

Psalms 90

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[0 : 00] Life is too short, isn't it? Last year the oldest person in the world got the Guinness World Book of Records award, a Japanese lady who has now reached 116 years old. 116 years, that's! that's pretty good isn't it? And the person before her who's just died was 122 years. Pretty good isn't it? But actually Psalm 90 tells us that whilst that's good, actually it is not good enough. It's not even close. Life is too short, even at 122. Moses who wrote this psalm wants us to face the reality of the brevity of life. That life's too short.

Our lives aren't long enough. Not even close. This psalm feels pretty brutal at times. And we'll have to face things that we'd rather ignore. But this psalm is God's way of startling us and wounding us so that he can heal us. And I want to take you through the psalm in which Moses contemplates some difficult realities of life and of death under three headings.

First of all, we're led to face the contrast between humanity and the God of the Bible. See with me the contrast in this psalm. Moses points out something blatantly different between us and God and God. Something obvious about human life that is not true for God. It's that compared with God, human beings are very, very short-lived. He contrasts human frailty over and against God's eternal grandeur. Do you see what he says about God in verse 2?

Before the mountains were brought forth or before the world was formed, from everlasting to everlasting, you are God. People say of really, really old people, don't they? He or she, they're as old as the hills. And Moses says, well, God's even older than the hills. He's older than the world. He's older than the oldest thing in the world, the mountains. And everything in the world, even before anything was, God was. He even says, from before time, from everlasting, God was there. There's never been a time when God has not been. And Moses shows us a contrast between God's time then and our time, doesn't he? If you look at verse 4. A thousand years in human time are like yesterday to God. A thousand years in the Bible is a kind of symbolic number for a very, very long time in human history. Think of everything that's happened in the last 1,000 years. The Battle of Hastings, the Magna Carta, the Renaissance, Gutenberg's Bible, the Reformation, the Industrial Revolution, the French Revolution, the Battle of Waterloo, US Independence, two world wars, the fall of communism, Britain joining the EU and leaving the EU. A lot's happened in the last 100 years, hasn't it? Let alone the last 1,000 years.

[3 : 44] In human time, it is a very, very long time. But when you are from everlasting to everlasting, a millennia is like yesterday, when it's passed. It's like a watch in the night. It's like an afternoon nap, he says. And that is the contrast. The ages of man are like milliseconds to God.

There's the round and round coming and going of humanity in verses 5 and 6. He says, there's every day, there's a new morning in the human scene. And humanity is renewed like grass. Like grass that flourishes in the morning, but by the evening, it's fading. Each generation comes and there's a renewal, but then it goes and passes away. He talks about literally how old people get in verse 10, doesn't he? The years of life are 70, maybe 80 years, give or take a decade, depending on how strong a person is. And if you compare human beings with other creatures, we do live a long time. If you Google animal lifetimes, you can find out that we can keep up with the best of them. We can live as long as a blue whale that can do 90 years.

We can live longer than the man-eater, the white shark who manages 30 to 40 years. We can live way longer than a honeybee at 5 years. We can live way, way longer than a dragonfly at 2 years or a blue-bottle fly at a couple of days. But compared with God, 70, 80 or 90, we can hardly keep up with the grass of the field. Life's too short. That morning freshness of youth quickly fades away. He says our days pass away and come to an end like a sigh. Our life, contrasted with God's life, is an anti-climax, isn't it? Life's too short. And we put so much effort into life, so much prolonged effort, but in the end we're brought to an end and we're forgotten.

Sure, we have moments of influence in the world, don't we? We can make a quick impression, but soon we're gone. He says we're swept away as with a flood in verse 5. We're like sandcastles.

[6 : 23] On holidays we go to Bournemouth where my wife's parents live and we spend a lot of time on the beach. And this year I bought a proper size spade, like a garden spade, because I wanted to make the biggest sandcastle on the beach. I wanted my children to see that their dad could make the biggest sandcastle and so I got a full-size spade, much to the embarrassment of Emma. And I did it. Our sandcastle dwarfed all the other little kids' sandcastles. But to my surprise, the next day, when we came back to the place, there wasn't a trace of my sandcastle at all, or any of the others. Because it doesn't matter how big your sandcastle is, how big your personality is, how big the impact of your life on the world when you're here.

When the tide comes in, we are all swept away. And we're left without a trace. That is in contrast with God, who outlives us all. Who is like one of those mountains where everything changes around it, but it just stays there. He is always there. He's always been there and he always will be. So we see the contrast.

Secondly, though, Moses shows us the cause. He shows us the cause. Life's too short, but why? That's the big question, isn't it?

Why is life so short? And underneath that question lies a very disturbing answer. He shows us the cause. Moses shows us that however good the longest human life is, even if you can get into the Guinness World Book of Records, with the way things are, it is never good enough.

And it's not how it should be. The end of life, and the finality of life, was not what human life was for. We were made to enjoy life forever.

[8 : 33] But can you see in the passage, the reason we don't, life is too short. The disturbing explanation is, and there's no nice way of saying it, it is because God is angry.

Death is not just a natural end to life. It's not how it should be. Look at verse 7. He's more specific, isn't he?

We are brought to an end by your anger. By your wrath, we are dismayed. Moses, in this psalm, echoes the story of Genesis 1-3, those first few chapters of the Bible, where the first man, Adam, is created from the dust to live forever, without death and without evil.

But he and his wife rebel against God and seek to replace God on his throne to be like God. And so God responds, halting their rebellion by the curse of death.

And in Genesis 3-19, he says to Adam, you are dust, and to dust you shall return. You're going to go back to where you came from.

[9 : 49] If you turn away from the life that is in me, then you can only die, Adam. And did you notice Moses picks up on that language in verse 3? You return man to dust, and say, return, O children of man.

Moses is saying that the disturbing explanation is that our mortality is connected to our morality. We have done what is wrong in turning away from God.

And death is the universal signal that God takes that turning away from him very seriously. Denzel Washington, the actor, was asked to perform a role in the film Training Day.

The role was of a vicious and corrupt policeman, or cop. And Washington said he'd do the part on one condition, that in the end his character had to die.

And the producers asked why. And he said, because the wages of sin was death. Denzel Washington understood something, isn't it, that so many of us forget.

[11 : 05] The problem is that we all think we're too good to die. You can bet that at most funerals, the struck line is, he was too good to die. She was too good to die.

And Moses says that this is our problem. That life is short, and we haven't worked out why. We haven't put two and two together as to why. That's what he says in verse 11.

Who considers the power of your anger and your wrath according to the fear of you? Our problem is that no one considers why. No one considers why life is so short.

And no one fears God. No one's willing to face the link between our mortality and our morality under God. That even living to 122 is just not good enough.

It's not even close. And our short lives should shout to us of a good God, who is angry at something very wrong in humanity. It's not how it's supposed to be.

[12 : 07] And if we're too good to die, then honestly, why do we keep doing it? It is because God commands that we return to the dust for turning our backs on him. So what happened in Genesis 6,

if you go back there, and you remember there, people before the flood lived for hundreds and hundreds of years, didn't they?

The numbers are staggering of how long people used to live. But before the flood, there was an increasing growth of rebellion against God and corruption.

And morality was linked with mortality. God capped the human lifespan to 120 years. He said to everyone, he said to the human race, look, 120 years is just not good enough.

It's too short. And that should shout to you of the cause. That even at 80 or 90 or even 100, you're a flash in the pan. You're a piece of grass.

You're a sigh. But no one seems to put two and two together. That our mortality, it is not natural. It is judicial.

[13:17] It is God placing a judgment on human beings for their rebellion against him. And we've got to start to recognize that, says Moses. As our bodies fall apart and break apart, as we face our mortality, we are facing our morality.

So we see the contrast. We see the cause. But thirdly, Moses shows us the cure. Shows us the cure. You might think that this talk has been very dour.

And this psalm is very dour. Dour. But actually, it is wonderfully encouraging and hopeful. Through it, God seeks to wound us, doesn't he?

And make us face things we don't want to see, but only to heal us. What are we supposed to do about this? Well, look at verse 12. Moses begins a prayer.

He prays, teach us to number our days that we may get a heart of wisdom. Moses says, life's too short. But if I can face the reason for that, and if I can go to God, and I can get a heart of wisdom, which means, in the Bible's language, fearing the Lord, and turning to him, doesn't it?

[14:37] Because in the judgment of our short lives, Moses wants to show us that there is also forgiveness and mercy and blessing for those who do that. It's interesting.

Remember what God says for humanity in verse 3. Return to the dust. But Moses, in his prayer, uses the same words of God and uses them with God, doesn't he?

Verse 13. Return, O Lord. How long have pity on your servants? You've told us rightly to return to the dust, Lord, but Lord, we want to ask you to return to us.

And Moses makes the case that God, in his steadfast love, can and will do that. For those who are willing to get a heart of wisdom and face these things and call upon God, that he could transform our fleeting days on earth into something meaningful and everlasting.

Do you see verse 15? Make us glad for as many days as you have afflicted us. Now, do you see what Moses is doing there? He's acknowledging the affliction.

[15:49] He's facing up to the short days that he's going to live on the earth. Under wrath, under affliction of God. That we disappear because of God's anger at our sin.

But at the same time, as your people, he prays boldly, that God, you would somehow change that. And that you would inject the darkness of our short days with gladness.

That you would establish the work of our weak, short-lived hands. that you would, effectively, that you would reverse the curse with a cure.

What he's doing, he's found the only place that he can run to, to escape God's anger, and it is to run to God himself.

Lord, you have been our dwelling place. And we find that in the Lord Jesus Christ, God answers this prayer for a cure. The staggering thing with Jesus, is that for the first time, the God who is everlasting to everlasting, lives a fleeting human life under judgment.

[17:06] In Jesus, the immortal dies. Who can explore his strange design?

The everlasting to everlasting one comes to an end, like a sigh. He becomes like the grass. At 33 years of age, he takes the cause and the curse of our short lives on himself.

And that is more than Moses could have possibly imagined, isn't it? As the Apostle Paul says later in Corinthians, because of Jesus, though our outer self is wasting away, our inner self is being renewed day by day.

And this light and momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory, not just for 80 years, but forever. You hear people talking about their battles with terminal illness, don't you?

And wonderfully, there are stories of people who have scrapes with serious illness, and there's a full recovery, and there's a return to normal life. But more often than not, what you hear people saying as a result of that, is I've managed to conquer my illness.

[18 : 27] I've managed to conquer cancer. He or she, they've won their battle with cancer. And that's what we do, isn't it, when we face our impending end.

We fight. And we try to conquer. But Moses says, look, just put two and two together. And see that no matter how long you manage to live, life is too short.

And it's just not good enough. And you need to pray to God, Lord, I'll know I'll return to the dust, but would you return to me?

And the wise person, faced with death or illness, rather than saying, I can conquer anything, says, I must now make the Lord my dwelling place.

and find in Jesus Christ an end to this curse. And to have gladness all my days in him. And to look forward to an eternal weight of glory forever.

[19 : 31] Let's pray.