

Summer in the Psalms: Moses' Psalm
 Psalm 90
 ABC 9/4/22

Recently I've been watching the TV series, *Alone*. It's an adventure reality show that follows the self-documented daily struggles of 10 people as they attempt to survive alone in the wilderness for as long as possible with a limited amount of gear. With the exception of medical check-ins, they're isolated from each other & all other humans. They may *tap out* at any time by satellite phone or be removed due to failing a medical check. The contestant who remains the longest wins \$500,000. They all do this knowing there's an escape plan. I recently read of something similar but without an exit strategy.

In March, 1981 Carl McCunn, 34, was flown into the remote Alaskan wilderness to photograph the beauty of the area. He had photo equipment, 500 rolls of film, 2 rifles, a shotgun, & 1,400 pounds of provisions. As the months passed, the entries in his diary, which at 1st detailed the wonder & fascination with the wildlife around him, turned into a record of a nightmare. In August he wrote, *I think I should have used more foresight about arranging my departure. I'll soon find out.*

He waited but no one came to get him. In Nov he died 225 miles NE of Fairbanks. An investigation revealed he'd carefully mapped out his venture, but had made no confirmed plan to be flown out of the area.¹

That was a bit shortsighted of him. Yet, how many people live their lives without making any plans for their departure to face God & eternity? & what about purpose in life? They are varied.

Burro Schmidt was a miner in the El Paso Mountains north of LA & was faced with a dangerous ridge between his mining claim & the smelter to the south in Mojave. He said he'd *never haul his ore to the Mojave smelter down that back trail* using his 2 burros. So he began digging a tunnel in 1900. It was about 6 feet tall & 10 feet wide, cut through solid granite.

In 1920 a road was completed from his mine to Mojave, eliminating the need for the tunnel, but Schmidt claimed to be obsessed with completing it & dug on.

In 1938 he had achieved his goal, having dug through nearly 2,500 feet of solid granite using only a pick, a shovel, & a 4-pound hammer for the initial section & carefully placed dynamite with notoriously short fuses for the rest. It's estimated he moved 5,800 tons of rock with just a wheelbarrow to complete his work. Schmidt never used the tunnel to move his ore. Instead, he sold the it to another miner & moved away.²

38 years to build a tunnel through a barren, desert mountain that served no purpose. What a way to spend your life. Have you ever had the feeling that life is futile? What's the point? What's its

¹ www.upi.com/Archives/1982/12/13/Photographer-Carl-McCunn-stranded-and-starving-in-the-Alaskan/7238408603600/; wikipedia.org/wiki/Carl_McCunn

² wikipedia.org/wiki/Burro_Schmidt_Tunnel

purpose? After all, you can amass a fortune only to be cut down in the prime of life. You can't take it with you. You can work all your life looking forward to retirement only to die & never enjoy it. Almost anything you choose to put your hopes & efforts in can quickly be brought to nothing through the common leveler of death. As George Bernard Shaw quipped, *The statistics on death are quite impressive: One out of one people die.* We try to avoid thinking about death & our ultimate purpose in life. But we can't brush it aside for too long because we, & everyone we know, will die. As you think about death you have to wrestle with the question, *How can my fleeting life have purpose or value? What makes life significant & worthwhile?* It seems there are only 2 possible answers. The 1st is the philosophy of the world, *Eat, drink, & be merry, for tomorrow we die* (Eccl 8:15; Lk 12:19). If there is an afterlife, that view is flawed. The other view is that of the Bible, that we must be linked vitally to the eternal God if we want our fleeting lives to have significance. Think back to Moses 3,400 years ago. He was a man surrounded by death. He led Israel out of bondage in Egypt to take them to the Promised Land. But because of their disobedience, God judged that generation & said it wouldn't enter the land but die in the wilderness. It's estimated that 1-2 million people died during the 40 years in the wilderness. That's a lot of graves! As Moses saw these people dropping like flies, he reflected upon the question, *How can this fleeting life have meaning & value?* Instead of being driven to despair & cynicism, as many would be, Moses was driven to worship & prayer. The result is Ps 90, the oldest of the psalms & the only one known to have been written by Moses. His answer to the question of how this fleeting life can have value is by living wisely before the eternal God. This psalm falls into 4 stanzas & the thought moves from God as eternal (1-2), to man as finite (3-6), to God angry with our sin (7-11) & concludes that God will be merciful in our need (12-17). It's written to remind us that what matters most in life isn't the temporal but the eternal, not the physical but the spiritual, not the visible but the invisible. In other words, all that truly matters is eternal.³ We'll read it & then look 1st at the 2nd & 3rd stanzas, which reveal what makes life futile apart from God. Then we'll look at the 1st & 4th stanzas, which show how life can have meaning & value. **Ps 90:1-17**

³ Steven J. Lawson, *Psalms 76-150*, ed. Max Anders, vol. 12, Holman Old Testament Commentary, p 81

1. The Fleeting Nature of Man (3-6) Death is inescapable. God has declared, **it is appointed for men to die once and after this comes judgment** (Heb 9:27). Because death is inescapable, it's important that we prepare for it. When Moses talks of God bringing man back to the dust, he goes back to the fall & the curse which God imposed in Gen 2-3. When he refers to **a 1,000 years** (4), he may be recalling the life span of those before the flood. Think of Methuselah & his cohorts (Gen 5). He's saying, *Even if a person lives to be 1,000 years old, it's nothing to God. It's like a day to Him, or like a watch in the night, which passes while we sleep.* Think of all of the history that has occurred in the past 1,000 years. America is a mere 246 years old. Columbus came to America 530 years ago. What was happening in the year 1022? & yet to God that's all just happened. Moses goes on & describes our helplessness in the face of death as being swept away by a flood that suddenly bursts upon us (5a). We're like the grass of the field (5b-6), which sprouts in the morning & looks promising but the sun withers it in a day. In other words, the promise of youth fades quickly & the reality of death is always before us. It may be uncomfortable to think about but it's true. Think of how short & uncertain our feeble life is. None of us is guaranteed tomorrow. It just isn't all that difficult to die. Remember the great molasses flood in Boston in 1919? A storage tank with 2.3 million gallons of molasses burst & a wave of molasses rushed through the streets at 35 mph killing 21. Who would have seen that coming? 150 people/year die from falling coconuts. It's just not that hard to die. None of us knows how long we have to live. I want you to feel the anxiety Moses intends us to feel by his words. Life is short & uncertain. Apart from being rightly related to God, it is futile.

2. God's Wrath Against Man's Sin If that's not enough, in vss 7-11 we see God's wrath on our sin makes life pointless apart from Him. Moses wants us to think about sin. The problem we face isn't simply death. Death is rooted in the even deeper problem of sin. Man's greatest problem isn't just his frailty; that death is near. Our greatest problem is that we're sinners & are subject to the just wrath of God. It's sin that's the cause of death & misery. We don't like to think about God's wrath but every obituary, every funeral is a reminder that **the wages of sin is death** (Rom 6:23). Moses must have been thinking of the fall of Adam & Eve when he wrote this, as well as of his own sin in

striking the rock & of God's judgment, which kept him from the Promised Land. Moses saw the results of sin continuously. People around him were dying left & right. For 1.5 million people to die in 40 years, 37,500 were dying every year. That's over 100/day! Of course, on some days thousands were killed because of their rebellion & sin (Num 16:49; 25:9) but Moses saw a lot of death. He's making the point that death is the result of God's wrath on our sin. People often say death is just a natural part of the life cycle so we should accept it as normal. But that's a humanistic lie that minimizes the horror of death & disregards the clear teaching of the Bible. The truth is that death entered this world as God's direct judgment on our sins, beginning with Adam (Gen 2:17; 3:19; Rom 5:12-21). The reality of death ought to make us all face the reality of our sin & the fact that we'll shortly stand before a holy God. **10**

As Americans, we average 70 to 80 years as Moses says (76.1 in 2021 down from 78.8 in 2019).⁴ Some a few more, some less, & we think we're so great & have lived so long. But the truth is that none of us has the certainty of waking up tomorrow. The shortness of life is seen here. Moses continues, *Why the effort? What's the point?* Our pride is **but labor & sorrow** & then death comes & we **fly away**. We're terminal because of our sin & because of God's wrath. The psalmist asks, **11** The implied answer is, *No one*. We continue to sin & think everything is fine. But the fear that's due God is owed because of His **fury** & it's this wrath that turns us **to dust** (3). In our day, we want to minimize the horror of God's wrath. It's popular to believe there is no hell. But as Moses contemplated life he exclaims, **Who understands the power of Your anger, & Your fury** (11). I don't know how many of you have read Jonathan Edwards' sermon, *Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God*.⁵ Some say he was a cruel sadist who took great pleasure in scaring ignorant people with the supposed horrors of hell. Not so. Spurgeon was correct when he said that no one could ever go too far in describing the terrors of hell. Rather, he said, *The wrath to come has its horrors rather diminished than enhanced in description by the dark lines of human fancy; it baffles words, it leaves imagination far behind*.⁶ If you struggle with how a good & loving God can also be a God of

⁴ <https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/vsrr/vsrr023.pdf>

⁵ <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1053&context=etas>

⁶ *The Treasury of David*, <https://archive.spurgeon.org/treasury/ps090.php>

wrath, I suggest you read another of Edwards' sermons, *The Justice of God in the Damnation of Sinners*.⁷ He's not easy reading but it's worthwhile. He shows that our problem with hell stems from the fact that we think too lowly of God & too highly of ourselves. Because of this, we look upon God as having little right to do as He pleases & upon ourselves as having great rights. Edwards exonerates God & leaves us lying in the dust, examining our hearts to make sure we aren't under God's condemnation. Moses' point is that the fact of death should make us aware that the wrath of the eternal God is upon sinful mankind. If we don't truly know this eternal God as our personal **dwelling place**, life is futile. This is the dark yet real side of life. This is our plight as described by Moses. We're limited & life is short & marked with sorrow, suffering, & labor. If Moses stopped here this would be a grim picture. Thankfully, the 1st & 4th stanzas show how our fleeting lives can have meaning & value if we have a relationship with the eternal God & if we have His blessing upon our life & work. Moses didn't know as much as we do about God's plans. The NT teaches if you've put your trust in Jesus, then He saves you from the wrath of God (1 Thes 1:10) by taking it upon Himself. Though we'll die physically, unless Christ returns in our lifetime, we won't face the 2nd death which is to be forever separated from God in hell (Rev 20:14-15). But if you're apart from Jesus you're under God's condemnation & life is futile because of its shortness & uncertainty & because of God's wrath on our sin, as seen in the fact of death. But the psalm doesn't leave us in despair.

3. The Eternal Nature of God This psalm is one of the great passages in the Bible contrasting the grandeur of God with man's frailty. Few people on earth have had as strong a sense of the greatness & eternal grandeur of God as Moses did. After all, he knew God intimately & talked with Him as no one else did. It isn't surprising that he would begin this psalm with a reflection on God being a sure & eternal refuge for His people.⁸ The truth is we can only see ourselves as we really are when we come to see God for who He really is. Isaiah gained an awareness of his own sin when he was granted a vision of the righteousness & holiness of God (Is 6:1-4). It was then that he cried

⁷ www.biblebb.com/files/edwards/je-justice.htm

⁸ James Montgomery Boice, *Psalms 42-106: An Expository Commentary*, p 741

out, **Woe is me, for I am ruined! Because I am a man of unclean lips** (Is 6:5). Like Isaiah, the 1st thing we must acknowledge & understand is the holiness & righteousness of God. Only then will we correctly recognize our own sinful condition. & it's only through a relationship with the eternal God that gives our life meaning & value. **1-2**

Moses paints a picture of the eternality of God. He works his way back, from the previous generations, to the formation of the mountains, to the creation of the earth, & to eternity past (**from everlasting**) & then moves swiftly forward to eternity future (**to everlasting**), saying **you are God**. The point is God is eternal. That truth can be unsettling & awesome. But Moses makes it clear that it's altogether possible that we, the finite creature, can have a relationship with this infinite, eternal God. The personal pronoun **our** occurs in relation to God both in vss 1 & 17. The eternal God is **our** God. He is our **dwelling place**, our refuge (Dt 32:27) & we live in Him through Christ. God is a home for His people providing meaning & security. It isn't the Promised Land or even the temple that lets God's people be at home. It is God Himself. Like the prodigal in Jesus' parable, to go home is to go home to the waiting Father (Lk 15:11-32). This is the experience of generation after generation. For 40 years in the wilderness, God's people had no place to call home. Wandering in the desert they'd been without any earthly dwelling place of their own. They never settled down but were like a tumbleweed driven by the wind. Num 33 names 42 different places they camped during their wanderings. But no matter where Moses lived, God was always his home.⁹ In the midst of this vagabond existence, Moses acknowledged that his soul rested in God, who was his true **dwelling place**. **Generations** come & go, but God is the one constant in the midst of uncertainty. There's nothing that can give meaning & value to life like the reality of a personal relationship with the eternal God of the universe. As Augustine put it, *Thou hast created us for Thyself, O God, & our hearts are restless until they find their rest in Thee*.¹⁰ To know that in spite of our finiteness & sin, we can know the infinite, holy God in a personal way provides a sense of stability & substance to life that can't be found anywhere else. Here we have no fixed home, but

⁹ Warren W. Wiersbe, *Be Exultant*, "Be" Commentary Series, p 12

¹⁰ *Confessions*

like Moses, Abraham, & all the OT patriarchs, we look **for the city which has foundations, whose architect and builder is God** (Heb 11:10). Moses concludes his psalm with a ...

4. Prayer for God's Mercy & Grace Moses prays for a reversal of what's gone before. **12-17**

God's blessing upon our life & work gives life meaning & value. All of this on our mortality (3–6) & God's wrath against sin (7–11) is designed for our instruction. The psalmist asks God to **teach us to number our days**. We must be taught by God to **number our days** here because they are few. We must weigh them & value them. Once a person numbers his days, only then will he be able to present to God a **heart of wisdom**. Man must be careful not to waste his life in frivolities but to invest it for eternity.¹¹ By keeping track of the calendar, we can know the truth of this psalm's teachings & we won't engage in some fantasy about our omnipotence & immortality. This will give us **a heart or mind of wisdom**. All of this is based on letting God be God. We understand our days & receive wisdom as His light shines upon us.¹² God said to man, **return** to dust in vs 3 & now Moses says to God, **Return** to forgive & bless us (13). As God has called Israel to repent of her sin (3), Moses petitions God to change in His response toward men. While God has been righteous in judging men for their sin, Moses begs Him, not for justice, but for mercy & grace. God is a God of salvation & here Moses petitions Him to save, to turn to the help of His people. This bold cry is immediately followed by the question, **How long?** The season of wrath must end. The burden is too great to be borne any longer. The call to **return** is followed by a call for compassion. Moses asks God to have pity on His people (14). This compassion includes satisfaction & joy due to God's **lovingkindness**, His covenant-love. Moses asks for it **in the morning**, or, to paraphrase, *Bring it now*. The results will be that God's people will rejoice & **be glad all their days**. Nothing will satisfy the human heart ultimately except God Himself. So forget trying to fill your life with things or experiences. They won't last or bring satisfaction. Moses then asks that God would make His people glad to the same extent in which He **afflicted** them through the years in which they saw **evil** (15; cf 9). He asks for God's **work to appear** or be seen by His **servants** (16). It's as though God's face,

¹¹ Lawson, p 83

¹² Donald Williams & Lloyd J. Ogilvie, *Psalms 73–150*, vol. 14, The Preacher's Commentary Series, pp 153–154

His personal intimate contact with His people, has been veiled. God has been standing distant & aloof & so Moses asks that God would intervene, break into history, & reveal His might, power, & salvation to men. This life isn't the ultimate purpose for which man was created. What we've seen described is a result of man's sin. Moses cries out to God to restore all creation & mankind to what it could & should be. Life ought not to be futile, but it is. Life ought not to be short, but it is. God is asked to remove the stigma of sin, the futility of life, & to restore & renew instead. While Moses looks forward to God again breaking into history, revealing His strong right hand, he doesn't see God's actions as totally unrelated to man's activity. Moses concludes, **17**.

While this life may be characterized by limitations & frustrations, we aren't only able to pray that God will change us, but that He will change life. We can even pray that God would bless the work of our hands by allowing us to accomplish eternal results. This **work** is God's grace in our midst. Furthermore, Moses requests that the next generation see God's **majesty** (16). He's saying, *Satisfy us with Your covenant love. Satisfy us with Your lovingkindness. Satisfy us with Your steadfast love. Satisfy us with Your grace.* We may fear God, we may number our days, but if we don't receive His saving grace there is no hope for us. With his weakness & sin before him, Moses appeals to the grace of God to make what he'd been trying to do for God worthwhile. God needs nothing from us. He's self-sufficient. But if God has put us in this life to do something good for Him, then it's important we do it & do it well. William Taylor wrote, *So long as we are here.... we are required by Him for something. Let us therefore find out what that is, & do it; & while we do it, let us pray that God may establish it so that it may remain to bless posterity.*¹³ As God turns from His wrath & returns to His people, they'll receive His covenant-love, His mercy, His work, His glory, & His beauty. In Him our work will have meaning. The blessings of the world are fleeting & fickle & never satisfy. Witness the unhappiness & emptiness of so many famous & wealthy people. But God's blessings do satisfy. There's never been a person who's walked with God & reached old age & looked back on life & said, *I wish I hadn't lived this way. I've wasted my life.* It's impossible because a person who knows God's joy & peace is a satisfied, joyful person. Not only does Moses pray that

¹³ William M. Taylor, *Moses the Law-Giver*, p 373

God's blessing would be upon His people, but also that God would **confirm ... the work of their hands** (17). He doesn't just mean so-called *spiritual* work, such as the priests did, but all the work they all did whether farming, trade, business, or family life (Dt 14:29; 16:15; 24:19; 28:12; 30:9). When you have the eternal God as your **dwelling place**, all of life becomes sacred. So whether your work is as a missionary or garbage man or student or waiter or whatever, you can do it all to the glory of God (1 Cor 10:31). If God is your **dwelling place** & His hand of blessing is on your life, then whatever you do you can do to His glory. Even the mundane takes on significance when you belong to the Lord. Our fleeting lives can have value if we live wisely before the eternal God.

You may be thinking, *Did God answer this prayer of Moses?* Moses may well have written this psalm after the events of Num 20 where Miriam died, God told Moses he wouldn't enter the Promised Land, & Aaron died. In Dt 34:1-5 we're told at the end of his life, God took Moses up onto a mountain & showed him the Promised Land. He then said, *Moses, you'll see it but you won't set foot in it.* Moses then dies & is buried outside the Promised Land. How did God answer Moses' prayer that He'd make him glad for as many days as He had afflicted him, & as many years as he'd seen evil? How did He answer Moses' prayer that the Lord's favor would be on him & that the work of his hands would be established? Moses had lived his life for the purpose of getting God's people out of Egypt & into the Promised Land. Now God tells him, *Moses, you're not going to set foot there.* Have you ever wondered whether God was a little unfair with Moses? If so, stop it! God is never unfair. When's the next time we find Moses in Scripture? On the Mt of Transfiguration talking with Elijah & Jesus (Lk 9:28-36). God answered Moses' prayer in a way he never could've imagined, far beyond all that he could ask or think (Eph 3:20). Don't think that if you'll go to the loving Lord, your refuge, that He'll disappoint you in His answer of grace. He won't!

I conclude with some practical lessons from this psalm:

1. Live in light of eternity. Moses prays, **teach us to number our days, that we may present to You a heart of wisdom** (12). One day you'll present something to God. He's entrusted certain gifts & abilities to you & you're to manage them for Him in such a way as to be profitable for His kingdom. The Hebrew verb in vs 12 is the same word used in Gen 4:3-4 to refer to the offerings of Cain &

Abel. What will you offer to God when He calls you to account? Remember, it was the fellow with only one talent who buried it that was chastised by his master. Not having the greatest abilities is no excuse for not using whatever abilities you have for God & His eternal kingdom & glory. One's vantage point determines how one sees, how one lives, & for what one lives. This underscores how important it is that every believer should maintain an eternal perspective. We're allotted by God only so much time. Therefore we must live strategically in light of eternity.

2. Labor for the lasting, not the passing. There's so much we work for that doesn't last. Yes, we need a certain amount of worldly things to live & function in this world. But never forget that **the world is passing away, & also its lusts; but the one who does the will of God lives forever** (1 Jn 2:17). The only things God is going to reclaim off this planet are His Word & people. Yet, so often, we value things above God's Word & above other people. Remember what Paul wrote in light of the truth of the resurrection: **Therefore, my beloved brethren, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that your toil is not in vain in the Lord** (1 Cor 15:58). The **work of the Lord** involves His Word & people. Put your efforts there & you won't be disappointed.

3. Avoid the waste that comes from sinful living. Israel was consumed by God's anger (7-10) because of their disobedience. Sinful, self-willed living always results in waste. While those who are in Christ need not fear God's condemnation (Rom 8:1), we do need to fear the Lord & avoid sinning. The law of sowing & reaping applies even under grace (Gal 6:7-8). Don't be deceived, sin has consequences whereas obedience results in blessing. Israel's experience in the wilderness was written for our instruction, so that we don't repeat their mistakes.

Maybe you feel you're going in aimless circles, like Israel in the wilderness. Perhaps you're living with disappointment & despair. Maybe you're being squeezed into the tyranny of the urgent with all its pressing deadlines but have lost sight of eternity. This psalm is intended to bring the eternal perspective back into focus in your life. It's designed to redirect you to live for the kingdom of heaven, not for the kingdoms of this world. It calls us to live every day for the approval of God & not for the applause of men. It directs us to be laying up for ourselves treasure in heaven, not riches on the earth (Mt 6:20). Wisely investing one's life requires living in light of eternity. An old

adage says, *Aim at nothing, & you'll hit it every time*. So it is with life. A misdirected life is a wasted life. In order to hit the target of God's will, we must live for what's truly important & will stand the test of time. We must live for God & His eternal kingdom. Only a life lived for God will be a truly satisfied life. Living for the world, independent of God, yields an empty & hollow existence. The message is clear: Redeem the time, use it wisely, & invest it carefully. Let me read something I read Friday:

You are here for a purpose. You were carefully crafted with a perfect plan in mind. You are a character in the greatest story ever told, & your life, & your actions, & your decisions—even today—can send shockwaves into eternity. Maybe the role God has for you is big and public. Maybe it is quiet, behind the scenes, where hardly anyone will notice. Don't worry about that. You can invest in loving God & loving the people He loves from wherever you are, & the best ways to do that have always been the closest, most ordinary, most overlooked & under-appreciated ways, like humble service to humble people & time spent with God & all the little ways we can remind each other of God's truth & God's love & the big story He made us to be part of.¹⁴

For centuries this somber psalm of Moses has been read at funeral services. It's easy to see why. It recognizes the shortness of life but also the truth that God is able to make what we do & how we live count eternally. Do you want God to do that? Do you want your life & what you do to have meaning? Do you want to be a blessing to others? The only way that can happen is if God establishes your work. May He do that so others who come after you will be blessed because of you. & so, when you die & appear before God, you'll hear Him say, **Well done, good and faithful slave... enter into the joy of your master** (Mt 25:21, 23). You know you'll be departing this life one day because the statistics on death are clear. The only way for your fleeting life to have value is to live it wisely before the eternal God & to avoid His wrath against your sin by taking refuge in the mercy He offers in the cross of Jesus Christ. PRAY Men come

We come to the communion table remembering that our sins have earned us God's anger, wrath, & fury. But thankfully, in God's grace & mercy, Jesus, God's Son, was **smitten of God, & afflicted... He was crushed for our iniquities... The Lord was pleased to crush Him...** (Is 53:4-5, 10). As the elements are passed, ponder upon this wonderful fact & thank Him for it & that **the favor of the Lord our God can be upon us** through Him (Ps 90:17). Pass elements

¹⁴ Seth Lewis, *Dream Small: The Secret Power of the Ordinary Christian Life*

I received from the Lord that which I also delivered to you, that the Lord Jesus in the night in which He was betrayed took bread; & when He had given thanks, He broke it and said, "This is My body, which is for you; do this in remembrance of Me" (1 Cor 11:23-24).

We eat of the bread remembering with thanksgiving, what God has done for us through Jesus.

In the same way *He took* the cup also after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in My blood; do this, as often as you drink *it*, in remembrance of Me." For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until He comes (1 Cor 11:25-26).

We drink of the cup remembering with gratitude, what God has done for us through Jesus & we look forward to the day that He returns.