

OUR HELP IN AGES PAST

Psalm 90:1-17

First Presbyterian Church of Georgetown, Texas

Dr. Michael A. Roberts March 15, 2009

Psalm 90

¹Lord, you have been our dwelling place in all generations. ²Before the mountains were brought forth, or ever you had formed the earth and the world, from everlasting to everlasting you are God.

³You turn us back to dust, and say, "Turn back, you mortals." ⁴For a thousand years in your sight are like yesterday when it is past, or like a watch in the night. ⁵You sweep them away; they are like a dream, like grass that is renewed in the morning; ⁶in the morning it flourishes and is renewed; in the evening it fades and withers. ⁷For we are consumed by your anger; by your wrath we are overwhelmed. ⁸You have set our iniquities before you, our secret sins in the light of your countenance. ⁹For all our days pass away under your wrath; our years come to an end like a sigh. ¹⁰The 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. ¹¹Who considers the power of your anger? Your wrath is as great as the fear that is due you.

¹²So teach us to count our days that we may gain a wise heart. ¹³Turn, O LORD! How long? Have compassion on your servants! ¹⁴Satisfy us in the morning with your steadfast love, so that we may rejoice and be glad all our days. ¹⁵Make us glad as many days as you have afflicted us, and as many years as we have seen evil. ¹⁶Let your work be manifest to your servants, and your glorious power to their children. ¹⁷Let the favor of the Lord our God be upon us, and prosper for us the work of our hands— O prosper the work of our hands!

Moses' time was too short. "Moses thus becomes a symbol of human existence. We often come up short, in terms of time, intentions, accomplishments. What initially seems like a (discouraging) message, however, is actually an encouraging one. If the great Moses came up short, then perhaps it is not such a disaster that we do too. Moses' death was a reminder that God, not Moses, would lead the people into the land. Our time, therefore, is not all there is to measure. God's time is primary, and as Psalm 90 suggests, our time must be measured finally in terms of God's time." (*New Interpreter's Bible* Vol. IV p. 1041)

Notice the superscription of this psalm which reads: "A Prayer of Moses, the man of God." This is the only time it says this in the psalms. The title was not part of the original psalm but it does express high esteem for this psalm in that the people believed that only the nation's greatest leader could have spoken this psalm.

Walter Brueggemann suggests that the psalm be heard as though Moses was now at the mountain at Pisgah overlooking the promised land. He has come to an end of his life and his ministry. It dawns on him that he will not go on to the promised land. He embraces the painful reality that his life will fall short of what he had envisioned. He is reflective, even regretful.

The psalm has three parts. The psalm begins in verses 1-2 with praise for God's eternal nature through the generations. Verses 3-11 emphasize the transient nature of human life and the troubles that come our way. Verses 12-17 conclude the psalm with a series of petitions to God.

The psalmist begins the prayer *"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."*

This is a most positive affirmation of God's action in our life. Other versions say God is our refuge. God is the shelter, refuge, belonging place. God is the home that is more like a true home than any home we have ever known.

"When we are made aware that all around us changes, and that those we cherish most pass away, the human spirit yearns for the constant and the lasting" (James Mays *Psalms* p. 294). This psalm allows us to speak to God who alone is constant and eternal. This God is not only the God of the present but is someone who has always been there, even before the creation.

This is a powerful expression of trust in God, no matter what may come our way. Human existence can be discouraging, frustrating, and heavy at times, as we will see in a moment. Yet, God's people continue to express their trust in God as their true and lasting home.

We will sing one of my favorite hymns this morning. "Our God, Our Help in Ages Past". It is a paraphrase of the first five verses of the 90th psalm. It was written by Issac Watts in 1719 when he was 45 years old. Watts was radical at the time in believing that the psalms could be paraphrased and sung rather than just sung literally. One scholar says this hymn "is undoubtedly one of (Issac Watts') finest compositions and his best paraphrase."

Verse 1 of this psalm is paraphrased this way by Issac Watts:
 "Our God, our help in ages past, Our hope for years to come,
 Our shelter from the stormy blast, And our eternal home."

Psalm 90 is a meditation on the power of the eternal God to sustain us even in the face of human reality. This is important to remember before we move on in the psalm. These first two verses are not nullified by what follows in verses 3-11.

The title of Issac Watts' original hymn was called "Man Frail and God Eternal". That pretty much summarizes the theme of the psalm. For this psalm is also to be prayed by those who believe human beings are frail and transient.

Listen again to some of this section as the psalmist prays: "*You turn us back to dust, and say 'Turn back, you mortals'. For a thousand years in your sight are like yesterday when it is past, or like a watch in the night. You sweep them away...our years come to an end like a sigh. 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.*"

Human life is fleeting. Human life is transient. God is eternal, earthly human life is temporary. This psalm is often read at funerals when our minds are open and sensitive because of grief and remembrance. At funerals, perhaps more than other worship services, we are likely to reflect on our own condition and destiny (*Psalms* by James Mays p. 289).

The psalmist thinks the life span is 70 years and if we are strong 80 years. Either way, 70, 80, 90, 100, relatively speaking, human life is short. When you compare human life to a millennium, for example, it strikes us hard that human life is transient.

I have officiated at a number of funerals for individuals who were born in the 19th century. None of them made it to the end of the 20th century. We are living in the 21st century. Very, very few of us in this room will be living when the next century dawns. Earthly life is limited.

I think being part of a church which has a long history helps us realize that. This church has been here longer than any of us and it will probably be around longer than any of us.

I have been the pastor of this church for 20 years. That's a long time in pastor years and it's an even longer time in my own life. But it's only a small portion in this congregation's history of 154 years. A church with a long history helps put things in perspective. I may have been pastor for 20 full years but that's only 13 percent of the congregation's history.

Human life, at least on earth, is transient. The psalmist then adds that even the years we have are often full of toil and trouble. This is a pessimistic view of life. This indeed was a lament. But there are times, this psalm reminds us, when humans feel this way, when we feel this way. This is a common experience of God's people. The psalm seeks to speak for all who have felt this way before.

Issac Watts expressed it this way:

"Time, like an ever rolling stream, Soon bears us all away;
We fly forgotten, as a dream Dies at the opening day."

We live within this tension- God is eternal and God is our true home. And human existence is transient and troublesome. So, what are we to do? The psalmist teaches us that we should ask God to intervene in our lives.

What follows is perhaps the most interesting part of the psalm- a series of petitions in verses 12-17. The psalmist essentially asks God for a total reversal of all that has gone before in the psalm. The psalmist seeks a change from a time of affliction and mourning to one of satisfaction and joy.

The petitions begin with a profound request in verse 12: *"teach us to count our days that we may gain a wise heart."* The traditional way of saying this is "teach us to number our days." Having a good sense of time is important. We need to pray that God would teach us to count our days- to measure them, to consider them, to value them, to use them wisely. Wisdom sees the time given to us as the unique opportunity, the chance to be faithful to God. No matter how many years we have, we can each count our days in a wise manner.

The writer of Ecclesiastes says, *"For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven."* There is a time to live. No matter how long we live, life is short, it is not forever. There is only so much time to live a life, to labor, to relax, to travel, to enjoy your family. We must seize the day, celebrate the moments, enjoy the hours and days of our existence. For all of us, this is the time to live. As the apostle Paul said: "make the most of the time."

And this is our time in the life of our congregation. We have benefitted from the efforts of previous generations in this congregation and future generations of the church will reap the benefits of our efforts. This is our time. We are to make the best of this time. We may not have another opportunity. We do not want to squander this time. We do not want to miss the opportunities or fail to carry out our responsibilities. A wise person will value these days and consider how to use them most effectively in the service of Christ for the good of this church.

These verses of scripture raise the question for each of us- What time is it in your life? Is it a time to nurture your children or a time to use your gifts in your career or a time for both? Is it a time to play golf or a time to mentor a young person or both? A time to read and reflect? Or a time to get active in service? A time to take care of details or a time to dream? A time to think deeply or a time to feel deeply?

Do you know what time it is in your life? What is God calling you to emphasize in the immediate future in your life? None of us can do everything. Choices need to be made.

And there are times when life's circumstances shape what our priorities will be. If you have children at home, for example, there is no question that this is the time for them. Very few things are of higher priority in life. If you have lost a loved one in the past year, it is likely that this is a time to mourn and a time to re-shape and re-create a life. If you have been presented in life with a difficult relationship- this may be a time to make peace or it may be a time to let it go. Do you know what time it is in your life?

The petitions go on following verse 12. They are powerful and true expressions of what we hope for and pray for. These words ring true also as our prayer: *"Satisfy us in the morning with your steadfast love, so that we may rejoice and be glad all our days. Make us glad as many days as you have afflicted us, and as many years as we have seen evil. Let your work be manifest to your servants, and your glorious power to their children. Let the favor of the Lord our God be upon us, and prosper for us the work of our hands."*

These are words that all of us wish to pray in all seasons: satisfy us with your love, make us glad, prosper our work. The psalmist is saying that life can be short and very troublesome. Yet, life can also be enjoyable, meaningful, and joyful. It is appropriate that we pray that God would enable us to rejoice, to make us glad, and to help our work to be meaningful.

This psalm is helpful in many seasons of life. It is for those times when we rejoice that God is the true home in our lives. It is for those times when life does seem overwhelming and troublesome. It is for those times when we need God's intervention to make our lives more joyful and meaningful.

Issac Watts concluded his paraphrase of the 90th psalm this way:
 "Our God, our help in ages past, Our hope for years to come,
 Be Thou our guard while life shall last, And our eternal home."

PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE Led by Joy Bedford

Almighty God, by your grace you enrich us in speech and knowledge. We can pray with all confidence that through Christ you will hear us.

Open our eyes to behold your presence in all parts of our lives. Keep us from putting you on the fringe of existence, from turning to you only when we are in need. Keep us forever aware that you accompany us in all our journeys even into the next life. Let us see where we are needed in this world of uncertainty and let the world see in us the first fruits of goodness and mercy, and themselves be brought to know you through our acts and our mission.

You tell us through Christ to be ready, keep us from putting off until another time the discipline that will make us better disciples. Make us willing to break the comfortable routine and dare to start ventures that will test our obedience. Surround us with those who have made a similar commitment, so that they may teach us. Help us to seek their assistance and to learn of their ways.

For our pastor, We pray that you give him the support, wisdom, strength and vision needed to lead this church, this body of Christ. For all of us, pastor, elders, staff and congregation, knowing we are all imperfect and often weary and impatient, teach us what it means to live wisely and well. Make your presence known to us in ways we cannot overlook and affirm the work of our hands as we strive to further your kingdom on this earth.

You send us out to be about our tasks, to love and to dance, to work and to play, to cry and to heal. Go before us to guide us, and stay behind us to prod us. Live within us as God who fashions our being, as Christ who keeps us from falling, and as Holy Spirit in whose name we can do all things.

Eternal God, You alone are constant in this changing world. Grant us true wisdom of heart and guide us in serving you all the days of our life; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.