

Eternal God, Ephemeral Man

Psalm 90; 2 Peter 3:1-9

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Dear Congregation of Christ: Do you know which country in the world has the longest life expectancy? It's not the United States. It's Japan, with a life expectancy of 82. The life expectancy of American women is 81 and 79 for American men. The highest life expectancies in the world are in the largest and most advanced democratic economies in Western Europe, Japan, Singapore, South Korea, Israel, Canada, and New Zealand. The lowest are in Africa, with Central African Republic at the bottom at 53 years.

Our text today says that on the average, a person lives about 70 years, and if blessed with strength, even 80. Science has blessed man that life expectancy in most Western countries now exceed 80. But it also laments the fact that our 70-80 years on earth consist mostly of toil and sufferings because of God's wrath against sin. We think that these years are long, but compared with the eternal God, man is ephemeral—short-lived, like vapor that vanishes in a second. But Moses, who wrote this psalm, also prays that God would show favor by being merciful his faithful servants.

The heading of Psalm 90 is "A Prayer of Moses, the man of God." This psalm is the only psalm written by Moses, who lived about 1500 B.C., making it the oldest psalm in the Psalter. Most likely, he wrote it when the Israelites were camped on the plains of Moab, just across the Jordan River from Canaan the Promised Land. To situate the time of Moses, many of the inspired psalms were written by King David, who lived about 500 years after Moses and about 1,000 years before Jesus was born. He heard God's punishment against the rebellion of all the adults who came out of Egypt that none of them, including himself, would enter the Promised Land. It could be that he wrote this prayer-psalm as he contemplated this disappointment and sadness near the end of his life of 120 years.

So, as we begin the year 2020, we will meditate on Psalm 90, under four headings: first, **The Eternal God**; second, **The Ephemeral Man**; third, **God's Wrath on Man the Sinner**; and fourth, **God's Favor to His Servants**.

The Eternal God

The psalmist begins with a meditation on the eternal God in verses 1 and 2, "*Lord, you have been our dwelling place in all generations.*" The psalmist prays to the "Lord," the sovereign title of God, not his name Yahweh. In the ancient world, "Lord" can mean "sir" as a polite and slightly exalted address, or to a master of slaves or servants. But here, he is the absolutely sovereign, majestic, powerful King whom he worships and serves. Therefore, when we say that "Jesus is Lord," we mean that he is God who is our sovereign, majestic, powerful King, "*at the name of Jesus every knee should bow...and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord*" (Phil 2:10-11).

God is not only the sovereign Lord. He is also "our dwelling place." Moses might have been thinking about his unending pilgrimage of suffering in this world. In his first 40 years, Moses saw

the grandeur, power and riches of Egypt. In the next 40 years, he worked as a shepherd after he fled Egypt. And then in his last 40 years, he saw the power of God in sending ten plagues against Egypt, and his preservation of the people in their wilderness wanderings. But he also saw the repeated rebellion of the people and God's wrathful judgment against them in the wilderness. Those 120 years were to him a temporary pilgrimage to a permanent dwelling-place with God.

Our eternal dwelling-place is not merely heaven. Rather, God himself is our dwelling-place. In other manuscripts, the word used is "refuge." Before he died, Moses blessed the tribes of Israel, saying, *"The eternal God is your dwelling place"* (Deu 33:27). Other psalmists call God our refuge: *"Be to me a rock of refuge, to which I may continually come"* (71:3). *"Preserve me, O God, for in you I take refuge"* (16:1). *"God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble"* (46:1). Therefore, whether he is our "dwelling-place" or "refuge," God is both.

All the way back to the Garden of Eden, God provided everything for Adam and Eve's nourishment and enjoyment. He actually dwelt with them! In the midst of this sin-sick world, this is our hope for the future: in the new heaven and new earth, *"the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God"* (Rev 21:3).

Not only is God our sovereign King, he is our dwelling-place forever. Since God is infinite, eternal and unchangeable, we are assured that his promises in the gospel are eternal and unchangeable. He created the whole universe with his wisdom, power, holiness, justice, goodness and truth. Our first parents were created with true holiness, righteousness and knowledge of God.

The Ephemeral Man

In contrast to God who is infinite and eternal, the psalmist meditates on the smallness, shortness and weakness of man's life. He uses simple but vivid metaphors for man's life. Man is dust, so at death he returns to dust (verse 3; Gen 3:19). God is outside of time and space. He sees all of the tens of thousands of years of earth and human history as one short timeline from beginning to end. Therefore, our thousand years are but a day to him, or just "a watch in the night" or three hours. Man is like a rock in a river that is swept away and gone when the river rages with a flood. He is like a dream in the night that is completely forgotten in the morning. He is like grass that sprouts in the morning and withers at night.

Why does all humanity die at such a young age compared to God's eternity? When God created Adam and Eve, he implicitly promised them eternal life if they passed their probation in Eden, "If you obey my commandment by not eating of the forbidden fruit, I will give you eternal life." But they disobeyed, and God's warning that they will surely die on the day they disobeyed came true. In that moment, they died spiritually, but Adam still lived for 930 years (Gen 5:5). Methuselah, one of Adam's descendants lived for 969 years! (Gen 5:27). These are astronomical lifespans compared to our 80 years today.

Therefore, when sin entered the world, man's lifespan started decreasing. By the time of the flood, Noah's father lived only 777 years. But Noah himself lived 950 years since he survived the flood because he found favor with God. By the time of Terah, Abraham's father, the average

lifespan from Noah was 345 years. Abraham lived 175 years, and 500 years later, Moses lived only 120 years. When Moses wrote Psalm 90 near the end of his life, he says that 80 years is a long life. And this is where we are now.

Everyone's short lifespan and death (Rom 6:23) is not the only aspect of life that was affected by sin. Look at the history of the world up to our time. It is filled with murder, theft, sexual immorality, lying, disorder and wars. Paul describes the unrepentant world as people who are *"lovers of self, lovers of money, proud, arrogant, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, heartless, unappeasable, slanderous, without self-control, brutal, not loving good, treacherous, reckless, swollen with conceit, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God"* (2 Tim 3:2-4). But sin not only affected man's relationship with one another. Sin also caused the earth to decay, bringing floods, earthquakes, storms, fires and other natural disasters.

God's Wrath on Man the Sinner

These decay, corruption, wickedness and immorality are manifestations of God's wrath on sin that entered the world through Adam's sin. Verses 7-8 say that God's wrath consumes and terrifies man. Indeed, when we look at what is happening around us and around the world, we are terrified. What's happening? How can this be? Why is the world so evil? And then, we question God, "If God is good, why does he allow so much evil and suffering in the world? But God sees everything that happens, every wicked deed of everyone, and his wrath will consume the wicked.

Even Christians sigh and moan when we see and experience God's wrath. Death is the result of God's wrath. When we look back at those 70 or 80 years of our lives, we remember our toil, trouble and sorrow. Every New Year, we say, "Where did all those days go?" And every birthday, we realize that our years pass by swiftly, and we will eventually fly away.

But dear Christian, do not ever think that when sufferings or even death come to you, that God is punishing you. Sufferings are a part of human existence, even for you who have faith in God. Peter exhorts us, *"Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you"* (1 Pet 4:12). God sends them to us to test us and to strengthen our faith, as Paul says, *"we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope"* (Rom 5:3-4).

How then must we live through our sufferings? *"Rejoice insofar as you share Christ's sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed"* (1 Pet 4:13). *"Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds"* (Jas 1:2). Joy is not merely happiness that the world desires, but joy produced by faith in God's promise of preservation and perseverance through the Spirit.

God's Favor to His Servants

After considering the eternal God and short-lived, sinful man under God's wrath, Moses prays to God beginning with this petition, *"So teach us to number our days that we may get a heart of wisdom"* (verse 12). We must pray to God to teach us to consider the shortness of our lives compared to the eternal God. We think that 70 or 80 years is a long time to live. When we were young, we think that we were invincible, that we will not get seriously ill. We need God to teach us that we

are like grass, or vapor, or a dream that is fleeting and soon forgotten. Only then would we be able to make the best use of our day because our time on earth is short. We must pray that God would give us wisdom in living our lives in righteousness and in the fear of God, for *“the fear of God is the beginning of wisdom”* (Prov 1:7).

His prayer contrasts his consideration of God’s wrath on man’s sinfulness. In verse 3, because of sin, God pleads to his people, *“Return, O children of man!”* Now in verse 13, Moses implores God, *“Return, O LORD! How long? Have pity on your servants!”* We must plead to God for his mercy and forgiveness to us sinners. We who believe and trust in the Lord are his servants because we serve and worship him as forgiven sinners.

Whereas God’s wrath terrorizes unrepentant sinners, God’s mercy evokes joy in repentant sinners. While in verse 9, “all our days” are under God’s wrath, we pray in verses 14-16 that all our days will be filled with joy—even in sufferings—because of God’s steadfast love. We must humbly pray for balance in the joys and sorrows of our lives: the joys of births and weddings balanced by sorrows in deaths and separations. We are to remember that our suffering in this world is but a *“light momentary affliction [preparing] for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison”* (2 Cor 4:17). As God’s children, we pray that he will continue to perform his glorious and powerful works of creation and salvation for us and for our children.

Finally, in verse 17, we are to plead for God’s favor upon us. And one of these mercies is that he will establish the work of our hands. God commanded Adam and Eve to “work and keep” the Garden, to till the land and guard it from intruders, because it is *“the garden of God”* and *“the holy mountain of God”* (Ezk 28:13-16). Work was not meant to be toil, drudgery and futility that counts for nothing. Rather, it was meant to be done with joy and be rewarded by God with eating, drinking and finding enjoyment in his toil (Ecc 2:24; 5:19). For we also know that *“rendering service [must be] with a good will as to the Lord and not to man”* because our reward from the eternal God is eternal rest in God’s dwelling-place.

Dear people of God: How did God answer Moses’ prayer? God promised him that the Seed of the woman in the Garden will be the Prophet who will come to speak all of God’s Word and obey all of God’s commandments.

Although Adam sinned, incurring God’s righteous wrath against all humanity, God in his goodness promised a Savior who would redeem his people and restore creation into a perfect, eternal state (Gen 3:15; Rom 8:18-24). His salvation plan was from eternity because he has decreed all things that will happen from the beginning to the end. This is why Hebrews 13:8 says, *“Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever.”* Jesus is the eternal Son of God. He is *“the first and the last”* (Rev 1:17; 2:8; 22:13). Therefore, in eternity past, the Son of God willingly accepted his mission from God the Father to assume human flesh and blood and die for all the sins of all his people. He is our dwelling-place, our Savior from sin and death, our joy and gladness, our rest from this world’s toil and suffering. Amen.