

ADDRESS ON PSALM 90 by Rev Paul Wilson – Continuing our ‘Reassurances from the Psalms’ series

INTRO.: It is a great privilege to share God’s Word with you again. We rejoice in the unique strength & hope it gives us – especially in uncertain times!

Finding the right perspective is so crucial if we are to make sense of life. We need the divine perspective the Scriptures offer. In this regard the psalm we’re looking at today is both thought-provoking & prayer-inspiring.

Psalm 90 is a fairly well-known & memorable psalm with a distinctive authorship. Whilst most of the psalms were written by David or his contemporaries, this psalm is an ancient prayer by Moses, conveying his very wise & really valuable reflections, most likely written towards the end of his life. Profound truths are found here & a very deep faith in God; meaningful, helpful & practical insights are conveyed.

This is a strong & robust psalm: it does not dodge the really big issues! In encountering them head-on, it constitutes a secure anchor for our souls. It is so focused upon God & on our relationship with Him, offering a much needed perspective to steady our hearts & our minds. Composed out of such a rich experience of God & of life. Moses has known many challenging, demanding & bewildering times but also many wonderful experiences of God’s renewed calling, deliverance & provision. Moses is a man of God, a man who fears God in the best possible sense & a man who has walked with God. He talked with God as one talks with a friend; he had a passionate desire for God’s glory & an intense revulsion regarding the sins of the people of Israel that damaged their relationship with God. Psalm 90 reveals those character traits which we see in Moses.

As a very moving prayer, it vividly communicates Moses’s grasp on God’s utter reliability – His eternal nature & unchangeable character. It also leaves us in no doubt about our stark plight & our utter dependence upon God & His favour. The first 2 verses contain tremendous statements about God; the next 9 verses describe the harsh realities of the human situation & the final 6 verses convey the positive possibilities that emerge because of God’s grace.

We will consider, in turn, what we need to know about God, what we need to know about ourselves & what we can confidently pray for.

There are such mixed emotions here. This can be described as a sublime, solemn & hopeful psalm! It captures the fateful constraints & shortcomings characterising the human lot & sets them in sharp contrast with the overarching glory & mercy of God. It confronts despair but in the end it lifts us way above it! This psalm does not shy away from addressing human frailty, both physical & spiritual, but in the end it leads us to God’s triumphant & unfailing love. Psalm 90 is shaped by Moses’s rich & colourful experiences, by his responsibilities & frustrations as a leader & by his close interaction with the living God who is totally committed to His people & to seeing His plan of salvation through despite all obstacles.

WHAT WE NEED TO KNOW ABOUT GOD

V1 Lord, you have been our dwelling place throughout all generations.

Our true home is found in God alone. This is the enduring reality for all generations. So much may fluctuate in national & family life but Moses affirms right at the beginning that he & his people look to God for the rest & reassurance represented by a stable, lasting & secure home. God is the ultimate promised home-land! The truth is that we are at best mere sojourners & pilgrims here on earth. Only in God do we discover our permanent dwelling. This very positive statement sets the scene for the closing section of the psalm, where the character of God & Moses’s faith in God will be very reassuringly revealed.

V2 Before the mountains were born or you brought forth the whole world, from everlasting to everlasting you are God.

Moses delights in God’s eternity. He is before all things, Creator of all things & in Him all things exist. God’s lifetime has no beginning & no ending. This magnificent fact is also celebrated at the end of Psalm 41: ‘Praise be to the God of Israel from everlasting to everlasting. Amen & Amen.’

WHAT WE NEED TO KNOW ABOUT OURSELVES

Vs3-6 You turn people back to dust, saying, "Return to dust, you mortals."

A thousand years in your sight are like a day that has just gone by, or like a watch in the night.

Yet you sweep people away in the sleep of death — they are like the new grass of the morning:

In the morning it springs up new, but by evening it is dry and withered.

Those truths set out in the opening 2 verses of the psalm have put man in his place. The subsequent verses also cut us down to the proper size. Perhaps this makes for rather grim reading but it gives us a necessary perspective. For unlike God, we are not divine or eternal beings, we are mortal & transient. We are made from dust & return to dust. If we take 40 years as a human generation, then 25 such generations (i.e. covering a thousand years) are virtually inconsequential – like just a day in God's sight. Man may boast of his significance & achievements but in truth his existence is fleeting, a 3 or 4 hour watch in the night.

We are subject to the ravages of time & decay. Death will sweep us away & like new grass springing up under the burning Middle Eastern sun we quickly wither! There is a stark honesty expressed here! A realism that must be faced if we are to understand our limitations, our frailty & our need for God's aid. The desperate requirement for His salvation is laid bare in the next verses & again we are compelled to see that our only hope is to be found in Him.

Vs7-11 We are consumed by your 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.

Our days may come to seventy years, or eighty, if our strength endures;

yet the best of them are but trouble and sorrow, for they quickly pass, and we fly away.

If only we knew the power of your anger! Your wrath is as great as the fear that is your due.

Moses further underlines our vulnerability by stressing our predicament as sinners. We are fully accountable to God; answerable for our rebellious actions which have provoked His fully legitimate anger. We are subject to God's penetrating gaze & as rebels we live under His holy judgment & righteous displeasure. We deserve His fury & His punishment. Mankind's fallenness, hopelessness & sadness are very much in view here. Moses is honestly acknowledging all this directly to God. He is confessing how important it is to face up to the reality of the human predicament; a predicament he fully shares in. Moses stresses our accountability & yet our failure to recognise the seriousness of our sinfulness. He keenly feels the need for this perspective which graphically displays man's unregenerate state & his unworthiness, pitifulness & plight. It has been said that: 'We come into this world with a cry & we leave it with a groan'. We live under the heaviness of God's judgment. This depressing diagnosis is, however, not the full story!

There is another perspective: one rooted in a proper respect for & understanding of God: an outlook above all based on God's grace. Other key songs & blessings composed by Moses celebrate this positive perspective too: Exodus 15 vs1-19 (see especially v2: 'The Lord is my strength & my defence; He has become my salvation' & v13: 'In your unfailing love you will lead the people you have redeemed. In your strength you will guide them to your holy dwelling') plus Deuteronomy 32 (see especially vs36: 'The Lord will vindicate His people & relent concerning His servants' & v43: 'He will make atonement for His people').

WHAT WE CAN CONFIDENTLY PRAY FOR

V12 Teach us to number our days, that we may gain a heart of wisdom.

Moses can see firm grounds for continued hope. He prays, in effect, for a way out of man's bleak & hopeless predicament – a coming to our senses & the acquiring of a heart of wisdom. A prophetic insight here into our need for a new heart! What constitutes a heart of wisdom? An embracing of the truths already set out in this Psalm (i.e. in vs1-11). An ability to measure things correctly, including the finiteness of our days. An acknowledgment of God's greatness/ of man's puniness; of God's eternity/ of the brevity of human life on earth; of God's holiness/ of human fallenness; of God's judgment/ of man's guilt.

BUT ALSO a heart of wisdom sees beyond all this & discerns God's mercy & love. This heart is a gift from God; a gift of His grace. For humanly-speaking it is beyond our capabilities to perceive the wisdom we require.

V13 Relent, LORD! How long will it be? Have compassion on your servants.

Moses urges God to turn again towards His people, to see their predicament & address their plight. Here is an earnest longing & petition for God to stay His hand of judgment, to show compassion & to provide the salvation only He can deliver. Moses has pleaded with God on behalf of the Israelites on numerous occasions: appealing to Him to show mercy & exercise forgiveness. Moses has not lost any of His confidence in God & he still obviously believes that God will keep His covenant towards His people. He believes that divine mercy can triumph over divine judgment. Calvin interprets Moses's words thus : 'Be pacified towards your servants'. The following paraphrases from other commentators reinforce this focus on God's ability to intervene: 'Be pleased to turn your severity into kindness towards us' & 'Be glorified in our salvation rather than in our destruction'. The essence & cost of this salvation will only be revealed much later in the NT revelation.

V14 Satisfy us in the morning with your unflinching love, that we may sing for joy and be glad all our days.

This verse is such a turning-point in the psalm. The atmosphere changes & wonderful positive possibilities emerge countering the doom & gloom of verses 3-11. After a night-time of suffering, sorrow, weeping, compensate us, O Lord, by your tender presence & meet all our needs by means of your unflinching love. This is such a wonderful expression of trust in God. Hope & joy are bursting forth! Moses can clearly see that God is good & in the light of that he can perceive a gloriously brighter perspective.

Vs15-17 Make us glad for as many days as you have afflicted us, for as many years as we have seen trouble. May your deeds be shown to your servants, your splendour to their children.

May the favour of the Lord our God rest on us;

establish the work of our hands for us — yes, establish the work of our hands.

Moses obviously grounds his very optimistic requests here on what he already knows of God's goodness & lovingkindness. He has proved God's tender-heartedness & faithfulness over so many years & realises that God can act in atoning grace to meet His own demands & deliver those who put their trust fully in Him.

Jesus spoke of the fact that Moses wrote about Him & the reality that Moses could see ahead to Jesus' sacrifice is undoubtedly the ultimate basis of his confidence in these closing verses of Psalm 90.

The expectations expressed in these statements transform the whole outlook of the psalm. Moses factors in God's ongoing relationship with his people & His long-term goals which are not thwarted by man's shortcomings.

The generation that doubted God's ability to bring them safely into the promised land is dying off but there is still time for them to experience something of the goodness & wonders of God. Moses's great expectations for their children is particularly evident here: he prays that they might see God's glory & enjoy His favour. Anticipating their entry into Canaan he pleads that God will go ahead of them, bless them & prosper all their efforts. Only God can give us a truly worthwhile existence, enable us to make a lasting impact & grant us an enduring inheritance!

Balancing the outlook of this mighty psalm with our New Testament reading today, from John chapter 3, we can more fully appreciate the glorious, yet hugely costly, manner in which God has surmounted the bleakness of the human predicament. The reassurances offered in the closing verses of Psalm 90 are brought to fruition in the New Testament revelation of Jesus Christ as our completely atoning sacrifice & our all-sufficient Saviour! Let's praise His Name!