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A Prayer for Eternal Perspective in a Temporal World

Psalm 90

Series: Key Texts for Difficult Times

Introduction: Take your Bible and join me in Psalm 90. Never before have we seen our culture so aware of the brevity and fragility of life. Particularly in America we have whittled down the experience of death to a nicely appointed funeral parlor, a beautiful casket, and a long-lasting headstone to mark the grave. We have taken ourselves out of the process as much as possible – and in part, because we don't want to face the reality of death. But the recent pandemic has taken death and put it front and center in the headlines and in the dinner table conversations. And we, as a culture, seem willing to do whatever it takes to avoid the plague of the Coronavirus, and hence, the plague of death. Never in our lifetime have people been so aware that life is short and can be taken from you at any moment. This has always been true, but we have never had to look it in the face like we do right now. So, what do we need most? Do we need a cure for the Coronavirus? Do we need to flatten the curve of infections through social distancing measures? Do we need a vaccine to stop a future pandemic?

Well, what we need most is an eternal perspective in this temporal world. A cure for this pandemic will never be a cure for death. The human death rate still stands at 100%. We are all going to die at some point. And that truth could be terrifying or it could be compelling. Absent from the truth of the Scriptures and the hope of God, it would be a terrifying truth. But with the truth of texts like Psalm 90 instructing our minds and shaping our hearts then we can be compelled by the reality of our fleeting lives to live them in a way that counts for eternity.

In Psalm 90 we find one of the greatest pieces of poetry found in all of Scripture, let alone in all of human literature. But beyond being great poetry, it is one of the clearest and most helpful expressions of our fragility and brevity in this life which is countered with the glorious truths of God's eternal nature and steadfast love. Life is passing away and we are passing through, but God is from everlasting to everlasting! Psalm 90 is not just a theological explanation though – it is a prayer to this everlasting God. And it is a prayer by the man in Scripture who had one of the truest understandings of God and one of the closest relationships with God. So, let's read Psalm 90 as we seek this eternal perspective in our temporal world. *Read Psalm 90.*

At first blush that psalm might strike you as pessimistic and hope-draining. But there's really nothing pessimistic or needlessly negative about it. It is simply honest with the realities we face. The realities of a human life that doesn't last forever and the realities of our own sinfulness which provoke the holy wrath of God and the reality of hope found in that very God who can be our refuge. And if anyone can put those realities into words it is Moses – the man of God. He talked with God face to face, we are told in Numbers 12 – which is a way of expressing the very close relationship they had. He met with God on the top of Mount Sinai for 40 days and 40 nights. He heard God in the burning bush. The Shekinah glory of God would descend upon the

Tent of meeting and Moses and Joshua would meet with God there. He saw the awesome and holy character of God in the 10 plagues in Egypt, the parting of the Red Sea, the shaking of the mountain at Mt. Sinai, the sending of the fiery serpents into the camp, the opening of the earth to swallow up Korah and his followers, the pillar of cloud by day and of fire by night, the sending of manna every morning, the death of a whole generation because of their rebellion, the turning of Balaam's prophecy into a blessing upon God's people, the overthrow of kings and nations in their way, and so many other things. God had used Moses as his mouthpiece for over 40 years to God's people, and in that role Moses has gained an understanding of God that no one else had.

Not only had he seen God in His unique glory, but he had also seen the nature of humanity in its unique trouble. He had witnessed the children of Israel in great sin and he had seen the great wrath of God provoked against them. He had seen the hard-heartedness of Pharaoh in his rebellion against God, and he had seen the destruction of Pharaoh's great army in the Red Sea. He had seen death happen as a direct result of sin more than any other man in all of Scripture – the 3,000 dead after the Golden Calf incident, the death of Nadab & Abihu after they offered strange fire, the very great plague that killed many after the craving for meat and the quail that God brought, the death of the 10 spies who led the rebellion against God's command to enter the Promised Land, the death of the many who went up to war with Canaan even after God told them he would no longer bless them because they had rejected him, the death of Korah, Dathan, Abiram, their followers, and the 250 offering incense at Korah's rebellion, the death of many from the fiery serpents sent by God because of the complaining of God's people, the death of 24,000 at Peor after they were led into the worship of Baal, and last but not least – the death of a whole generation (likely over a million people) in the wilderness over a 40 year time period. So, if any of God's prophets are well-equipped to tell us the truth about our nature and about God's nature – isn't Moses the most well equipped? Shouldn't we listen to what he has to say about the matter?

And what he does say about the matter comes to us in the form of a prayer. It is a prayer formed by God's nature, and forced by man's nature and fueled by God's kindness.

I. A Prayer Formed By God's Nature – vs. 1-2

- a. We see that first point in verses 1-2. It is a prayer formed by God's nature. Moses prays this way because he is so very aware of who God is. He knows the very essence of this God he is speaking to. And his prayer throughout the psalm is shaped by this everlasting and unchanging character of God.
- b. Moses approaches God in verse 1 by declaring the steadfast nature of God – he has been the dwelling place of God's people in every generation. God has proven to be their refuge and their hiding place. He has been their surest hope and their truest comfort. In a world that is always changing, God's people have always found God to be their unchanging fortress and rock of refuge.
- c. And this God is not a generational God or a temporary stronghold. He is not like the feeble tents his people have lived in for 40 years in the wilderness. He is rather like the eternal dwelling place of His people – their sure and final

destination. God will not be their temporary residence. No, his character is so sure and so steadfast that he has forever been the refuge of His people.

- d. But, not only has he been his people's refuge, he has also been from everlasting to everlasting. Before the earth was formed or before the mountains were brought forth – God was. Notice the increasing nature of the argument here. From generation to generation gives way to before the hills were formed which then expands to “or ever you had formed the earth” which gives rise to even before you formed the world. In other words, Moses just keeps backing up the time train until there is no more track left and he has to say – from everlasting to everlasting you are God. There has never been a time, nor will there ever be a time, when God is not what God has always been.
- e. And this glorious truth shapes how and what Moses prays in this psalm. As he sees the frailty of man all around him, he prays to the God who never changes – who is always and forever God. And this provides a wonderful example for us of how all true prayer should work. As we see the realities of life and are confronted with the pain and the problems, we should consider God. And in considering the character, nature, and essence of God we should want to pray to Him. And if we do not want to pray to Him then there is something we are not understanding about the poverty of our situation or about the greatness of his nature! Moses understood both of those, and so he prayed.

II. A Prayer Forced by Man's Nature – vs. 3-11

- a. In verses 3-11 we see that this prayer is forced by man's nature. This is the heart of the prayer – an exposition on the brevity of human life. We can break that down further by seeing in verses 3-6 that he explains how we are passing away and then in verses 7-11 that is because we have provoked the holy wrath of God. And if we don't rightly understand this reality, we will never seek refuge in God. That is the glorious grace of God, as we shall see – that the God who is rightly angry with us because of our rebellious sin is also the only One in Whom we can find salvation from our condemnation before Him.
- b. *We are passing away – vs. 3-6*
 - i. He gets right to the pulverizing point in verse 3. He describes man as being returned to the dust. This is not describing the normal process of slow decay – like what was promised Adam in the curse in Genesis 3. No, there is more here. This word for dust is the idea of crushing something into dust. This was the will of the Lord to crush (that's our word) his servant under the weight of the sins of his people in Isaiah 53:10.
 - ii. Then in verse 5 we are described as being swept away in a flood or as fleeting as a dream, and like grass that is green in the morning but by evening has already faded under the hot wilderness sun. In other words, we are fleeting and transitory. Our strength is reduced to dust, our stability is washed away as in a flood, and our vitality is zapped as quickly as green grass withers.
 - iii. And this is contrasted in verse 4 with the infinite reality of God's nature. A thousand years in His sight are but as yesterday – already past and

hardly remembered. Or they are as a watch in the night – a mere 4 hour segment for the sentry on a city wall. That is how otherly God is from us. In that reference to a thousand years, Moses likely had Methuselah in mind. Remember that it was Moses whom the Lord used to write the book of Genesis. And in that book we find out about the man who lived the longest life of all – 969 years – and his name was Methuselah. Even our greatest achievement of life, back before the worldwide flood when people were living that long – even back then, our life span was but as yesterday with the Lord, or as a fleeting watch in the night.

- iv. Friend, there is nothing that can stop the sure passing away of your life. It will happen at its appointed hour. Until that God-appointed moment you are indestructible, so to speak. But in that moment, you will not beat death. And notice who the agent of death is in these verses – it is not some act of fate, or some stroke of chance or even some inevitable and inescapable law. No, it is accomplished by the One who brought all life into existence by the power of His Word. It is the Creator of all who alone has the power to kill and to destroy.

c. *Because we have provoked the Holy Wrath of God – vs. 7-11*

- i. And this is true about us because we have provoked the holy wrath of God. God is the one who has power over death and is the one who brings death to all because we have all sinned against him. The universality of sin is proven by the universality of death. Let me break that down by showing you three things we don't have because we have provoked the holy wrath of God.

ii. **We have no escape – 7, 9-10**

- 1. First, we have no escape. No one gets out of this. In verse 7 we are all brought to this end by God's anger and we are dismayed by his wrath. In other words, if we gave even one iota of thought to this reality of our rebellion against a holy God and the account we must give to Him, then we would tremble with great fear. And there is no escape for anyone. There is no wiggle room, as is proven in verses 9-10. This is the sure end of everyone. Life is like a burning fuse. Some are longer than others and some are shorter than is imaginable, but all of them have an end and when it is burned up it is burned up.
- 2. We generally know this is true, but don't consider it all that much. But just imagine if you were a part of Moses' generation. They were told that because of their rebellion against God in being unwilling to trust him and enter the Promised Land, they were all going to die in the wilderness over the next 40 years. Everyone 20 and over at the time knew that they would, at the most, have 40 years left to live. Some would be much less, and some would be in the middle, and some would live the longest. But they all lived

everyday with a death sentence. None of them would escape. And neither do we!

iii. We have no excuse – 8

1. We also have no excuse, in verse 8. The Lord has been provoked in his holy wrath and has brought about the sentence of death because he has seen our iniquities. We have no secret sins with God. We can hide those sins from others, but not from Him. He sees all and knows all. And these sins are met with the just and righteous judgment of God. When sin is put before the Lord He cannot turn a blind eye and act as though it doesn't matter. He is light, and in him is no darkness at all. He is patient in his judgment and he provides opportunity for repentance and forgiveness through the atonement of His Son – but he must judge sin. And no one has any excuse before Him. We are all found guilty and deserving of His holy wrath.
2. And again, think of this in terms of Moses and his contemporaries. Had any generation ever seen as many direct connections between the sinfulness of man and the outpouring of God's wrath upon them? They had seen and known more of the power and the direct revelation of God than any generation up to that point. And yet over and over again they walked in sinful rebellion and unbelief. They hardened their hearts and refused to obey. And this provoked the righteous wrath of their holy God. And this brought sudden and swift judgment in some cases, and in other cases it brought the threat of judgment in time. In fact, not even Moses would escape. He had known the great powerful work of God and the glorious revelation of God, but his sins were before the Lord. In anger he struck the rock and misrepresented God and would not enter the Promised Land. He too would die in the wilderness. No one escapes death because no one has an excuse, no one is without sin.

iv. We have no enlightenment – 11

1. And then in verse 11 we see that we have no enlightenment. Moses asks the Lord "Who considers the power of your anger, and your wrath according to the fear of you?" Who truly understands the depth and the intensity of God's anger toward us? Who has really given enough thought to the purity of God's holiness and the far reach of God's love and to man's subsequent rebellion? Who has really spent enough time thinking about the judgment day which awaits us after our death? Who has had entirely pure thoughts about God and his holiness by which we have understood how entirely we are condemned before Him?
2. Whatever terrifying thoughts you have had of God's judgment, they are not enough. Whatever consideration you have given to

the white hot holiness of God's anger, it is not pure enough. And that's when we are thinking about it. How little that is true of us? How little of our fleeting lives do we actually spend considering the holy wrath of the thrice holy God against our sins?

3. And this is especially true of those who have not been touched by the convicting work of God's Holy Spirit. How is it that someone who is not at peace with God through faith in Jesus Christ can come to a funeral of a loved one or a friend and shed a tear or two for their personal loss and then go on their merry way in life? How can we be so flippant when we have laying before us in that casket a morbid reminder of our mortality and of God's righteous judgment against our sin? Friend, how can you be so cold and so thoughtless about the power of God's anger? Your judgment day is coming. Your physical death is looming and then you will stand before your Creator and give an account for all that you have done in this life. And nothing will be hidden from him on that day. Nothing will be missed. Nothing will be left out. And whatever thoughts you have of fear in facing your Righteous Judge – they are too small and too thoughtless. This virus is miniscule in comparison to the threat of God's wrath against your sin.
4. But there is hope. You have not given enough thought to your sin and to God's righteous wrath. But as the Spirit of God convicts you of sin and righteousness in this very moment, he also points you to the one way you can be reconciled to God. He points you to the very Son of God – Christ Jesus himself. God's Son is the only one who can reconcile you to God because he is the only one who ever lived in this world without sin. And being without sin he gave his life as a substitute to die in the place of sinners. He took their condemnation of sin. He put himself under the weight of God's wrath and suffered for sins so that we might be made right with God. Friend, are you right with God? Have you been reconciled to him through Jesus Christ? Look to Him and live today! May today be the day of salvation for you.
5. Christian, what does this consideration of God's righteous wrath against our sinfulness do in us? Does it force us away from God? Does it make us run in the opposite direction as we seek to avoid His holiness? Well, that's not what it does for Moses. This transitory nature of man – this fleeting reality – this coming reality of death does not push Moses away from God, but it pushes him to God. This is why Moses is praying this prayer in Psalm 90. He is overwhelmed with God's righteous holiness and everlasting nature, and he is overwhelmed by the frailty of mankind. And so he is compelled to seek refuge in God. Remember, Lord, you have been our dwelling place in all generations. Moses knows that his

death will be met with the merciful reception of God into his presence because he has believed God and trusted God. He is not consumed with concern about what will happen after the moment of his last breath. And neither should you be Christian. He knows that to die is gain if we are in Christ. But he is concerned about his living that will happen before his dying. And he knows that this time is short and so he prays the prayers of verses 12-17. And these prayers are fueled by God's kindness.

III. A Prayer Fueled by God's Kindness – vs. 12-17

- a. Think again about Moses. He is leading a group of sojourners through the wilderness in obedience to the Lord. He has been told already that he will not complete the journey. He will not enter into the Promised Land. That could be an incredibly disheartening and discouraging thing. I mean, at that point, what is the purpose of living. Isn't it all vanity and worthlessness? This is the pessimism of old age isn't it Christian? In our youth we have life in front of us and we are often fueled by the optimism of all that we still have to experience and accomplish. But at about 40 we start to realize that life is really short and moves by really fast and will soon be over. And so, so many just live life for the living of it all. They amass experiences and stuff and relationships trying to fill this deep void of meaning and purpose. And friend – Christians are not exempt from this. Far too many Christian lives are wasted as one day piles on top of another with little thought of eternity. And what is so encouraging to me is that Moses was no different than this. He too knows the desperate condition of feeling purposeless in this transitory life. So what does he do? He prays! And how does he pray?
- b. *Wisdom – 12*
 - i. Well, he first prays for wisdom in verse 12. He asks the Lord to help him do the most difficult math problem known to mankind. We can calculate the distance of stars from one another based upon complex math formulas, but no one has yet figured out how to truly and rightly number our days. In light of our ever burning wick that we know has an end, Moses asks the Lord for the wisdom necessary to live as we should. He is asking the Lord for the ability to abide in the truth in every area and live in accordance with that truth in all of life. This is the heart of wisdom he is seeking. He knows there is an incredible amount of freedom that the Lord gives to his people as they live out their days on this earth. He knows that he will have to make daily decisions about the use of that time. He knows he is prone to not think about his date with death as he makes those decisions. And so he pleads with the Lord for the mercy of a wise heart. Every reminder of our mortality should also be a reminder of our foolishness apart from God's great help. So, we must pray for wisdom.
- c. *Mercy – 13*
 - i. Next, Moses prays for mercy in verse 13. This was Moses pattern as God's mediator with God's people. How many times did God want to destroy

the nation and start over, and Moses interceded for mercy? And this is his prayer here in verse 13. Their rebellion has put God out, and now Moses pleads with God to mercifully turn back to them. He understands that God's favor upon them is not guaranteed. If God blesses them with his ongoing presence it will be a result of his mercy. So Moses intercedes and pleads for mercy. If life is really as short as it is, then do we really want to live one moment without the undeserved mercy of God? He is delighted by those who humble themselves before Him and cry out to Him for mercy.

d. *Satisfaction – 14*

- i. And then in verse 14, he prays for satisfaction in God. He knows the restlessness of the human heart in this short life. We are so very prone in our sinfulness to seek the deep joy of our soul in all kinds of frivolous things. And so Moses prays and asks for God to be their satisfaction. He knows they will not find it in things, because those fade. He knows they will not find lasting satisfaction in experiences, because those pass by. He knows true satisfaction is not found in other people, because they die. Moses knows that the only true and lasting satisfaction must be found in the One who is from everlasting to everlasting. The One who is full of steadfast love for his people. The one who has every right to pour out his wrath, but who is slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love for his people. And so Moses is asking the Lord for the eternally significant experience of satisfaction in God. Since our journey is so short Lord, do not let us complete it without being filled with gladness in you!

e. *Balanced Gladness – 15*

- i. And in verse 15 he asks that this gladness could be a balanced gladness. A gladness of soul in God that is as deep and as long as has been their affliction. Listen to Spurgeon's explanation of this prayer: "The prayer is original, childlike, and full of meaning; it is moreover based upon a great principle in providential goodness, by which the Lord puts the good over against the evil in due measure. Great trial enables us to bear great joy, and may be regarded as the herald of extraordinary grace. God's dealings are according to scale; small lives are small throughout; and great histories are great both in sorrow and happiness. Where there are high hills there are also deep valleys. As God provides the sea for leviathan, so does he find a pool for the minnow; in the sea all things are in fit proportion for the mighty monster, while in the little brook all things befit the tiny fish. If we have fierce afflictions we may look for overflowing delights, and our faith may boldly ask for them. God who is great in justice when he chastens will not be little in mercy when he blesses, he will be great all through; let us appeal to him with unstaggering faith."¹

¹ Charles H. Spurgeon, *The Treasury of David*, Vol. 2, pg. 65-66.

- ii. Beloved, let us appeal to our merciful God for a balanced gladness. As we have been afflicted – and rightly so – may we ask for God’s kindness and blessing so that we might be glad in proportion to how we have been afflicted!

f. *Revelation – 16*

- i. Next he asks for revelation in verse 16. In this short life he is concerned that God be known by all. He longs for, and therefore prays for, the work of God and the glorious power of God to be known among God’s people. This is the down payment on Heaven’s glory where we will see God as He is. We look now through dim eyes of faith and see a sliver of the reality. And since life is passing away and this is not our eternal destiny, Moses prays that God would show us more of himself along the journey.
- ii. And he is especially concerned about the next generation. Not that they have enough money or enough food or a nice enough house and car. No, he actually warns against the great prosperity they will inherit when they enter the Promised Land. Don’t you remember that from the book of Deuteronomy? He warns them of the temptation to forget God when they are no longer daily dependent on him in the wilderness. He combines his preaching with his praying here in Psalm 90. He knows his exhortations will have no effect if God does not reveal himself to his people. And this ought be our prayer for ourselves and for the generations to follow. Lord, we are passing away, but you are forever. Therefore, we ask that you make yourself known to us and to our children. Use us to show them the greatness of your power and the holiness of your nature and the saving grace of your love.

g. *Usefulness – 17*

- i. And then, lastly, he prays for usefulness. This life is short, but it does not need to be meaningless. He prays for God to show his kind favor to them and to establish the work of their hands. In other words, don’t let us work on things and in ways that don’t matter and won’t last. Give us eternally minded lives which work in eternally significant ways. Help us Lord to see how every small and great detail of our life’s work can be leveraged for your glory and for the sake of your name! We know Lord that we come and we go, but that you remain. So make us happy to live, to work, and to die knowing that our lives have counted for your cause and for your purpose. We know you have saved us from our sin and given us your great grace because you have prepared beforehand the works that we should do – so help us Lord to do them!

Conclusion: I wonder what would change in your life if you were given a terminal diagnosis – if your doctor told you that the disease you have will kill you? John Beekman was given such a diagnosis. As a graduate of the Moody Bible Institute, he was told that he had a serious heart condition that would likely kill him. His only chance of survival was to have a plastic valve inserted in his heart. At the time, only 2 people had lived through the operation. If he was lucky

he might be survivor number 3. But he would have to live a very conservative life always conscious of his health.

Well, he did live through the operation and once the plastic valve was in he determined to number his days and apply his heart to wisdom. Instead of living safely to guard his health he gave himself entirely to being used by the Lord. Instead of hoarding his days, he poured himself into pioneering missionary work among the Chol Indians in southern Mexico. He and his wife Elaine ignored all the doctors warnings and lived in primitive conditions in steaming jungles. They reduced the Chol language to writing and translated the Bible into their native tongue. They taught the Indians to read and led them to Christ as they saw the Church expand to yet another tribal group! As one commentator said, "His story became one of determination and courage, of a life spent prodigally, with one eye fixed firmly on the zero hour announced by his doctors and the other fixed on eternity."²

Beloved, are you living that way? You don't have to be a missionary in Southern Mexico for this to be true of you. But do you have one eye fixed firmly on your last breath in this life and the other eye fixed firmly on eternity? Let's pray.

² John Phillips, *Exploring Psalms Vol. 2*, pg. 24