

Unit Theme: Non-Davidic Psalms

**August 18, 2024 (Lesson 12)**

## **HUMAN MORTALITY AND GOD'S ETERNALITY**

- 1. Our Everlasting God** (Psalm 90:1-4)
- 2. Human Frailty and Sinfulness** (Psalm 90:5-11)
- 3. God Rewards Kingdom Work** (Psalm 90:12-17)

**Central Truth:** Though man is mortal, he can have everlasting life through Jesus Christ.

**Focus:** Discuss the fragility of human existence and be confident in God's eternal love and care.

**Evangelism Emphasis:** Though man is mortal, he can have everlasting life through Jesus Christ.

**Golden Text:** "Before the mountains were brought forth, or ever thou hadst formed the earth and the world, even from everlasting to everlasting, thou art God" (Psalm 90:2).

Psalm 90 is unique in that it is the only one attributed to Moses. This indicates (1) this is an ancient psalm that predates the psalms of David and (2) it reflects an ancient Hebrew theology rooted in the earliest stories of the Genesis narrative. Thus, this psalm is likely the oldest in the Book of Psalms. Significantly, the themes of this psalm are affirmed in the writings of the New Testament. The superscription identifies this psalm as a prayer. Verses 1-12 are a reflection on the sovereignty of God, and verses 13-17 are a petition seeking the grace of God. The psalm's main theme is the lament that human life is fragile and brief. As the psalmist faces his own mortality, he seeks the favor of the living God, who does not die.

As we reflect on the words of this psalm, we should consider the words of the English poet John Donne, who wrote: "Any man's death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind. And therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee" ("No Man Is an Island," 1624). In other words, death comes to us all.

### **1. OUR EVERLASTING GOD**

#### **A. From Everlasting to Everlasting** (Psalm 90:1-2)

**1 Lord, thou hast been our dwelling place in all generations. 2 Before the mountains were brought forth, or ever thou hadst formed the earth and the world, even from everlasting to everlasting, thou art God.**

The psalmist began with a brief hymn of praise (vv. 1-2) and then reflected on the brevity of human life as compared to the course of time (vv. 3-4). God is addressed in Hebrew as *Adonai*, which means “Sovereign Lord.” God is sovereign over all creation and human lives.

The Sovereign Lord is “our dwelling place” (v. 1). Last week we studied Psalm 84, which focused on the joy of being in the Temple. Here the emphasis is on dwelling in the presence of the Lord. This anticipates the first verse of Psalm 91: “He that dwelleth in the secret place of the most High shall abide under the shadow of the Almighty.” God is Israel’s dwelling place “in all generations” (90:1). As a prayer of Moses, these words express confidence that God has been present with every generation since Abraham. God was present with Abraham’s descendants as they entered the land of Egypt during the days of Jacob and his son Joseph. God was present with them as they endured the centuries of Egyptian bondage, and present as they sojourned through the wilderness. The time of Abraham until the days of Moses spanned about six centuries. The time of Moses to the reign of King David to the period of the Exile was about a thousand years. The eternally living God was present with each generation.

Moses declared God existed before the world was formed. This takes us back to the first words of the Bible: “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth” (Gen. 1:1). All creation has its beginning with God, but God has no beginning. The Sovereign Lord lives “from everlasting to everlasting” (Ps. 90:2). God lives from eternity past through eternity future. God has no beginning and no end. God is omni-temporal; that is, He lives throughout all time and beyond all time. *Time* is defined as a measure of the progress of existence. In the Genesis

narrative, time began when God said, “Let there be light” (Gen. 1:3). Whereas all created things are affected by time, God remains utterly unaffected or unchanged by the passage of time (Mal. 3:6; Heb. 13:8; James 1:17). God does not grow old; He does not die. God’s covenant name is *Yahweh*, which means “I AM THAT I AM” (Ex. 3:14). *Yahweh* is the eternally self-existent holy One, the “Lord God Almighty, which was, and is, and is to come. . . . who liveth for ever and ever” (Rev. 4:8-9). Because the living God is everlasting, “he is the faithful God, keeping his covenant of love to a thousand generations” (Deut. 7:9 NIV).

### **Eternal and Unchanging**

God is eternal and unchanging. Before He laid the foundations of our universe, He was a being of infinite power and love, and He will remain so throughout all eternity.—Woodrow Kroll

#### **B. Hours and Years (Psalm 90:3-4)**

**3 Thou turnest man to destruction; and sayest, Return, ye children of men. 4 For a thousand years in thy sight are but as yesterday when it is past, and as a watch in the night.**

It is difficult for us, who are creatures of time, to comprehend the eternal nature of God. Again, the time between Abraham and the Exile was about 1,600 years. But to God, it amounted to little more than a day. The Apostle Peter said even though it seems the return of Christ is delayed, “one day is with the Lord as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day” (2 Peter 3:8). Neither the psalmist, nor Peter, meant this literally. Rather, “a thousand years” is a metaphor for an especially long period of time. Astronomers, by measuring the expansion of light, have suggested the universe is about 14 billion years old. That seems unbelievable to most of us. But to God, that’s but a blink of the eye. Job declared, “Yes, God is great—beyond our knowledge! The number of his years is unsearchable” (Job 36:26 NET).

On the other hand, humans are creatures of time. Time changes us, wears us down, and eventually we die. Death claims the “great and small,” a phrase used to describe humans of all social classes (Rev. 20:12 NIV). As a pastor of almost four decades, I’ve officiated scores of funerals with the youngest at seven days and the oldest at 100 years. No one is immune from death’s grasp. As I write this exposition, the world mourns the death of Queen Elizabeth II of the United Kingdom, who died at the age of 96. For more than seven decades, her leadership was a source of strength to the people of her realm. Reflecting on her long life, she once said, “None of us can slow the passage of time; and while we often focus on all that has changed in the intervening years, much remains unchanged, including the Gospel of Christ and His teachings.”

The Sovereign Lord declares, “Return to dust, you mortals” (Ps. 90:3 NIV). This is a reminder that humans are subject to the decrees of God. The Lord created humans from the dust of the ground (Gen. 2:7); and because of the curse of sin, humans will die and “unto dust shalt thou return” (3:19). Humans are born, and humans will die (Eccl. 3:2). Death, without hope of resurrection, would mean we are confined to the darkness of the grave, separated from all those we have loved, forsaken, and ultimately forgotten (cf. Ps. 88:3-7). Death reduces the physical body to dust, and human life to utter meaninglessness were there no resurrection (Eccl. 1:2 NIV).

§ *What does Ecclesiastes 3:11 state about eternity, God, and human beings?*

## **2. HUMAN FRAILITY AND SINFULNESS**

### **A. Like Withering Grass (Psalm 90:5-7)**

**5 Thou carriest them away as with a flood; they are as a sleep: in the morning they are like grass which groweth up. 6 In the morning it flourisheth, and groweth up; in the evening it is cut down, and withereth. 7 For we are consumed by thine anger, and by thy wrath are we troubled.**

The psalmist lamented the condition of humanity. As he reflected on the mortality and sinfulness of humanity, he was deeply grieved. Like Job, he turned his attention to God with a profound complaint: “We wither beneath your anger; we are overwhelmed by your fury” (v. 7 NLT). Humanity is overwhelmed by God’s judgment. Humans are powerless against the omnipotent God, who “carriest them away as with a flood” (v. 5). As a psalm of Moses, it is likely this is a reference to the flood of Noah (Gen. 6:6, 11; 7:4), or even to the drowning of the Egyptian army in the Red Sea (Ex. 14:21-31). In both cases, God acted to judge the sinfulness, violence, and idolatry of humanity.

The terrors of death sweep over all humanity like an irrepressible sleep (cf. Ps. 55:4). The mortality of humans is compared to the grass that is fresh in the morning and withers in the evening. Job 14:1-2 declares, “Mortals, born of woman, are of few days and full of trouble. They spring up like flowers and wither away; like fleeting shadows, they do not endure” (NIV). Isaiah 40:6-7 compares the mortality of humanity to the withering grass: “All flesh is grass. . . . The grass withereth, the flower fadeth . . . surely the people is grass.” Throughout the Scripture, wicked humans are compared with withering grass (Ps. 37:1-2; 92:7). The rich and powerful may appear strong, but they cannot resist the power of death. “But the rich . . . will pass away like a wild flower. For the sun rises with scorching heat and withers the plant; its blossom falls and its beauty is destroyed. In the same way, the rich will fade away even while they go about their business” (James 1:10-11 NIV).

Furthermore, all human life is little more than a vapor, “a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes” (4:14 NIV). James was speaking of the fragility and brevity of human life, and to the suddenness by which life ends. Death is literally just one breath away. In the Old Testament, human life is likened to a shadow that quickly disappears in the light (1 Chron.

29:15; Job 8:9). During the years of the Black Plague (also known as the Great Mortality) that swept over Europe (1346-1351), it is estimated over 100 million people died, representing one-third of the continent. It was said the people of a village could rise dancing in the morning, but would all be dead by sundown.

### **Acts of God**

The term “acts of God” is often used to speak of an instance of uncontrollable natural forces in operation. There are several such historical events that qualify. The eruption of Mount Vesuvius in AD 79 destroyed several Roman cities and killed thousands of people. On April 18, 1906, a massive earthquake shook the city of San Francisco, California, and resulting fires burned for days and consumed almost 500 city blocks. The earthquake and fires killed an estimated 3,000 people and left half of the city’s 400,000 residents homeless. On December 26, 2004, a 9.1 magnitude earthquake in the Indian Ocean caused a massive tsunami that swept the shores of Asia and Africa, killing almost 230,000 people. Such events leave us profoundly shaken and questioning the purposes of God.

#### **B. Like a Sigh (Psalm 90:8-11)**

**8 Thou hast set our iniquities before thee, our secret sins in the light of thy countenance.**  
**9 For all our days are passed away in thy wrath: we spend our years as a tale that is told.**  
**10 The days of our years are threescore years and ten; and if by reason of strength they be fourscore years, yet is their strength labour and sorrow; for it is soon cut off, and we fly away.** **11 Who knoweth the power of thine anger? even according to thy fear, so is thy wrath.**

As Moses reflected on the relationship between mortal humans and the eternal Sovereign Lord, he was reminded humans are subject to divine judgment—“consumed by [God’s] anger”

and “troubled” by God’s “wrath” (v. 7). Even so, we must remember because of the wickedness of humans, God’s “heart was deeply troubled” and “the Lord regretted that he had made human beings on the earth” (Gen. 6:6 NIV). Our mortality is caused by God’s response to our sinfulness, which cannot be hidden from Him (Ps. 90:8). In the Garden of Eden, Adam and Eve tried to hide their sin from God (Gen. 3:9-10), but their disobedience resulted in the entire creation being corrupted by death (2:17). The earth is filled with the fossilized bones of humans and creatures from ages past that testify to the reign of death.

As Moses led the children of Israel out of Egypt and through the wilderness, they repeatedly rebelled against God, and repeatedly suffered the judgment of death. As they camped at the base of Mount Sinai, the Israelites worshiped a golden calf—the image of an Egyptian god. God’s anger burned against them and He purposed to destroy them all (Ex. 32:10). Moses interceded, and God relented. Even though God did not destroy all of them, three thousand died that day (v. 28). When the people complained about God’s provision in the wilderness, “his anger was aroused” and “fire from the Lord burned among them and consumed some of the outskirts of the camp” (Num. 11:1 NIV). When Moses sent spies into Canaan, some of the leaders spread a bad report and provoked the people to complain. Those leaders were “struck down and died of a plague before the Lord” (14:37 NIV). Because of continued sinfulness, “the Lord’s anger was kindled against Israel, and he made them wander in the wilderness forty years, until all the generation, that had done evil in the sight of the Lord, was consumed” (32:13).

Humans are condemned to “pass away under [God’s] wrath” (Ps. 90:9 ESV). Paul declared, “The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of people” (Rom. 1:18 NIV) and “the wages of sin is death” (6:23). Even the greatest of humans with all of their wealth, strength, exploits, and glory will be remembered only as “a tale that is

told” (Ps. 90:9b). The ancient Hebrew phrase is better translated as “we bring our years to an end like a sigh” (ESV). The point is that all humans, great and small, will breathe their last breath with a whimper.

God is unrelenting in exposing human sin. We might try to cover our shame by keeping our sin secret, but God has declared, “My eyes are on all their ways; they are not hidden from me, nor is their sin concealed from my eyes. I will repay them double for their wickedness and their sin” (Jer. 16:17-18 NIV). King David could not conceal his adultery and murder from God (2 Sam. 12:1-14); nor could Ananias and Sapphira secretly defraud the Holy Spirit (Acts 5:1-11). The Apostle John saw a vision of God sitting on “a great white throne” (Rev. 20:11). Even though everyone on the earth and in the heavens fled from God’s presence, there was “no place” to hide. “The sea gave up the dead who were in it, and Death and Hades delivered up the dead who were in them” (v. 13 NKJV). “The dead, great and small,” were summoned to stand before the Great White Throne, and God judged them all “according to what they had done” (v. 12 NIV).

In Psalm 90:10, Moses again compared the brevity of human life against the eternal nature of the living God. The human life span is “seventy” to “eighty” years, and life is full of “toil and trouble” (ESV). Moses died at 120 years old, and “his eye was not dim, nor his natural force abated” (Deut. 34:7). Even in good health, humans cannot evade death. The genealogy of Genesis 5 records ancient humans were exceptionally long-lived, with Methuselah living to be 969 (v. 27). Even so, all of these long-lived men were mortal. The phrase “and he died” occurs again and again in Genesis 5.

Moses said our years “quickly pass, and we fly away” (Ps. 90:10 NIV). The phrase “fly away” is not suggesting humans fly away to Heaven. Dead humans are powerless to deliver



themselves from the grave. Rather, the phrase “fly away” speaks to the transience of human life, as in Job 20:7-8: “He perishes forever. . . . He flies away like a dream” (NASB). In other words, in death humans become memories which quickly fade away (cf. Luke 11:44).

§     *Respond to the question in Psalm 90:11: “Who understands the power of Your anger and Your fury, according to the fear that is due You?” (NASB).*

### **3. GOD REWARDS KINGDOM WORK**

#### **A. Numbering Our Days (Psalm 90:12-14)**

**12 So teach us to number our days, that we may apply our hearts unto wisdom. 13 Return, O Lord, how long? and let it repent thee concerning thy servants. 14 O satisfy us early with thy mercy; that we may rejoice and be glad all our days.**

With verse 12, the psalmist moved from lament to petition. Humans are powerless before the Sovereign Lord. How might we live meaningful lives if we are subject to God’s wrath? Moses prayed God will “teach us to number our days,” which is an idiom that acknowledges life is limited and we are mortal. Even so, we should “apply our hearts unto wisdom.” In other words, even though life is short relative to eternity, we should strive to make each day count. How so? Wisdom demands, “Remember now thy Creator in the days of thy youth” (Eccl. 12:1). The first verse of Psalm 90 is an affirmation of the Sovereign Lord as Creator. In Hebrew tradition, the fruit of the Tree of Life is wisdom; that is, to acknowledge God. “Happy is the man that findeth wisdom, and the man that getteth understanding. . . . She is a tree of life to them that lay hold upon her” (Prov. 3:13, 18). Living according to the wisdom of God means “Your days will be many, and years will be added to your life” (9:11 NIV). Human life has meaning and prospers only as we faithfully reflect the character of God (19:8).

Moses cried out, “Relent, Lord! . . . Have compassion on your servants” (90:13 NIV). In verse 1, God is *Adonai* (Sovereign Lord and Creator). Here in verse 13, God is *Yahweh*—God’s covenant name, which He revealed to Moses (Ex. 3:14). This signifies a movement from the wrath of the Sovereign Lord to the “mercy” (unfailing love) of Yahweh (Ps. 90:14). God has indeed relented in His wrath and demonstrated compassion. If we acknowledge God and live according to His wisdom, we will escape His wrath. As we keep the covenant commandments, our lives can be satisfied with joy and gladness (Ps. 103:5; 107:9).

### **An Audience With God**

When we pray, the first thing we should do is to see to it that we really get an audience with God, that we really get into His very presence. Before a word of petition is offered, we should have the definite consciousness that we are talking to God, and we should believe that He is listening.—R. A. Torrey

#### **B. Working With Our Hands (Psalm 90:15-17)**

**15 Make us glad according to the days wherein thou hast afflicted us, and the years wherein we have seen evil. 16 Let thy work appear unto thy servants, and thy glory unto their children. 17 And let the beauty of the Lord our God be upon us: and establish thou the work of our hands upon us; yea, the work of our hands establish thou it.**

The closing words of this psalm move us from lament to gladness, from affliction to favor. The psalmist wrote of the work of Yahweh and the work of humanity. Yahweh’s saving works are the “glory” (salvation) of His children (v. 16). The works of Yahweh began with the acts of creation by the power of His divine word (vv. 1-2; cf. 33:6), not the least of which was the creation of humanity (8:3-4). Since Psalm 90 is attributed to Moses, the days of affliction and years of evil (v. 15) could be a reference to Egyptian bondage (Ex. 1:11-12; 3:7). Likewise, the

“works” of Yahweh (Ps. 90:16) would speak of God’s deliverance of Israel by judging Egypt with a series of plagues and ultimately destroying Egypt’s army in the Red Sea. The delivered people exclaimed, “Who among the gods is like you, Lord? Who is like you—majestic in holiness, awesome in glory, working wonders?” (Ex. 15:11 NIV). Throughout the Psalms, the works of God are described as wondrous, powerful, mighty, terrible, and awesome.

The final petition of this prayer asks God, “Establish the work of our hands” (Ps. 90:17 ESV). Again, as a psalm of Moses, this could be a reference to the period of Egyptian bondage, when the Israelites were compelled to work for the pharaoh and gods of Egypt. With their deliverance from Egypt, the people now prayed God would grant them His “beauty” (KJV), or “favor” (NIV), and strengthen their hands to work for His glory. When God created Adam and Eve, they were commissioned to work and care for Eden (Gen. 2:15). Likewise, when God gave the Promised Land to the people of Israel, they were commissioned to act as “a kingdom of priests and a holy nation” (Ex. 19:6 NIV). This is where human life gets its ultimate meaning—where human purpose is fulfilled. If we work only to fulfill our selfish desire, then life becomes meaningless—wealth, power, and pleasure are meaningless (Eccl. 2:1-17). However, if we live our lives in pursuit of God, He will grant us favor and blessing, and life will be meaningful (Pss. 37:23; 40:2, 4).

§ *How can Moses’ petition in Psalm 90:15 apply to your life?*

## **OUR REDEEMER LIVES**

When a friend or relative dies, we are reminded of human mortality; especially our own. The grief and sorrow of death can provoke profound depression. The world is filled with human affliction, and we are sometimes given over to despair. Does God care? This psalm acknowledges all of these concerns and questions. In spite of suffering and death, our lives are

established as we pursue the kingdom of God. The Lord's greatest redemptive work is the resurrection of Jesus Christ. In Christ, death is defeated and we have hope. In the words of the Apostle Paul, "For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive" and "the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed. For the perishable must clothe itself with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality" (1 Cor. 15:22, 52-53 NIV). May we declare, "I know that my redeemer lives, and that in the end he will stand on the earth. And after my skin has been destroyed, yet in my flesh I will see God" (Job 19:25-26 NIV).

### **Daily Devotions**

- M. The Eternal "I AM" (Exodus 3:13-15)
- T. The Brevity of Life (Job 7:6-9)
- W. The Weariness of Life (Ecclesiastes 4:1-3)
- T. Jesus Declares His Eternality (John 8:51-58)
- F. Christ's Obedience and Exaltation (Philippians 2:5-9)
- S. Godly Perspective of Life (James 4:13-15)