

Getting into the Psalms can be like learning a second language. For many of us entering into this God-inspired dialogue is not easy. The Psalms seem unfamiliar and foreign, and in some very important ways the Psalms are strange and different. Like a second language, we have to work at understanding their historical-grammatical context, making sense of their metaphors, and entering into their poetry. The Psalms are not immediately accessible. They require effort on our part, if we expect to become fluent.

Yet, in another sense the Psalms are like our mother tongue. Since we are made in God's image and immersed in the human condition, there is much here that connects with our souls. One of my former students in Toronto was a missionary to France. After serving for four years, he and his young family returned to Canada for a three month sabbatical. The entire family was struggling to cope because of a vow he had insisted that his family make. In order to learn the language and embrace their mission, he had determined that he and his wife would only speak French. He even made his children vow that they would only speak French. For four years, they had not spoken a word of English in or out of the home and now that they were back home in Canada they were all struggling. Their mother tongue had become a foreign language.

Deep down we have a sense that the Psalms should mean more to us than they do. We have trouble linking the Psalms to our true feelings and passions. Somewhere, there is a disconnect between our soulful self and the Psalms. So we try to access them the way we look for a Hallmark greeting card when we want to say something positive, or the way we open the medicine cabinet for a Tylenol when we don't feel good. If the Psalms were meant to work that way; they would abridged and indexed. But they're not.

There are identifiable reasons for our failure to connect with the Psalms. We inhabit various worlds that find the Psalms strange and unfamiliar. We expend considerable time and effort learning the languages of the academy and the marketplace. We talk sports and entertainment, law and engineering, fashion and food. We keep up on the daily news, but praying the Psalms is awkward. Yet as we become more fluent in our mother tongue we discover in the power and passion of the Psalms the language we need to deal with God and with reality. If we give them a chance, the Psalms will resonate with our souls.

We begin Book IV of The Psalms with the sober and searching notes of Psalms 88 and 89 still in our minds and hearts. Far from ignoring the threat of the second death or the despair of a world void of God's saving grace the Psalms confront these issues head-on. The truth that emerges is two-fold. First, there is deep confidence in the Lord who saves and who demonstrates his great love and mercy. Second, there is a yearning messianic expectation that goes unfulfilled and in need of completion. The Psalms emphasize both truths: the gift of God's covenant love and the consummation of God's great faithfulness in the yet to come Anointed One.

Psalm 90, like the two previous psalms, begins with a strong affirmation of an enduring and abiding relationship: "Lord, you have been our dwelling place throughout all generations" (Ps

90:1). Everything that follows in the psalm flows from this covenant relationship. This conviction grounds the discussion on the frailty, brevity and depravity of life and inspires the believer's sincere search for wisdom. It is out of physical and spiritual weakness that the people of God humbly pray for the Lord's perspective on their lives. To be able to greet the morning with joy is a gift from God. To leave a testimony for the people of God and future generations is a blessing from God. Only the Lord our God can establish the work of our hands.

The superscription credits Moses, the man of God, with this psalm. This raises the intriguing possibility that the back story for the psalm is the rebellion at Kadesh when all the Israelites refused to enter the promised land and the whole assembly talked about stoning Moses and Aaron. The Lord responded by judging all the Israelites who were twenty years and older to a lifetime of wondering in the wilderness. Caleb and Joshua were the exception, but every other adult was destined to die in the wilderness (Num 14:1-43). Later, Moses and Aaron were judged for their own act of disobedience. They were told, "You will not bring this community into the land I give them" (Num 20:12). These tragic events in the wilderness may lie behind Moses' grasp of the eternal and holy God and the danger he felt of subverting God's will and jeopardizing what little time we have on earth through disobedience.

Spurgeon reminded believers that they stood on higher ground than Moses.<sup>1</sup> The power of God's indwelling presence, made real through the Incarnation of God and the presence of the Spirit of Christ, enabled believers to draw near to God with a sincere heart and with the full assurance that faith brings (Heb 10:22). Nevertheless, Moses in Psalm 90 exudes a confidence in God and a grip on reality that is free from despair or bitterness. Even though Moses belonged to the generation that was passing away in the wilderness, his Spirit inspired psalm leads believers today through the challenges of this transitory life.

*God's Eternity, Humanity's Brevity*

*Lord, you have been our dwelling place  
throughout all generations.  
Before the mountains were born  
or you brought forth the whole world,  
from everlasting to everlasting you are God.  
You turn people back to dust,  
saying, "Return to dust, you mortals."  
A thousand years in your sight  
are like a day that has just gone by,  
or like a watch in the night.  
Yet you sweep people away in the sleep of death –  
they are like the new grass of the morning:  
In the morning it springs up new,  
but by evening it is dry and withered.*

Psalm 90:1-6

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<sup>1</sup> Spurgeon, Treasury of David, Psalm 90 (opening title).

Shortly before he died, Moses pronounced a blessing on the Israelites, saying, “The eternal God is your refuge, and underneath are the everlasting arms” (Deut 33:1, 27). The theme of refuge and eternity sets the tone for Psalm 90. The psalmist opens with the over-arching truth upon which everything else depends: “Lord, you have been our dwelling place throughout all generations” (Ps 90:1). This is not a platitude, but a profound recognition by the psalmist of God’s loving care and eternal protection. There is no hint of despair or lament; “his spirit is one of humble submission and trust.”<sup>2</sup> When we pray this psalm today we acknowledge that all our weaknesses and all our hopes are subsumed under this great truth. The sovereign and majestic Lord is our refuge (Ps 91:9). When Jesus spoke of the vine and the branches on the night he was betrayed he embraced this truth of everlasting protection and provision. He made the eternal refuge of God personal: “As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love” (John 15:9).

Time and space are God’s creation. God lives outside of time. “His life is not dribbled out moment by moment like ours,” writes C. S. Lewis. “If you picture Time as a straight line along which we have to travel, then you must picture God as the whole page on which the line is drawn.”<sup>3</sup> Before anything ever was, God is. The mountains were birthed and the world conceived by the word of the eternal God, prompting the psalmist to declare, “From everlasting to everlasting you are God” (Ps 90:2). The author of Hebrews writes, “By faith we understand that the universe was formed at God’s command, so that what is seen was not made out of what was visible” (Heb 11:3). Mortals, by contrast, are mere dust. The Hebrew word “dust” is not the same as in Genesis 3:19, but the idea of returning back to it alludes to the curse of Adam and uses the same verb.<sup>4</sup>

Not only are we mortal, “earth to earth, dust to dust,” but we are extremely short-lived. We are such frail creatures that life can pass away like a dream. One minute we are awake and the next minute we are asleep (a metaphor the psalmist uses for death). Shortly after our new grandchild Jonah was born he developed a viral bronchial infection. His breathing became difficult and his oxygen levels dropped dangerously low. Jonah got his first ambulance ride from one hospital to another and was in and out of hospital for several days. He had to be suctioned multiple times through the day and night. Newborns are always risky even when healthy. They make us vividly aware of how fragile life is.

To God a whole millennium is equivalent to a single day (compare 2 Peter 3:8) or even a four hour night watch (Ps 90:4). When compared to God our life span is like grass that springs up in the morning and by evening is dried up and withered. “It is like water spilt on the ground, like a shadow which passes when the sun comes out, and like smoke or mist dispersed by the wind.”<sup>5</sup> With a few choice phrases the psalmist cuts humanity down to size. Richard Holloway writes, *“This is my dilemma. I am dust and ashes- frail, wayward, a set of predetermined behavior or responses. Riddled with fears, beset with need, the quintessence of dust and unto dust I shall return. But there is something else about me. Dust I may be, but troubled dust. Dust that dreams. Dust that has strange premonitions of transfiguration, of the glory in store, a destiny prepared,*

<sup>2</sup> Stott, Favorite Psalms, 77.

<sup>3</sup> C. S. Lewis, Mere Christianity, 168 (Bk IV. Sec. 3, 168).

<sup>4</sup> Kidner, Psalms, 328.

<sup>5</sup> Stott, Favorite Psalms, 78.

*an inheritance that will someday be my own. So my life is stretched out in a painful dialectic between ashes and glory, between weakness and transfiguration. I am a riddle to myself, an exasperating enigma, this strange duality of dust and glory.”*<sup>6</sup>

To grasp the brevity of life does not mean we accept the futility of life. On the contrary, believers know that this short life span is framed by God’s sovereign purposes and infused with God’s eternal meaning. The psalmist’s realism runs contrary to “a uniquely American persona filled with hopefulness, optimism, and expectation.” Dr. Samuel Harrington sees “our society’s emphasis on youth, celebrity, and consumerism coupled with the successful marketing of medical advances, health care products, and political promises,” as contributing to unrealistic expectations of longevity. Remarkably life-expectancy between seventy years and eighty has remained fairly constant. Harrington uses the concept of “compression morbidity” to refer to the fact that we are “living longer healthier lives and dying quickly with less disability.” Life expectancy is still about seventy-nine, with the maximum improvements in health occurring between ages fifty and seventy. In other words, “if seventy is the new fifty, then eighty-six is the new eighty-five.”<sup>7</sup> We are living healthier longer but still dying at about the same age.

We may like to think of ourselves as the zenith of evolutionary development, but the psalmist thinks of us as a wispy dream or a blade of grass. The psalmist did not use these metaphors to disparage humanity. He is simply being honest about our humanity. Our value lies not in our chemical constitution nor in our longevity. The meaning of the person lies in our unique and wonderful relationship with our Creator in whose image we are made. We are recipients of his wisdom, compassion, unfailing love, and favor. Before the psalmist is through he will move us from dust to destiny and from ashes to glory. But first we must reckon with God’s anger.

#### *God’s Wrath, Humanity’s Depravity*

*We are consumed by your anger  
and terrified by your indignation.  
You have set our iniquities before you,  
our secret sins in the light of your presence.  
All our days pass away under your wrath;  
we finish our years with a moan.  
Our days may come to seventy years,  
or eighty, if our strength endures;  
yet the best of them are but trouble and sorrow,  
for they quickly pass, and we fly away.  
If only we knew the power of your anger!  
Your wrath is as great as the fear that is your due.*

Psalm 90:7-11

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<sup>6</sup> Richard Holloway, <https://studiesinhope.com/2011/08/dust-and-glory/>

<sup>7</sup> Samuel Harrington, MD. *At Peace: Choosing a Good Death After a Long life*. New York: Grand Central Life and Style, 2018, 30.

If our lives are frail and transitory in the physical universe, they are weak and corrupt in the moral universe. We live under a curse that strikes the body and the soul. As the psalmist says, “Surely I was sinful at birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me” (Ps 51:5). There is no escaping the verdict that “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Rom 3:23). We are in fact already “dead in [our] transgressions and sins” (Eph 2:1). We are all miserable sinners subject to the wrath of God.

The psalmist’s description of God’s anger is personal and devastating. The language is graphic. We are consumed by God’s anger and terrified by his indignation. Our secret sins are exposed. It is like sitting across from the oncologist and being told you have stage four pancreatic cancer. Our sinful state impacts each and everyone of us in deeply personal and practical ways. This is not some abstract assessment that can be brushed aside. Being a sinner, no matter how good we think we are, is not some neutral propositional fact that can be duly noted and then forgotten. This is far worse than a jury handing down a guilty verdict and sentencing us to prison. Facing God’s wrath is far more terrifying. Judgment has eternal consequences. The psalmist describes an existential crisis that ought to scare the hell out of us. All of our days are spent under the burden of the fall and the weight of our sinful choices. Trace the cause of our mortality, weakness, brokenness, and brevity, back to its source and it is sin.

It is not difficult to imagine Moses penning these words and feeling their sorrow deeply. He lived to one hundred and twenty years-old (Deut 34:7) and at the end of his life he was denied entrance into the promised land because he struck the rock. I’m sure Moses wished he had that moment back, when reverence for the Lord might have replaced his anger against the people. “If only we knew the power of your anger!” laments Moses. As if to say, “If I had only taken your word more seriously, I never would have violated your explicit command. I would have spoken to the rock.” Moses learned the hard way that the Lord means business, but don’t we all? We struggle to learn: “Your wrath is as great as the fear that is your due” (Ps 90:11). Suffering and conflict dogged his whole life, Even the best years were filled with trouble and sorrow (Ps 90:10). Moses rightly observed that “we finish our years with a moan” (Ps 90:9). As we pray this psalm we sense that Moses was not bitter or angry. He knew he had no cause to be disappointed with God. Disappointed with himself, yes, but not with God.

### *God’s Steadfast Love, Humanity’s Hope*

*Teach us to number our days,  
that we may gain a heart of wisdom.  
Relent, Lord! How long will it be?  
Have compassion on your servants.  
Satisfy us in the morning with your unfailing love,  
that we may sing for joy and be glad all our days.  
Make us glad for as many days as you have afflicted us,  
for as many years as we have seen trouble.  
May your deeds be shown to your servants,  
your splendor to their children.*

*May the favor of the Lord our God rest on us;  
establish the work of our hands for us –  
yes, establish the work of our hands.*

Psalm 90:12-17

The sober realism and straightforward honesty of the first two sections leads to a communal prayer for wisdom. The psalmist enters a corporate plea for the Lord's compassion, steadfast love, empowerment, and favor. He gives voice to the holy ambition of the people of God. Having grappled with a biblical view of mortality and immortality, the psalmist prays boldly for an outpouring of God's grace. He prays for God's imperative action: teach us wisdom, turn back to us in mercy, satisfy us with your love, make us glad for the opportunity to serve, make your action in our lives real and glorious to our children, and establish the work of our hands. Instead of receiving what their fallen status deserves, the psalmist prays for a great reversal. Instead of turning people back to dust, he prays for compassion and strength to serve the Lord.

*Teach us wisdom.* If we do the math according to Psalm 90 we will use whatever time we have left for God's kingdom purposes. We don't know whether we are going to die young or live long, but we desire to make "the most of every opportunity because the days are evil" (Eph 5:18).

*Turn back to us in mercy.* The great truth of the gospel is this: "While we were yet sinners, Christ died for us" (Rom 5:8). On our own merit we are but dust and the apostle agrees with the psalmist, "the wages of sin is death." But because of God's great mercy, "the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Rom 6:23).

*Satisfy us in the morning with your unfailing love.* Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the well-known German pastor and martyr, was a strong advocate for morning meditation and prayer. He reasoned that since Jesus rose "very early in the morning" and "went off to a solitary place" to pray, so should we (Mk 1:35). Bonhoeffer insisted that our first thoughts should not be "our own plans and worries, not even for our zeal to accomplish our own work, but for God's liberating grace, God's sanctifying presence."<sup>8</sup> Bonhoeffer's lyrical description of the value of meeting with God in the morning is a beautiful meditation on Psalm 90:14.

"Each morning is a new beginning of our life. Each day is a finished whole. The present day marks the boundary of our cares and concerns (Mt 6:34; James 4:14). It is long enough to find God or to lose him, to keep faith or fall into disgrace. God created day and night for us so we need not wander without boundaries, but may be able to see every morning the goal of the evening ahead. Just as the ancient sun rises anew every day, so the eternal mercy of God is new every morning (Lam 3:23). Every morning God gives us the gift of comprehending anew his faithfulness of old; thus, in the midst of our life with God, we may daily begin a new life with him...Before the heart unlocks itself for the world, God wants to open it for himself; before the ear takes in the countless voices of the day, it should hear in the early hours the voice of the Creator and Redeemer. God

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<sup>8</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Meditating on the Word*, 32.

prepared the stillness of the first morning for himself. It should remain his.”<sup>9</sup>

*Make us glad for the opportunity to serve.* In the limited time we have left on this side of eternity we greet the challenge to serve as a joy and privilege, not a burden and duty. We aspire for the apostle’s commendation: “We remember before our God and Father your word produced by faith, your labor prompted by love and your endurance inspired by hope in our Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Thess 1:3). Paul was the best example of this. He embraced the mission of the gospel of grace with a palpable sense of privilege and passion. He made no attempt to cajole, berate or brow-beat people into the work of the gospel. What he sought to do was compel believers by his infectious joy, his profound gratitude, and his sense of great honor. He was truly grateful for the responsibility of administering the gospel of grace.

*Make your actions in our lives real and glorious to our children.* We hold the treasure of the gospel in jars of clay for a purpose, “to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us” (2 Cor 4:7). We embrace the responsibility “to contend for the faith that was once for all entrusted to God’s holy people” (Jude 3). For we are called, “because Christ suffered for [us], leaving [us] an example, that [we] should follow in his steps” (1 Pet 2:21). We say with the apostle Paul, “I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I now live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me” (Gal 2:20).

*Establish the work of our hands.* Psalm 90 is often read at funerals, but it is always meant for the living. Life is short and we are sinners, but by the grace of God we have the promise of an abundant life on this side of eternity and an everlasting life when we die (John 10:10; 3:16). To that end, the apostle Paul concludes his powerful message on the resurrection with these words: “Therefore, my dear brothers and sisters, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain” (1 Cor 15:58).

At the age of 25, Isaac Watts (1674-1748), often called the father of English hymnody, published a hymnal titled *The Psalms of David in the Language of the New Testament* (1719). At the time, congregational worship was limited to singing ponderous metrical psalms with the words strictly limited to the actual text of the Bible. Watts sought to change that by putting the theology of the psalms to a musical style that was more inspiring and expressive. Watts argued that hymns could be “free expressions of Christian truth in poetical form.”<sup>10</sup> He based his first hymnal on a paraphrase of the Psalms and after 250 years we are still singing what God gifted and inspired him to write. *O God, our help in ages past* comes from Psalm 90.

O God, our help in ages past, our hope for years to come,  
Our shelter from the stormy blast, and our eternal home!

Under the shadow of thy throne thy saints have dwelt secure;

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<sup>9</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Meditating on the Word*, 31-33.

<sup>10</sup> Coloquhoun, *Hymns that Live*, 69.

Sufficient is thine arm alone, and our defense is sure.

Before the hills in order stood, or earth received her frame,  
From everlasting thou art God, to endless years the same.

A thousand ages in thy sight are like an evening gone;  
Short as the watch that ends the night, before the rising sun.

Time, like an ever-rolling stream, bears all its years away;  
They fly, forgotten, as a dream dies at the opening day.

O God, our help in ages past, our hope for years to come,  
Be thou our guide while life shall last, and our eternal home!