

## Significance: A Step Beyond Success

### *Psalm 90*

#### **Introduction**

Next week, we are going to begin a new series from the book of Exodus. I encourage you to bring your Bible to follow along in the text. Since we will talk a lot about Moses, I thought we would take a look this morning at a psalm written by Moses and contained in the Hebrew psalter. The psalm is Psalm 90. It is a psalm of perspective.

Perspective is so incredibly important. It affects the way you view yourself, life and the world around you. One day a man walked into a psychiatrist's office. The doctor walked out into the waiting room. He saw the man who had come to see him, and noticed there was a bullfrog growing out from the man's forehead.

He invited the man back into his office, and said, "Tell me what this is all about." The bullfrog replied, "It all started with a wart on my back."

Perspective matters!

Ten years ago this past month, one of the most popular sportscasters in our area died suddenly. His name was Glenn Brenner. I don't think we have had anyone since who has surpassed his presence on the evening sports.

The night he died, two of his friends from Channel 9 anchored a tribute and remembrance of Brenner. One of those interviewed was another Channel 9 newsman – Bruce Johnson. His comments were perhaps the most profound. He said:

He (speaking of Brenner) was a very special person. Two months before the marathon, Glenn was seeking out close friends and we were talking about spirituality and spiritual bankruptcy and after you've got things lined up – like job, money and family – and you are in a groove and you still weren't happy...what did all that mean. He was in search of that inner peace that no one else can give you.

Johnson was describing a man who found success in life but still felt empty, unfilled and disillusioned. Brenner was not alone in this situation. Freddie Mercury, former lead singer for the British rock band Queen, died shortly after he wrote these words to his last song: "Does anybody know what we're living for?"

Tennis champion Boris Becker, who won three Wimbledon titles once said: "I had all the material possessions I needed: money, cars, women, everything....I had no inner peace

because I was a puppet on a string, but I still don't know who was manipulating the string.”

Ralph Barton, one of the nation's top cartoonists in the first quarter of the last century, left this note pinned to his pillow before taking his own life:

I have had few difficulties, many friends, great successes; I have gone from wife to wife, and from house to house, visited great countries of the world, but I am fed up with inventing devices to fill up 24 hours of the day.

These may be extreme examples but there are people all around us who have succeeded in life but find there is still something missing. I believe that what they are really searching for is not, in reality, success, but significance.

Success has to do with accomplishing or achieving set goals. Significance is making a difference which lasts over time. It is a sense that who you are and what you do really matters.

William James, recognized as the father of American psychology, once wrote:

The value of a man's life is measured not by its duration, but by its donation. And it is a wise man who invests his life into something that will outlast him.

Psalm 90 is one of the greatest psalms penned. It is psalm of significance. Moses wrote this psalm during the time of Israel's wanderings in the wilderness, very possibly towards the end of that period.

Perhaps you recall the events leading to this “wandering.” Our study of Exodus will end with the Israelites ready to leave Sinai, having received from God the laws that would govern their civic, religious and moral life as a nation, a people of the covenant. They move out from Sinai towards Canaan, the Promised Land. But because of their disobedience to God's command, God instructs Moses to speak sobering words to the people.

### **Numbers 14:28-35**

This then is the backdrop against which Moses pens these words. Let's read the psalm in its entirety to get the big picture, then we will go back through and unpack its meaning and application to us.

### **Psalm 90**

In verses 1-11, we have a meditation on the contrast in character of God and man. Moses articulates the state of God and the state of man. It clearly delineates the issue whose conclusion is: man's life is futile; where is its meaning?

In verses 12-17, Moses presents a supplication for significance. Listen to the plea in verse 17: "Confirm, establish, give permanence to the work of our hands; yea, Lord, establish the work of our hands!"

## **I. The Character of God**

Moses begins with God; this is the starting point. To understand life, to make sense of life, we must begin with God. I want you to note five things that provide for Moses the foundation for significance found in the character of God.

**A. The Fact of God** – Moses says in verse two: "You are God." The Bible begins with a statement of fact: "In beginning God..." Here is the starting place of all, certainly for those who seek after God. The writer of the book of Hebrews says, "Without faith it is impossible to please God, for the one who comes to him must believe that he is...."

**B. The Eternality of God** – "before the mountains were born...even from everlasting to everlasting." This is such a difficult concept to even begin to comprehend. Eternality. In one Peanuts cartoon strip, Charlie Brown is sitting in his bean bag chair watching TV. Lucy comes up behind him and asks:

"How about helping me with my homework?" Then she adds, "If you do, you'll have my everlasting gratitude."

Charlie replies, "You don't even know what everlasting means."

Lucy has the last word: "Til I ask you again."

This is probably the foundational difference between temporal man and eternal God – our life is derived, received from what was imparted. The created in distinction from the Creator. The one coming into being; the other – the great "I AM."

**C. The Faithfulness of God** – "Our dwelling place, our refuge, our hiding place for all generations." Notice the link with the past – the continuity of the experience of God's people.

We stand in the line of saints that stretches over the centuries of time. I love the opening words of Hebrews, chapter 12. Having highlighted some of the saints of history, men and women who dared to trust God, the writer then says:

Therefore, since we have so great a cloud of witnesses surrounding us, let us lay aside...let us run...fixing our eyes on Jesus....

The golden thread that weaves all these lives together with us is the faithfulness of God.

**D. The Sovereignty of God** – He is sovereign over life. The God who gives life takes it back again – “from dust to dust.”

We have such limited control over our destiny. Think of how many times in your life you have had what we would say is a “close call.” Two incidents in particular I remember as a young boy:

- 1) Hayrack out in field baling straw
- 2) '48 Chevy pick-up truck – out the door

Every breath you take is a gift from God. You should treasure as so.

**E. The Agelessness of God** – “A thousand years are like yesterday to you.” Can you even begin to chronicle all that has happened from the year 1012 to 2012? The rise and fall of civilizations; the explosion of knowledge; the advances in science and technology; the passing of one generation after another.

Now, just a caution here. This doesn't mean that God is disinterested. He has numbered the hairs on your head; a sparrow doesn't fall to the ground without his knowledge and notice. How much more does he know and care about you.

What it does mean is this: God measures time; time does not measure God. Time is of significance to God; but it is not of consequence to God. Unbounded by time, God operates within time, yet not constrained by time.

One powerfully comforting implication of this: God has known the beginning to the end, even before he spoke the world into existence. There is nothing that can surprise God. Before creation, he has known everything about you, about us – Knollwood. There is nothing that can catch God off-guard. He can never be blind-sided by circumstances or happenings.

We may wake up in the morning and think: “Oh, this is a new day – a day I've never seen before.” But God has! He has already been in your tomorrow.

Put it all together – Moses says these truths about God are essential if we are going to understand and know significance:

- 1) God is
- 2) God is Eternal
- 3) God is Faithful
- 4) God is Sovereign
- 5) God is Ageless

## II. The Condition of Man

Now, just as it is important and crucial to significance that we know what God is like, so too, we must know our state, our condition. Two things that Moses mentions in his psalm.

**A. We are temporal** – “we are swept away like a flood.” What is thought to be solid, immovable, is swept away.

Think of the pictures you saw of the tsunami in Japan last year. Utter destruction as people were swept away. In relation to the scope of human history and more so eternity, our lives are swept away.

Moses says we are like a dream. The New American Standard version translates it this way: “we fall asleep.” What a contrast to God in Isaiah 40 who neither sleeps nor slumbers.

Our lives are like the fragile grass of the Palestinian desert: sprouting anew – filled with great hopes, aspirations, expectations, dreams. Only to fade and wither away yet in the same day. The fleeting glory of life.

Turn over and look at David’s thoughts in **Psalm 103:15-16**.

What do these people have in common?

- Actor James Arness (Matt Dillon)
- Actor Peter Falk (Columbo)
- Former first lady Betty Ford
- Boxer Joe Frazier
- Commentator Andy Rooney
- Actress Elizabeth Taylor
- Singer Amy Winehouse
- Actor Harry Morgan

All passed into eternity in 2011. They are quickly but a memory except for family and friends and television reruns. How soon they are forgotten.

What a bummer! Hope in this life only leads in one of two directions:

- 1) A passion and pursuit to get out of it all you can. The Epicurean philosophy: “Eat, drink and be merry, for tomorrow we die!”
- 2) A fatalistic resignation – “What will be, will be.”

I suppose a third possibility is just to pretend that life really does matter. Bertrand Russell, who was a British philosopher, mathematician, historian – and a self-avowed atheist, once wrote:

What else is there to make life tolerable? We stand on the shore of an ocean, crying to the night and to emptiness. Sometimes a voice answers out of the darkness, but it is the voice of one drowning, and in a moment the silence returns. The world seems to me quite dreadful, the unhappiness of many people is very great, and I often wonder how they all endure it. To know people well is to know their tragedy. It is usually the central thing around which their lives are built, and I suppose if they did not live most of their lives in the things of the moment, they would not be able to go on.

**B.** Moses says that we are not only temporal; **We are Sinful.** God scrutinizes our moral character; his wrath and anger are against sin. Not only is it the eternal versus the temporal, but also the holy against the unholy.

Our culture really struggles with this acknowledgment. We cling tenaciously to the premise that man is, at his core, good. Countering that belief, the brilliant English writer G.K. Chesterton said:

I’m amazed that moderns have rejected the notion of original sin when it is the only Christian doctrine that is empirically verifiable.

Nothing about us is hidden from God. He peels open our lives like a banana revealing what we are really like. A measure of one’s maturity in Christ is the level of one’s sensitivity to sin. Our Hearts and minds are tuned to hear the Spirit’s voice of conviction.

Moses’ conclusion to the condition of man is parallel to that of Solomon in the book of Ecclesiastes: the pride of life – labor and sorrow – here today, gone tomorrow. Is that all there is? Nothing more? Kind of a downer, isn’t it. Fortunately the psalm doesn’t end here!

### **III. The Quest for Significance: Seven Requests**

Moses' supplication focuses on seven requests that all contribute to a sense of significance – the Quest for Significance.

**A. That we would live life with skill.** – Moses asks God to “teach us to number our days.” This is not the process of numbering our years, but rather to face the limitations of life, to recognize with soberness the brevity of life. This speaks of priorities, of focusing your energies on those things you can uniquely do. It speaks of the process of choosing options and opportunities carefully.

This is a life lived wisely – governed by God's wisdom. Listen to Paul's admonition from Ephesians 5:15-16.

Look carefully then how you walk, not as unwise, but as wise, making the best use of the time, because the days are evil.

The phrase “making the best use of the time” in the original language of the New Testament is literally: redeeming the time.” The verb means “to buy up for oneself or one's advantage.” It means to make a wise and sacred use of every opportunity for doing good.

There are two words in the Greek New Testament most commonly translated into the English word “time.” One is *chrónos*, which means chronological time, linear time. The other is *kairós*, which is time regarded in its strategic, opportune seasons. This is the word used in Ephesians 5.

*Kairós* is the idea of buying up the strategic moment, seizing the opportunity. For example, it was used as a commercial term – the idea of a merchant seizing a bargain.

The request here is that God would help us to use our time wisely, strategically, knowing that our days on earth are limited.

Jim Elliot, martyred in 1956 by the Auca Indians – those whom he was seeking to reach with the Gospel, wrote in his personal journal some years before:

Only one life; 'twill soon be past; only what's done for Christ will last.

When all that we do is done out of the motive of serving and pleasing the Lord, God uses it for his eternal purposes in our life and in the lives of others.

**B. That we would know his compassion.** “Lord, have pity on us.” We like the Hebrews need the mercy and pity of God. Indeed, significance begins when by the grace of God we experience the compassion of God leading to the forgiveness of God.

**C. That we would be satisfied by his lovingkindness.** Each of us seeks for love. It is one of our most basic human needs. Only God's love satisfies the deepest longing of the heart. Charles Merry, writing in 1864, says:

“O Satisfy Us”...That is everywhere and evermore the cry of humanity. And what a strange cry it is, when you think of it. Man is the offspring of God; the bearer of his image; he stands at the head of the terrestrial creation; on earth he is peerless; he possesses wondrous capacities of thought, and feeling, and action. The world and all that is in it has been formed in a complete and beautiful adaptation to his being. Nature seems to be ever calling to him with a thousand voices to be glad and rejoice; and yet he is unsatisfied, discontented, miserable! This is a most strange thing – strange, that is, on any theory respecting man's character and condition, but that which is supplied by the Bible; and it is not only a testimony to the ruin of his nature, but also to the insufficiency of everything earthly to meet his cravings.

Look at **Psalm 92:1-2**

The security of his love brings joy and gladness.

**D. The fourth request is that we would experience a commensurate gladness – Verse 15.**

The people of Israel were suffering the consequences of their disobedience; they were experiencing the judgment of God. Moses pleads for a commensurate gladness. “When the affliction of God's judgment has passed, may the people accordingly be made glad.”

God, in Christ, has suffered the judgment of our sin. As we entrust our lives to God, resting and trusting in the finished work on Calvary's cross, God brings gladness to our soul in like measure of his judgment.

**E. That we would see his conduct and character. Verse 16 –** Oh that we would see not only his work, but also his worthiness. **Psalm 77:11-15**

**F. That we would wear the mantle of his favor.** “Let the favor of the Lord our God be upon us.” Do you realize that in Christ, God is pleased with you? He has generously bestowed his favor upon you. You are fully accepted in the Beloved. Not because of what you have done, but because of what Jesus Christ has done. This is the marvelous truth of grace.

**Psalm 5:11-12**

**G. That we would invest our lives in the things that last.** To know significance we must put our lives and our life work in the context of the eternal.

Your life has significance when, motivated by the grace of God, you do all things for the glory of God. A.W. Tozer, in his book *The Pursuit of God*, writes:

It is not what a man does that determines whether his work is sacred or secular; it is why he does it. The motive is everything. Let a man sanctify the Lord God in his heart and he can thereafter do no common act.

We also invest in the lives of other people, making an impact of significance in our spouse and children, if married, our friends, our neighbors, our colleagues at work.

Significance begins when you realize you have been chosen by God, loved with an everlasting love, secured by the grace of God; that your life is to be a testament to the transforming power of God through the Holy Spirit, and a testimony to others in the course of living out your heavenly calling through your daily living in whatever vocation you find yourself.

Significance: one step beyond success.

## FAITHFUL

We're pilgrims on the journey of the narrow road,  
And those who've gone before us line the way,  
Cheering on the faithful, encouraging the weary,  
Their lives a stirring testament to God's sustaining grace.

Surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses,  
Let us run the race not only for the prize,  
But as those who've gone before us,  
Let us leave to those behind us  
The heritage of faithfulness passed on thru godly lives.

After all our hopes and dreams have come and gone,  
And our children sift thru all we've left behind,  
May the clues that they discover, and the mem'ries they uncover  
Become the light that leads them to the road we each must find.

Oh may all who come behind us find us faithful,  
May the fire of our devotion light their way  
May the footprints that we leave, lead them to believe  
And the lives we live inspire them to obey.

Oh may all who come behind us find us faithful –  
Lord, find us faithful.

*Lyrics by Jon Mohr*