that He had chosen Israel long before time even began is striking. It is hope filled. “God has brought us to this moment for a purpose, and He will not abandon us here.” Most of us will never experience something like exile that Israel had to endure, but we all will experience our own Babylons from time to time, and these words can be an encouragement to us in those moments. The Compiler put this Psalm at the forefront of Book

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<sup>4</sup> Walter Zorn, *College Press NIV Commentary* (Joplin: College Press, 2004), 170.

Four to draw attention to a shift in worship for the Nation of Israel. Its focus was to bring the reader's attention back to that, as in the days of Moses, before David, before the Temple, YaHWeH reigns, let the earth be glad! (Ps. 97:1)

### The Author

The psalm is the only one attributed to Moses, who is mentioned several times in Book Four (cf. Pss 99:6, 103:7, 105:26, 106:16, 23, 32; elsewhere in the psalter only Ps 77:21).<sup>5</sup> It is fitting that we see Moses here as the opening to Book Four, the Psalter is returning to its roots. What is all the more fitting is the topic in which Moses writes. The epitome of wisdom is understanding our place in the world we live in, Moses reminds us that our place is in the hands of God. The same God who made everything we see, and the same God who chose to make a covenant with people and live in relationship to that covenant.

The psalm also points out several allusions to Moses' life as well, leading some to say the psalm is lightly biographical for Moses, not only within his life, but the life of Israel under his watch. Matthew Henry believes this Psalm to be in reaction to the story we have in Numbers 14, in which the people rebelled because of the reports from the spies sent into Canaan. The people's faith fell. The response from God was one of judgment, anger, and wrath. Moses saw what it looks like for YHWH to bring a nation to its knees, a nation that looked and felt and acted superior and in complete control, immortal, some would say. And yet, the Creator turned against them and brought them to nothing. Moses knows what it is like to watch the wrath of God poured out, not only on Egypt but also on Israel. He remembers the snakes in the desert, the fate of Korah, and the long years of wilderness wanderings. We must never rise above our place in God's order of things.

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<sup>5</sup> Laurence Kriegshauser, *Praying the Psalms in Christ*, University of Notre Dame Press. Kindle Edition. Kindle Locations 3711-3712

Some scholars debate and remain uncertain whether this psalm was actually composed by Moses, or whether some one of the prophets framed it into a song for the use of the people, from a formula of prayer written by Moses in Deuteronomy 32, and handed down from age to age.<sup>6</sup> It is, however, highly probable, that it is not without some ground ascribed to Moses in the title; and since psalms were in use even in his time, there should be no doubt that he was its author.

The epithet, *The man of God*, given to Moses, is an honorable designation that is expressly applied to him, that his doctrine may have the greater authority (perhaps than that even of David). If conjectures are to be admitted, it is probable, that when the time of his death drew near, he ended this prayer to assuage the prolonged sorrow under which the people had almost pined away, and to comfort their hearts, under the accumulation of adversities with which they were oppressed. Although the wonderful goodness of God shone brightly in their deliverance from Egypt, which, burying the miseries formerly endured by them, might have filled them with joy; yet we know that, soon after, it was extinguished by their ingratitude; so that for the space of not less than forty years, they were consumed with continual languor in the wilderness. It was therefore very seasonable for Moses at that time to beseech God that he would deal mercifully and gently with his people, according to the number of the years in which he had afflicted them.<sup>7</sup>

### Theological and Jesus

One major point the reader of Psalm 90 would immediately take away from the text is that this psalm deals with the Jewish understanding of time and space. It is deeply theological for them, drawing from the Creation narrative itself, God was outside of and superior to time and space. The critical reader would notice immediately the chiasm within the first two verses. Moses begins his poem by bookending the creation of the world with names for God (Lord/God) and designations of time and space. He goes on to speak of the transcendence of God over time and space for “a thousand years are as a day to you”. There are by my estimation 15 references to time within this psalm. Moses had lived a long life, he witnessed the power and prestige of God and the eternity of

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<sup>6</sup> Walter Zorn, *College Press NIV Commentary* (Joplin: College Press, 2004), 170-171.

<sup>7</sup> Calvin & Anderson *Commentary on the Book of Psalms Vol. 3*, Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software, 460.

YHWH was evident by how He was sovereign over the years and over nature. Moses had also lived long enough to notice a trend in behavior of nature within time.

We measure time with what we call days, weeks, months, years, decades, and centuries.

Though the Jewish people used these words as well, they seemed to be more interested in generations, this measurement had much to do with their communal understanding of ones place in society as well as a larger designation for a specific time frame. I do not have the space within this paper to dive deeply into the matter, however the Jewish understanding of time that I have at least come to understand is that they see time as cyclical rather than linear. The Jewish people measured things by what it pointed back to, that history somehow would constantly repeat itself in some form or in some manner until it was redeemed. This concept is carried out within the pages of the New Testament as well. It is another way of showing us how powerful God is, that He is so beyond us that He can orchestrate events in the manner that He does.

I believe the most important thing we can glean from this psalm on a theological level however, is Moses' use of bringing time into this poem was for the purpose of giving us all wisdom to chew on. We must learn to number our days, to gain a heart of wisdom. We must reckon with ourselves that YHWH is on the throne of our lives, He commands and brings forth life, and He can take it away in an instant. We are made low by His anger and wrath, and part of that wrath is our mortality. We are not only separated from God by space and time, but by the moral distance that our sin creates. The most important truth about this psalm is that death, the brevity of life, and our sin are connected. Understanding this is how we can pray with Moses verses 12-17.

The answer to that prayer is Jesus in our lives. How else would the gap of space, time, and sin be accounted for? How would our moral failings be atoned for? This psalm points us to incarnation as our hope. Jesus, the only one who could truly read this psalm in all its fulfillment is the only one who has truly made God His dwelling place without exception. He was the only one



who have been in God before the world was born, for He was already. He understands the breadth of man because not only did He create man, He became man. He was Lord over the flood. As the psalm turns towards the wrath of God over sin, so does the mood in which Jesus fulfills this psalm. Jesus, more than any other human being, understands how by the wrath of God we are made low. Though Jesus never sinned, and never experienced the deep wound of sin within Him, He did take on all of the sin of the world, and thus experienced something far deeper than anyone else would ever undergo. The prayer for God to establish the work of His hands is answered in Jesus as He built His church.

#### Church/ Apostolic Tradition

I cannot end this paper without addressing how the Church would come to understand this Psalm. I think it was found to be a very big encouragement to the Church, again with appeals back to Moses for the reminder of God's continuing faithfulness. Even to this day and age Moses is still speaking wisdom into our lives, and just how God took care of Moses and the people then, so He is taking care of us now. Then, God spoke through Moses, but now He is speaking through His son, the one "like unto Moses" (Deut. 18). The church was finding Jesus to be the fulfillment and the better Moses. This psalm, specifically verses 12-17 I think would be found on the lips of the persecuted church under Nero, Domitian, and many others. I imagine Peter praying this psalm as he sought for wisdom on how to lead the church effectively "Yes establish the work of our hands Oh, God." I imagine Paul, in prison, praying "Teach us to number our days that we may gain a heart of wisdom." I imagine James after hearing of the testimony of Peter that salvation has come to the Gentiles praising God and praying, "Let your work be shown to your servants, and your glorious power to their children." These words were probably sifting through the mind of Stephen as he preached his fiery message to the Sanhedrin, "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.” For the early Christians who were beaten, dragged away, or even killed at the hands of Saul and those with him I hear this echo, “Return, O LORD! How long? Have pity on your servants! Satisfy us in the morning with your steadfast love, that we may rejoice and be glad all our days. Make us glad for as many days as you have afflicted us, and for as many years as we have seen evil.”

I think the early church would have seen this psalm as something to continue to pray and use in their worship services. Its appeal is as much Christian as it is Jewish, a longing for God to forgive and turn his eyes to us. Its wisdom is ageless and something everyone could consider as we long to know God more deeply and serve him with more fervor.

### Conclusion

What my hope is, by studying and reading Psalm 90 is for us all to see that God is truly our refuge. The one who has remained throughout all time and space. He is the one who remains the same, constant in His love and mercy, unchanging in His judgments. He invites us into a relationship with Him despite the separation that exists between His righteous reign and our mortal failings. Laurence Kriegshauser says it this way, “Intimacy with the Lord will produce joy and the endurance of our works. In Christ the Christian shares in the divine eternity. As the body of Christ lives forever, so does the work the Spirit has empowered us to do in this life. Only if we know that all our days pass can we place our hope in the Jesus who leads us beyond earthly years.”<sup>8</sup>

May we find that no matter which lens we may look through to attempt to unravel this psalm and apply it to our daily lives that we understand the character, majesty, and greatness of our God. The psalm is all about Him, just as our lives should be. Throughout all generations, in every

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<sup>8</sup> Laurence Kriegshauser, *Praying the Psalms in Christ*, University of Notre Dame Press. Kindle Edition. Kindle Locations 3739-3742

moment, every time, and every space YHWH has been our dwelling place. May we learn to number our days and get a grip on our reality, for this will teach us to have a heart of wisdom. May our prayers ever be, Lord let your favor rest upon us, yes, “and establish the work of our hands upon us; yes, establish the work of our hands!”

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