

RTO™ School of Prayer

Moses' Prayer of Purpose for All Time Psalm 90

by Dave Mozdin

We return to Moses, a man of God, having previously highlighted him in the lesson about his intercessory prayer in Exodus 33:11-23.

While Moses was indeed a man of God, he was also a sinner, redeemed by God, chosen by God to lead God's people out of the bondage of Egypt and into the Promised Land. Moses was a leader, a law giver, a forerunner of Christ as a prophet who spoke for God, a priest and intercessor between God and the people. He was a man of prayer (his prayers appear in 18 different chapters of the Old Testament), and God "...used to speak to Moses face to face, as a man speaks to his friend" (Exodus 33:11).

Yet some of us forget or don't realize that Moses was also a writer, having composed the Pentateuch, the first five books of the Bible, which provides the foundation for the entire remainder of the Bible. The Pentateuch is mainly a historical sequential narrative of history's beginning and the various stages of man's developing relationship with God, who focused upon Israel as His chosen people, complete with accounts of man's sins, his faith, God's various responses, both blessing, cursing and miracles to display His awesome holiness. It was also the first recording of God's commands to man, and for many years it was the only available inspired Scripture for God's people. We praise and thank God for choosing Moses to be used as His instrument in providing this for us, as it is still relevant to us today, and for Moses' obedience to the leading of the Holy Spirit to faithfully and accurately record it.

And while some of us do know this, we might overlook one more chapter apart from the Pentateuch that he wrote, most notably, Psalm 90, the oldest psalm in the Bible.

In contrast to the narrative historical style of the Pentateuch, the Psalms are a different biblical literary form, best known as Hebrew poetry. In similarity to the Pentateuch, the Psalms are an historical account of man's life on this earth, and his relationship to an almighty, holy, transcendent God, but differently in that this is cast through the range of virtually all human emotional experiences. Some people refer to Psalms as poems in the key of life. Moses shows his God given, Holy Spirit inspired writing gift very well in this biblical chapter as well.

Biblical scholars theorize that the inspiration for this psalm came about from Moses' response to the events that occurred in the Book of Numbers chapter 14. At this point in redemptive history, God pronounces the judgment of death upon the older generation of Israelites because they complained against Moses after the ten of the twelve spies who were sent out to investigate the Promised Land came back with a bad report. This was despite plain evidence offered by two of the spies, Joshua and Caleb that this was indeed "...an exceedingly good land.... a land that flows with milk and honey" (vv. 7-8). After all that that they saw and experienced, the Passover, the manna from heaven, the parting of the Red Sea, the destruction of the Egyptian army, they were still unbelieving, fearful and grumbling.

God begins to pronounce His judgment; "I will strike them with the pestilence and disinherit them, and I will make of them a nation greater and mightier than they." (v.12). Moses intercedes and pleads for God's forgiveness for them. God responds with forgiveness but will not retract the judgment. "Then the LORD said, "I have pardoned, according to your word. But truly, as I live, and as all the earth shall be filled with the glory of the LORD, none of the men who have seen my glory and my signs that I did in Egypt and in the wilderness, and yet have put me to the test these ten times and have not obeyed my voice, shall see the land that I swore to give to their fathers." (vv.21-23)

"But your little ones, who you said would become a prey, I will bring in, and they shall know the land that you have rejected. But as for you, your dead bodies shall fall in this wilderness. And your children shall be shepherds in the wilderness forty years and shall suffer for your faithlessness, until the last of your dead bodies lies in the wilderness." (vv.31-33).

After spending so much time and effort interceding for these people, after enduring so much strife from their unbelief, grumbling, disobedience, and rebellion, and now knowing that he will see all of them die in the desert and that the remaining people will continue on this journey for another forty years for a journey that would normally take only a few weeks, it's not surprising that Moses' response would be one of lament, of sadness over loss, of introspection, of "what does it all mean?". Psalm 90 would certainly seem to fit as a response.

From the various sources I researched, the Archeological Study Bible (NIV) offered what I believe to be the best summary of this psalm. It says: "Psalm 90 illustrates the pattern of a lament. It is congregational in nature that it speaks to the situation of all people, not that of any one individual." The beauty of this psalm is its timelessness (all of God's word is timeless!), as it is just as applicable to us today as it was during the time Moses wrote it. Scholars and historians estimate that was approximately

one thousand four hundred and ten years *before* Jesus Christ was born, which is approximately three thousand three hundred eighty years before any of us were born!

The main points to consider in interpreting this passage are:

- 1.) It opens with a recognition of God as our one secure home and of His eternity. “Lord, you have been our dwelling place in all generations. Before the mountains were brought forth, or ever you had formed the earth and the world from everlasting to everlasting you are God.” (vv.1-2). This speaks to God’s faithfulness, His unchanging nature (immutability) despite man’s sins, failures and trials. This speaks to His omnipresence, that He always was, is, and always will be. As His children, we ought to take comfort in knowing that no matter what happens, He is our refuge, “from everlasting to everlasting”, which means *always*! This speaks to His omnipotence, His awesome power in creation, bringing forth the mountains, forming the earth and the world. This is a good counterbalance, declaring His holy mighty nature, so we don’t think of Him only in terms of His being our constant refuge.
- 2.) Moses then contrasts God’s eternity and perfect holiness with man’s frailty and sinfulness, vv. 3-12. “You return man to dust... (v. 3a). This is an echo of Gen 3, one of the punishments that God decrees to Adam and Eve (and by extension to all of mankind) after their first sin in the garden of Eden. As a result of sin, man will suffer death. “By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread, till you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; for you are dust, and to dust you shall return.” (v.19). Yet despite the decree of death because of sin, the Lord still issues a command, an exhortation to repent. “.....and say ‘Return O children of man!’” (v. 3b). This statement reflects the faithful gracious character of the Lord God, as He says to Moses after a similar previous incident in Exodus 34:6-7: (after the Israelites worshiped the idol golden calf and three thousand died as a result of that gross sin) “The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty....” Starting in Genesis 3 with the provision of the animal skins to Adam and Eve to cover their nakedness after their sin, and the delay of their death sentence, God has continually encouraged and commanded man to repent as a first step to be rightly reconciled to Him before death and judgment.

Using time as an illustration, Moses continues with contrasts between God’s eternity and man’s brevity of life in v. 4, saying that a thousand years in God’s sight are “but as yesterday”.

Peter also refers to this in 2 Peter 3:8 while he writes about the timing of the Second Coming of Christ. In vv. 5-6, Moses uses the pictures of a flood sweeping them (mankind) away, a dream which suddenly ends upon awakening, and grass which flourishes in the morning and “in the evening it fades and withers.” These are metaphorical illustrations of the brevity of life. The grass analogy is also used by Isaiah in his prophecy in chapter 40 vv.6-7.

Moses returns to the theme of man’s sin and God’s wrath towards it, culminating in man’s death as the verdict. “For we are brought to an end by your anger; by your wrath we are dismayed.” (v.7). Matthew Henry writes: “But here he (Moses) teaches the people of Israel to confess before God that righteous sentence of death which they were under in a special manner, and by which their sins they had brought upon themselves. And “They are here taught to acknowledge the wrath of God as the cause of all their miseries.” As Paul writes in Rom 1:18: “For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men...” And in Romans 6:23, “For the wages of sin is death....”

Man’s sin and God’s omniscience of it is the subject of v. 8. “You have set our iniquities before you, our secret sins in the light of your presence.” This had to be a very sobering thought for Moses and the people of his time. This ought to be the same for us today as God’s word further states. For example, Jesus, as God, the second person of the Trinity says this: “But Jesus, knowing their thoughts, said, ‘Why do you think evil in your hearts?’” (Matt 9:4). The writer of Hebrews: “And no creature is hidden from his sight, but all are naked and exposed to the eyes of him to whom we must give account.” (4:13). Very sobering.

Verses 9-10 comprise a type of summary statement of the brevity and frailty of man’s life, his struggles throughout that life (Genesis 3:19 again) and his end because of God’s wrath against his sin. “For all our days pass away under your wrath; we bring our years to an end like a sigh. The years of our life are seventy, or even by reason of strength eighty; yet their span is but toil and trouble; they are soon gone, and we fly away.” (vv.9-10). John MacArthur writes, “Because of this certain and speedy end, life is sad.”

In response to vv. 3-10, verse 11 asks two serious relevant questions. “Who considers the power of your anger, and Your wrath according to the fear of You?” That is, in view of the shortness of man’s life and his struggles and sin, does *anybody* think about the fear of the Lord and the reality of His wrath? How do you live to honor the God who is praised in vv. 1-2 in view

of His justifiable wrath? Proverbs 9:10, “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, and the knowledge of the Holy One is insight.”

- 3.) The answer to the questions of v. 11 signal a transition point, given in v.12 in the form of a request for God’s wisdom. I believe this answer is spot on, and next to vv.1-2 the most important verse of this psalm. “So teach us to number our days that we may get a heart of wisdom.” John MacArthur explains for “number our days”: “Evaluate the use of time in light of the brevity of life.” For “heart of wisdom”: “Wisdom repudiates autonomy (concern only for self) and focuses on the Lord’s sovereignty and wisdom.” I have often thought of this verse at funerals I have attended over the past ten years. How appropriate for us today!
- 4.) In the final transition point, the progression of this lament culminates in a request for God’s love, mercy and grace, vv.13-17. In v. 13, a cry is made to the Lord to return (a response to God’s call for man to return from v. 3), to not abandon His people, who perceive their struggle has been protracted by asking “How long?”

The request for mercy (also defined as steadfast love) is direct, and has an urgency about it, as God is asked to satisfy them “in the morning”, (v. 14), which can mean literally early in the day, or early in the person’s life while he or she is young, healthy and vibrant. At this point, let me provide what I believe is a good definition of God’s mercy. According to the late Pastor Rex Andrews of Zion Faith Homes, mercy is defined as “God’s supply system for every need everywhere.” Who among us doesn’t need God’s mercy? Who doesn’t need God’s supply system for their every need everywhere?

In v. 15, Moses asks God to “even up the score”: “Make us glad for as many days as you have afflicted us, and for as many years as we have seen evil.” At this point, after God’s judgment of all the first-generation Israelites in the desert, there is a request for God to now have an outpouring of His grace after many displays of His wrath and after how much this group has struggled with sin and affliction. Matthew Henry writes: “God’s people reckon the returns of God’s lovingkindness a sufficient recompense for all their troubles.”

The final two verses, 16-17, build upon the requests of the previous of vv. 14-15. In v. 16 God is asked to display His works so His people can witness them (and affirm what is said about God in vv. 1-2), and that their children may also be witnesses, especially since in the aftermath of the events of Numbers 14, they will be the only survivors left to carry on for the glory of God. (Another relevant point for us today.). Verse 17 is the summation of vv. 14-16.

As this psalm draws to its conclusion, we notice that it begins with worship and acknowledgment of who God is, descends to a lament in discouragement and futility, then does a reversal with the important request made in v. 12. In the final verse, v. 17, there is a request for God to be glorified, to be made to look great through His people, to salvage some worth in the work of the lives of those who are His. "Let the favor of the Lord our God be upon us and establish the work of our hands upon us; yes, establish the work of our hands!" (v.17). This also connects to v. 16, the giving witness of God's work in and through them to their children.

Conclusion and Application

As was previously mentioned, God's word is timeless and applicable to every generation and this psalm offers ample evidence.

- A.) God is eternal, almighty, holy, sinless and perfect. We are not!
- B.) We sin, therefore make ourselves liable to God's judgment and wrath, which, according to His decrees, causes our death. (Ezek 18:20(a), Rom 3:23 and 6:23(a)).
- C.) Despite this our God remains as our dwelling place, our refuge in all generations. He was, is and always will be a God of love, mercy and grace, and we can pray to Him, petition Him to supply our needs, especially our greatest need.
- D.) God supplies our greatest need, that is our need, our salvation, to be rightly reconciled to Him, that is, to be on acceptable terms with Him through His Son Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ is the perfect answer to the requests of vv.13-17 of this psalm. He is the One who has pity on us, satisfies us with His steadfast love/mercy, makes us glad for as many days as God has afflicted us, has shown God's work and glorious power to us and to our children through His finished work on the cross, has put the Lord's favor upon us through His forgiveness of our sins, lets the beauty of the Lord our God be upon us, and helps to establish the work of our hands.
- E.) If you have not done so already, please accept God's offer of His Son Jesus Christ as the fulfillment of your greatest need. Repent (commit to change your ways) and place your faith and trust in Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, so you do not suffer the power of God's anger and wrath forever in hell but be welcomed into the glory and joy of God's kingdom in heaven forever instead. Do this today, remember in this psalm we ask God to

“teach us to number our days”, to recall of the brevity of our lives, which can end at any time.

- F.) If you have made a commitment to repent, embraced Jesus Christ by faith for forgiveness of your sins, please know that God, through Christ and the Holy Spirit, has given you “all things that pertain to life and godliness....” (2 Peter 1:3-8). Use these to have God help you to give purpose and meaning to your life, “establish the work of our hands.” Ephesians 2:10, “For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.” This is called legacy. What are you going to leave behind in the spiritual sense that would continue to make an impact for family and friends after the seventy to eighty years (or less!) of your life which pass away so quickly as this psalm tells us? What would you want people, especially your Christian brothers and sisters to say about you after you have died? Remember v. 12, “So teach us to number our days that we may get a heart of wisdom.”
- G.) In your devotional prayer time, say this entire psalm out loud as a prayer, because it is a prayer, and God, by demonstration of your faith in Him through Christ, will answer! Amen. Alleluia!

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