

Psalm 90

Haunting or Hopeful?

A prayer of Moses,
the man of God



psalm 90

Lord,

You have been our

dwelling place
in all generations.

Such beautiful words from a lovely, yet also haunting psalm. It is a psalm that I have read countless times over the last 30 years and have always been intrigued by the fact that it is attributed to Moses. But even more, I have been drawn to the amazing phrases, revelations and insights that are contained within it. Psalm 90 demonstrates the power of words—power to cause one to stop and reflect, to ponder deeply and to be motivated to reach for something—or Someone—far beyond ourselves and our current situation in life.

Psalms of Moses

In Hebrew, the opening words are: *Tefilah leMoshe ish haElohim* (תפלה למשה איש־האלהים)—“A prayer of Moses, the man of God.” This phrase begins the psalm which many Christian scholars believe is the only one written by Moses. However, many Jewish scholars and rabbis believe that it is the first of eleven consecutive psalms that Moses wrote, attributing Psalms 90–100 to him.

An intriguing explanation comes from Rabbi Shlomo Yitzchaki of the 11th century—better known as Rashi—who declared that these eleven psalms correspond to the eleven blessings which Moses bestowed upon eleven of the tribes of Israel as seen in Deuteronomy 33. The tribe of Simeon was excluded because they had led the orgy that resulted in the deaths of thousands of Jews, seen in Numbers 25. Others point out that the theme of each of the eleven psalms relates to a specific tribe, with Psalm 90 relating to the tribe of Reuben and a theme of repentance.

According to the *Talmud*, David drew upon the works of ten scholars, including Moses, adapting and incorporating their writings into his Book of Psalms.

Since Moses was the author of this one, it is the oldest of all the psalms. And if you agree that Psalms 91–100 were also written by him, then these eleven psalms are the oldest in the entire collection.



Lord,

Let that great
and glorious work of
giving Your people a complete deliverance,
which You have long since designed and promised,
be at last accomplished and manifested to us,
and in the sight of the world.

When Was Psalm 90 Written?

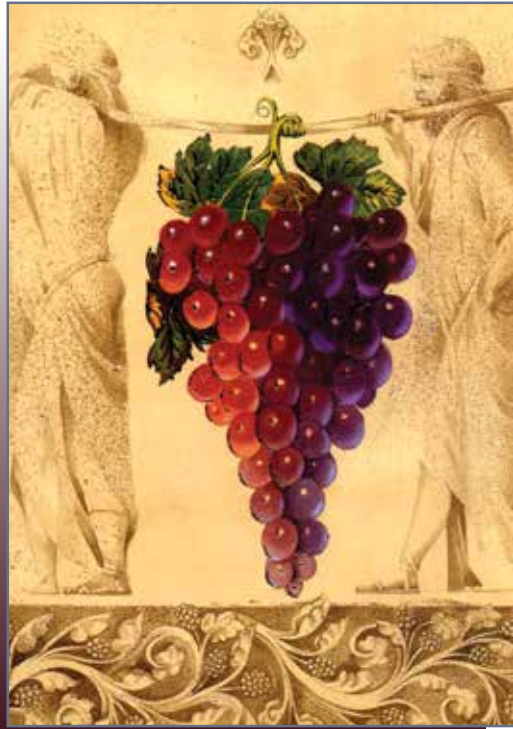
Another topic that should be briefly addressed is the lack of any specific time period mentioned in the psalm. However, most rabbis and Christian scholars believe that it was probably written in connection with Israel's failure at Kadesh-Barnea (Num. 13-14), where instead of entering the Land by faith, the Israelites turned back in unbelief and God judged them. This psalm appears to be Moses' personal reaction to the crisis. He turned to God in prayer and sought the One who

was his—and Israel's—eternal abiding place. In fact, years later Moses would say to Israel, “*The eternal God is a dwelling place, and underneath are the everlasting arms*” (Deut. 33:27a).

The great Baptist preacher of England, Charles Spurgeon, agreed with this interpretation, saying, “The condition of Israel in the wilderness is so preeminently illustrative of each verse, and the turns, expressions, and words are so similar to many in the Pentateuch.”

In *The Torah Anthology*, Rabbi Shmuel Yerushalmi describes Psalm 90 as “a lament over the frailty of man and the short span of his days.” While it does contain such a sentiment, I believe this psalm is so much more than a lament as it contains revelations of God, of man and of life that are invaluable to our understanding of all three; and it contains prayers that can be applicable to any person in any age.

Martin Rozenberg, author of the Jewish commentary, *Book of Psalms*, encourages that “this psalm is to be understood as being primarily a poem to God's greatness.” How important is that in our day? Man in his pride looks at all his technological and medical advances and often thinks that he is the Master of the Universe. But Adonai is the only omniscient and omnipotent One. Let's take a closer look now at how clearly God makes this truth known.



God Our Refuge

It is easy to see that Psalm 90 is basically written in two parts, beginning with Moses' contemplation of God and man in the first eleven verses.

The psalm begins, *"Lord (Adonai), You have been our dwelling place in all generations"* (v. 1). What a magnificent verse! Doesn't your heart just soar as you read these words? Notice that he doesn't say, *"The Tabernacle has been our dwelling place,"* but *"You."* God is not only a Person, a living being we can relate to, but He is a place where we can dwell, a place where we can go, a refuge or even a haven. David and others call Him a rock, a hiding place, a strong tower, a place of refuge in every situation of danger and distress. In the writings of the Apostles, Paul says of God, *"...in Him we live and move and have our being"* (Acts 17:28a NKJV). As His people's *"eternal home,"* God has always been the focal point of Israel's existence.

"...You have been our dwelling place in all generations." Moses is not just thinking about the generations that he has observed in his lifetime; he is thinking about all generations since the very beginning—a revelation he certainly would have had along with the revelation of the Creation account. At the very least, he would be referring to the generations beginning with the call of Abraham. What a wonderful God to be a dwelling place for His people during all that time.

"Before the mountains were born or You gave birth to the earth and the world, even from everlasting to everlasting, You are God" (v. 2). This faithful One has always been there. From eternity past and on into eternity future, God always has, and always will, exist. The mountains are mentioned because they are the most enduring part of the earth that God has formed. And I love the fact that in the Hebrew, it simply and powerfully says, *"from everlasting to everlasting, You God"*—*Atah El (אתה אל)*. God is all in all; He is the only eternally existing One; an eternal home.

...From
everlasting
to everlasting,
**You are
God...**

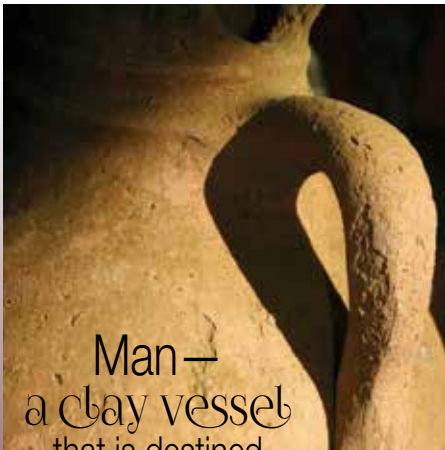


Brevity of Life on Earth

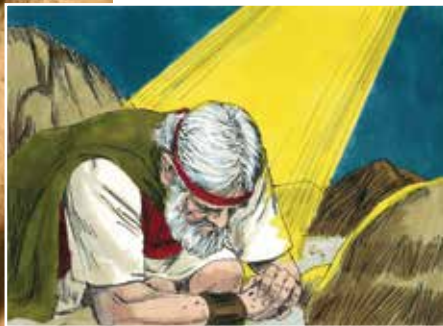
Moses seems to express an ominous tone as he declares in verse 3, “*You turn man to destruction, and say, ‘Return, O children of men.’*” The New American Standard Bible (NASB) says, “*You turn man back into dust,*” while the New King James Version (NKJV) says, “*You turn man to destruction.*” Either word is accurate, since to be turned to dust is synonymous with destruction. Rashi writes, “*You turn man back until he is crushed. You bring afflictions upon man until You turn his strength and arrogance to frailty and humility. Then his pride is crushed.*” Some rabbinical teachers also emphasize that verse 3 is really saying, “*Repent, O sons of men. You [God] constantly remind men that they will return to dust from where they came and that they should therefore repent without delay. All day, every day, God’s right hand is outstretched to encourage and welcome those who must repent.*” Oh, how this message needs to be communicated in our day, even if it sounds archaic and foolish to modern ears.

“*For a thousand years in Your sight are like yesterday when it passes by, or as a watch in the night*” (v. 4). So Moses begins his lament over man’s brief lifespan. What a contrast we see in the brevity of a person’s life compared with the eternity of God; it is just a tiny blip on a radar screen!

The Pickering Bible Commentary puts it this way: “*Man walks across life’s stage for a moment, a clay vessel that is destined to disintegrate into dust when his tiny part has been played...Man’s timescale is minute to God, who surveys human history spread before Him like a map.*” What a picture of God and His ability to see all of human history like a map spread before him. In His



Man—
a clay vessel
that is destined
to disintegrate
into dust...Man’s
timescale
is minute to God.



eyes, a whole millennium is only a “yesterday now over” as *The Jerusalem Bible* puts it, or a three-hour watch in the night.

“You have swept them away like a flood, they fall asleep; in the morning they are like grass which sprouts anew...toward evening it fades and withers away” (vv. 5, 6b). We see the transitory nature of a person’s existence, how our lives are like a flood that has quickly swept everything away; like a sleep or a dream that is but a few minutes long or the grass that quickly shoots up, but is gone by evening.

One of many examples that comes to mind is Alexander the Great, who, after conquering much of the known world in his day, died at the young age of 32. The shortness of human life frequently occupied the thoughts of biblical writers, as well. Many verses on the subject can be found in other Psalms and in Job, Ecclesiastes, Isaiah and James.


Consumed by Your Anger

“For we have been consumed by Your anger and by Your wrath we have been dismayed. You have placed our iniquities before You, our secret sins in the light of Your presence. For all our days have declined in Your fury; we have finished our years like a sigh” (vv. 7–9). These verses clearly describe the situation of the children of Israel in the wilderness who are living out a death sentence pronounced on them when they refused to proceed to the Promised Land (see Num. 14:20–38).



Notice that God’s anger “consumed” them; and the NKJV says that “*by Your wrath we are terrified*” (v. 7). How tragic it is that modern man rarely seems to attribute adverse circumstances in his life to the displeasure of God, preferring instead to speak of a nebulous “Mother Nature” rather than the holy, Almighty God. Ephesians 2:3 and other verses make it clear that sinful humans live under the wrath of God. In Hebrew, the word “wrath” comes from the root word for “nose,” an allusion to that most prominent physical manifestation of flaring nostrils and heavy nasal breathing when one is angry. What a graphic picture this word gives us of the emotional reaction of God to sin and rebellion!

This should serve as a warning to all people: when we choose to disobey God and go our own way, we are inviting God’s anger and wrath and can



Life lived
separate
from God
is nothing but
labor and
sorrow
and we are
soon gone.

find ourselves swept away, cut down or consumed. Or, if this doesn't occur, verse 9 tells us that our days will pass away "like a sigh"—obviously, a tragic way to end one's life when we consider that a sigh is a long, deep, audible breath that usually expresses sadness, tiredness or frustration.

"As for the days of our life, they contain seventy years, or if due to strength, eighty years, yet their pride is but labor and sorrow; for soon it is gone and we fly away" (v. 10). Here we learn the general length of a person's life on earth. Various scholars believe that this statement could not have come from Moses due to the fact that he and Aaron, Joshua and Miriam, and others lived to be well over one hundred years old. But the ages of these leaders appear to be the exception and not the rule. In Moses' day, life had come to be very much the same in duration as it is with us. This is brief, indeed, compared with the men of earlier times, and it is nothing when contrasted with eternity.

Man's mortality is recognized as not only a Divine decree but a result for which man is responsible. Our mortality and the length of our lives is the result of sin. As Moses described it, we see that life lived separate from God is nothing but labor and sorrow and we are soon gone. The unusual strength which may allow a man to live as long as 80 years (or more) only lands the aged man in a place where life is a weariness and a woe, or *"toil and trouble,"* as the Revised Standard Version words it.

Then the psalmist asks, *"Who really understands the power of Your anger and Your fury, according to the fear that is due You?"* (v. 11). If we did, we would not waste our lives as so many do in useless endeavors. We must fear the Lord and honor Him, and use our brief lives for His glory. As it says in Proverbs 9:10, *"The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom."*

This pessimistic assessment of life is by no means Moses' last word, but a realistic prelude to his words of optimism—optimism even in the face of the harsh realities of life, bringing us to the second part of the psalm where Moses' actual prayer begins.

God's Blessing and Man's Yearnings

“So teach us to number our days, that we may present to You a heart of wisdom” (v. 12). This is probably one of the most important verses of Psalm 90. This verse shows us how to properly respond to God through the numbering of our days, an act of humility and recognition of the finiteness of our lives on this earth. This is exactly what I found myself doing from the start of my time here in Israel, counting the days and realizing how wise it is to be aware of how each day is lived.

In these six concluding verses, in just a few words, Moses voices his prayers to God—prayers that can have great relevance to us today.


How often do you use the promises and prayers in the Scriptures to formulate your own prayers? There are numerous examples throughout the Bible that can serve as guidelines, and even specific prayers, for us today. From Moses in the *Torah*, to David in the Psalms, to Paul in the writings of the Apostles, there is a multitude of prayers that can form the basis of our own prayer lives each day. Moses' prayers in this psalm are a prime example.

Praying Moses' Psalm

“So teach us to number our days” (v. 12). Lord, remind us often of how short our lives are, what a gift each day is and the need to treasure each day and use it wisely. Rozenberg comments, “By counting the years of one's life, one by one, a person becomes better impressed with the brevity of life.” That is a heart of wisdom.

“Return, O Lord! How long? And have compassion on Your servants” (v. 13 NKJV). O Lord, come to me in mercy again! Don't leave me here to wallow in my misery. How





O satisfy
us in the morning
with Your
loving-kindness
that we may
sing for joy
and be glad
all our days.

Ackab Photography/shutterstock.com

long do I have to struggle or go through this? Please have compassion on me, for I long to serve you and I long for my life to be pleasing to you.

God does not turn away from His people when we sin or when we're struggling, but it often seems that way to us. When we focus on our circumstances, we wonder: Where are you, Lord? How long must I wander in this place alone? But He is there, just as He was with His constantly stumbling people in the wilderness. They had rebelled, but they had not utterly forsaken the Lord. God had severely disciplined Israel, yet they were still His people, and therefore He was entreated to deal favorably with them. God's mercy and compassion is still extended to us today.

"O satisfy us in the morning with Your loving-kindness, that we may sing for joy and be glad all our days. Make us glad according to the days You have afflicted us, and the years we have seen evil" (vv. 14–15). Lord, today was a difficult and discouraging day, but I look to You to bring me a new perspective and joy in the coming new day. Let me be satisfied with Your love. I cling to the words of Psalm 30:5b, "Weeping may last for the night, but a shout of joy comes in the morning."

Even though the Israelites were living under God's wrath and everyone from age 20 and above—except for Joshua and Caleb—was doomed to live out their days in the wilderness, Moses understood that God's nature and character was that of loving-kindness and compassion—a Father who could still give them reason to sing for the rest of their lives. His loving-kindness will be there for us as well.

"Let Your work appear to Your servants, and Your majesty to their children" (v. 16). Lord, I ask you to manifest Your power to me in the situations that are surrounding

me. Your deeds in the past prove Your power and Your faithfulness and I ask You to encourage me once again. And may my children and grandchildren be aware of Your glory and majesty and choose to follow You with all their hearts.

The prayer of Moses and the Israelites might have continued thus: “Let that great and glorious work of giving Your people a complete deliverance, which You have long since designed and promised, be at last accomplished and manifested to us, and in the sight of the world.”

“And let the beauty (no’am) of the LORD our God be upon us, and establish the work of our hands for us; yes, establish the work of our hands” (v. 17 NKJV). The Hebrew word *no’am* is amazing in that it can mean kindness, pleasantness, delightfulness, beauty, favor, splendor and agreeableness. The very same word is found in Psalm 27:4 where David said, *“One thing I have desired of the LORD, that will I seek: That I may dwell in the house of the LORD all the days of my life, to behold the beauty (no’am) of the LORD, and to inquire in His temple.”*

With that in mind, we might pray, “Lord, I ask for Your beauty, favor, kindness and delight to be upon me and with me at all times. You are not just a God of anger and wrath, but You are full of loving-kindness and compassion and grace. I ask You to guide and establish the work that You have given me to do.”

Apart from God’s *no’am* toward His people, all that the Israelites attempted—and all that we attempt—is in vain, echoed in Psalm 127:1. His *no’am* is the secret of purposeful living and work that lasts (1 Cor. 15:58).



International Headquarters

P.O. Box 1093
Jerusalem, Israel
Tel: (972) 2-624-5004
intl.office@bridgesforpeace.com

Australia

P.O. Box 1785, Buderim
Queensland 4556
Tel: 07-5479-4229
adminaust@bridgesforpeace.com.au

Canada

P.O. Box 21001, RPO Charleswood
Winnipeg, MB R3R 3R2
Tel: 204-489-3697
Toll free: (1) 855-489-3697
info@bfpcan.org

Japan

Taihei Sakura Bldg. 5F
4-13-2 Taihei, Sumida-Ku
Tokyo 130 0012
Tel: 03-5637-5333, bfp@bfpj.org

New Zealand

P.O. Box 768, Whangarei 0110
Tel: 09-430-2943
bfpnz@orcon.net.nz

South Africa

P.O. Box 1848, Durbanville 7551
Tel: 021-975-1941
info@bridgesforpeace.co.za

United Kingdom

18 Heol Ty Gwyn Industrial Estate
Maesteg, Wales CF34 0BQ
Tel: 01656-739494
ukoffice@bridgesforpeace.com

United States

P.O. Box 410037
Melbourne, FL 32941-0037
Tel: 800-566-1998
Product orders: 888-669-8800
postmaster@bfpusa.org



© COPYRIGHT POLICY:

Bridges for Peace holds the copyright on this material. We encourage pastors, Bible teachers, and lay people to use these articles for preaching and teaching, and we hereby grant permission for a limited number of copies for such educational purposes. However, any other reproduction or transmittal of this material in any form—including reprinting, republishing, recording or use with any information storage and retrieval system—requires written permission from BFP International.

Gone at last is that pessimism of verses 3–12, and we see that life under God's lordship (v. 1) means joy and fulfillment.

This is what Moses knew in his forty years of walking with God. Adonai Eloheinu had been his joy and his fulfillment; and He was Moses' dwelling place from Egypt to the wilderness, to Mt. Nebo and on into glory. "Lord, You have been our dwelling place in all generations."

By Rev. Dan Brown, BFP Staff Writer



www.sweetpublishing.com

Bibliography

- Chaim Feuer, Rabbi Avrohom. *Tehillim, A New Translation with Commentary Anthologized from Talmudic, Midrashic and Rabbinic Sources*. Brooklyn, New York: Mesorah Publications, Ltd. 2007.
- Howley, G.C.D., Bruce, F.F., Ellison, H.L., editors. *A Bible Commentary for Today*. London, Glasgow: Pickering and Inglis, 1979.
- Poole, Matthew. *A Commentary on the Holy Bible*. Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1685, 1962.
- Rozenberg, Martin S. and Zlotowitz, Bernard M. *The Book of Psalms: A New Translation and Commentary*. Northvale, New Jersey: Jason Aronson Inc., 1999.
- Spurgeon, Charles. *The Treasury of David*. <http://www.spurgeon.org/treasury/ps090.htm>
- Wiersbe, Warren. *Expository Outlines on the Old Testament*. Colorado Springs: Cook Communications Ministries, 1993.
- Yerushalmi, Rabbi Shmuel. *The Torah Anthology: The Book of Tehillim*. New York, Jerusalem: Moznaim Publishing Corp., 1991.

Scripture is taken from the New American Standard Bible unless otherwise noted.

Bridges for Peace is a Jerusalem-based, Bible-believing Christian organization supporting Israel and building relationships between Christians and Jews worldwide through education and practical deeds expressing God's love and mercy.



www.bridgesforpeace.com