

Theology of Psalm 90: A Psalm of Moses

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Main Ideas of Psalm 90

In Psalm 90, Moses begins his only written work outside the Torah by remembering what God has done thus far, leading into a brief discussion of God's eternality, and a slightly longer discussion of man's mortality; however, the main purpose of the psalm comes in verses 12-17, specifically 12-13. *Therefore, teach us to number our days that we may get a heart of wisdom. Return Yahweh! How long? Have pity on your servants!*¹ This is indeed the first phrase resembling a request appearing in the psalm. All those preceding it are descriptive of either God or man, and all requests after verse 13 are in direct correspondence with the request of verse 13. Return Yahweh, and satisfy us that we may rejoice (vv. 14). Return Yahweh, and make us glad for we have seen evil (vv. 15). Return Yahweh, and let your work be shown (vv. 16). Return Yahweh, and establish the work of our hands (vv. 17). Each request points back to the overarching request for Yahweh to return and teach.

The primary idea from Psalm 90 is also a request for Yahweh to return His presence to His people who feel abandoned by Him and perhaps even tricked by Moses.² There are secondary ideas to this psalm as well. Moses begins his prayer by emphatically appealing to Yahweh's eternality, supremacy, and timelessness. Before creation, Yahweh is Yahweh. God is the creator and can therefore create from dust and send that which He created back to the dust. Man dies, God does not. Moving into the next section, man's life is nothing when compared to the workings of Yahweh, and again by saying the labors and sorrows seem to be in vain for they will indeed all still die. The basic truths Moses juxtaposes in this psalm cannot be ignored; they are

¹ Blair, Thom. "The Hebrew-English Interlinear ESV Old Testament" Wheaton: Crossway, 2014, Ps. 90:13

² The latter point is mere conjecture since we have no definitive date or writing; however, I am going on the assumption that Psalm 90 was written during the exile amidst all the grumbling episodes.

secondary ideas he sought to convey all the while making his primary request for Yahweh to return and teach.

Purpose and Function of Psalm 90

Psalm 90, the beginning of the fourth book within Psalms, continues the logical flow of thought from Psalm 89 at the close of book three, specifically in the lament of verses 38-51. Moses' poem touches on the themes of Psalm 89, specifically speaking to God's wrath in the wake of rejection, the theme of dust, the concept of the days of life, death, and a desire for God to return with compassion. While this was in all likelihood the first written psalm in sequential terms, the compositor of the Book of Psalms identified these themes and used it as a logical transition from the lament that has persisted through books one-three to the praise and worship that will persist in books four and five.

Psalm 90 also has the unique purpose of introducing book four (Ps. 90-106). The themes of God as refuge, the righteous flourishing, God's lovingkindness, the mortality of man, and God's sovereignty over creation continually arise in these seventeen psalms. Moreover, when looking at the Exodus themes of psalm 106, one cannot help but again realize a purpose of Psalm 90 introducing this particularly book, namely as the introduction specifies it is a psalm of Moses describing a time of great anguish and abandonment, perhaps during the wanderings in the desert, without hope of getting to the Promised Land. The cries to the Lord move from "we have been consumed by Your anger (90:7),"³ which may have felt unjustified at the time, to "the anger of the Lord was

³ Unless otherwise noted, all scripture references are from New American Standard Bible: The Lockman Foundation, 1995.

kindled against His people” (106:40) because they “became unclean in their practices, and played the harlot in their deeds” (106:39). What seemed unjustified in the moment seems justified in hindsight; what the nation of old did not understand, we now do. Time is therefore pivotal for us understanding the ways of the Lord. Psalm 90 and 106 juxtapose this dilemma, and lead the reader to focus less on instantaneous results and instead to consider the limited time we have as a means for developing understanding, wisdom, and humility before the Lord. It should come as no surprise that concepts of time arise throughout these psalms to magnify the points of the psalmists and compositor on this point.

Literary Structure and Development

As I evaluate the literary structure of Psalm 90, I will consider verses 1-6, 7-11, and 12-17 as the three primary sections. There are themes that arise in all three sections as well as themes that are contained within each of the sections. I will first discuss the themes that arise within the three sections. The first of these sections answers the question, “Who is Yahweh?” The second of these sections answers the question, “What is man?” The third section answers the question posed at the end of section two, “Who understands the power of Yahweh’s anger?” with a cry for Yahweh to return to His people and instruct them.

Due to the theological components in Psalm 90 and the subsequent psalms in Book 4, it is important to premise any arguments made about God within the literary structure with God’s self-revelation in Exodus 34:6-7. *Yahweh passed before him and proclaimed, “Yahweh, Yahweh, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and*

abounding in steadfast love to the thousandth generation, forgiving iniquity and transgression, and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children and the children's children, to the third and fourth generation.

These characteristics of God are used throughout Book 4, but Psalm 90 in particular, in what can only be deemed an explicit reference back to this Exodus passage.

Section One: Verses 1-6

The Lord has been Israel's מְעוֹן "dwelling place" in all generations. This word is used in Deuteronomy by Moses describing Yahweh in exactly the same terms, as a dwelling place for Israel (33:27) in his concluding remarks following the blessings over each of the tribes. He earlier uses it again to describe heaven as the place that God dwells (Deut. 26:15). Samuel uses it to describe the place where offerings are brought (1 Sam. 2:29). The writer of the Chronicles uses it to describe heaven, the place where God lives (2 Chron. 30:27), but shortly thereafter uses it to describe the tabernacle (2 Chron. 36:15). The prophets and psalmists, specifically Jeremiah settle with the aforementioned precedents as the place God's presence and glory dwells (Ps. 26:8). The one exception with any form of distinction is in Psalm 68:5, which ascribes Yahweh's dwelling place as the place where He acts upon His will, specifically in caring for the orphaned and widowed.

This concept of "generation upon generation" also harkens to the theme of death, which was the consequence of sin in the Garden of Eden; as one generation falls, another generation rises. The point is clear: no matter the time that passes, Yahweh will remain Yahweh; however, what will not remain is man, for Yahweh brought forth man

from the earthly elements and will return man back to that very substance. This brevity of man when compared to Yahweh is not in canonical isolation: the psalmist also describes man's life as a mere breath compared to Yahweh (39:5). James writes that the life of man is a vapor that appears for a little while but then disappears (4:14). Moreover, Peter appeals to the language in this psalm—comparing a single day and a thousand years—to demonstrate that any comparison of man and God is unfathomable (2 Pet. 3:8). That said; the psalmist takes the comparison down a different road, not speaking to a day but speaking to yesterday after it has already past.

Yahweh sweeps away the generations like the flood (vs. 5). This language explicitly looks back upon the Flood from the days of Noah, similar to this appeal to the Flood motif used in verse 2. How peculiar a thing, that following a definitive declaration of Yahweh's everlastingness from generation to generation that Moses draws back so explicitly to the generation of Noah and the ark as the מְנוּחָה "dwelling place" during the Flood. The people were warned that a judgment of flood was forthcoming, but they did not listen, and when the waters fell from the sky, the floodgates of the sky swept them away (Gen. 7:11). Despite warnings, the people ignored Yahweh and were caught off guard by the Flood, thus their being swept away by Yahweh was a surprise. Moses appeals to this same language of surprise in this section, describing man as grass that flourishes in the morning but fades and withers in the evening. The abrupt end of man is the literarily developed conclusion in this section; that man is nothing compared to the everlasting reality of Yahweh. Generations rise and fall like the grass that is renewed in the morning and fades in the evening; nothing of time or significance when compared to Yahweh.

Section Two: Verses 7-11

Moses shifts from describing the consequence of death man experiences through approaching the question of *why*? Why is humanity swept away like the flood? Why are we brought to an end by Yahweh's anger? Moses even returns to the surprising language in the previous section by declaring that Yahweh's anger brought forth by His wrath is shocking; but the shock value is not justified, for the sins of the people, particularly *the* עֲלֻמֵינוּ “secret” sins of Israel. This word is functioning as an attributive passive participle of the noun נְתִיבוֹתָיו, “iniquities,” which requires that it follow and take on the noun's “gender, number, and definiteness,” even while “secret” is in a singular form.⁴ Therefore, one cannot read Moses' words here to suggest a singular sin but instead multiple sins, described by their hidden nature; these are repeat offenses against Yahweh that garner His wrath. Yahweh not only knows what Israel thinks is in the dark, but He brings those things out into the light. In His wrath, He reveals the justification for His anger, and now what was in the dark has been exposed.

Moses then returns to his discussion of the days of man in light of Yahweh's *justified* anger, reemphasizing the images conjured in the previous section. The years of man come to completion as a tale told as happenstance. This word הִנָּח can also be translated as “mourning” or “sigh.” While all three seem rather different, they paint a similar picture, a life of insignificance—a life wasted. When Israel continues to arrogantly live in secret sin, their life is spent in pride, wrapped up in their labors and wickedness; yet, despite having seventy to eighty years of life, their life's work is soon gone as they themselves inevitably die. Who can understand the power of Yahweh's

⁴ Pratico, Gary, and Miles Van Pelt. “Basics of Biblical Hebrew: Grammar.” Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007, page 266.

anger? Moses poses this rhetorical question, for he has just answered the question. Back in verse 9, Moses declares that our days pass away under Yahweh's breath. The extent of the power of Yahweh's anger is so great that it expands beyond the seventy or eighty mere years given to man.

Section Three: Verses 12-17

Therefore, Moses declares, we need Yahweh to teach us to number our days *in order* to have hearts of wisdom. The time of man is too short to hide our iniquities from Yahweh, whom not only already knows them but knows them with such intimate detail that he exposes them. How can we learn to number our days? Yahweh must teach us. What is required for Yahweh to teach us to number our days? He must return and have pity on His servants. This is the main idea that Moses has been building up to, appealing to Yahweh's sovereignty, eternality, lovingkindness, justice, and compassion as the means through which to make such a request for Yahweh's longed-for presence to return to the nation of Israel specifically to teach them to number their days and have hearts of wisdom. Leave it to the author of the Torah to seek out God's instruction for the people!

It is from this that Moses continues his line of requests, that Yahweh would satisfy them in the morning and that they be glad all their days of their brief life. This is explicitly correlated to the comparison of man to grass in verse six that grass flourishes in the morning but fades in the evening. To be sure, Moses is not asking Yahweh for flourishing but of satisfaction. The pride of man early in life returns to bite them in the butt in their older age with life patterns and habits of sin; yet, to be satisfied with

Yahweh's lovingkindness and instruction, specifically to obtain a heart of wisdom, is what brings forth gladness in the later years of life. The remainder of the psalm is devoted to various implications of what it would mean for Yahweh to return and to instruct His people to number their days.

Flood Theme in Relation to Theme of Limited Time cf. Psalm 104

While I have adequately touched on the general themes in the previous sections, one theme that requires further elaboration is the language of the Flood that arises all throughout the first half of Psalm 90 and how it relates to the primary idea of Yahweh teaching Israel to number their days. After all, if we do not number our days, our lives will end in mourning, as a tale told in happenstance, swept away like with the Flood. This theme of the Flood takes shape in Psalm 90, but also in 104, which must be read with Psalm 90—the introduction to Book Four—in mind.

Psalm 104:5-9 begins by describing Yahweh's sovereignty over creation forever and ever, paralleled with Psalm 90:2, declaring that before the mountains were born, from everlasting to everlasting, Yahweh is Yahweh. Psalm 104 continues in verse six that Yahweh covered the earth and the mountains He birthed with deep water like a garment. Psalm 90 starts off by declaring Yahweh as the dwelling place for all generations; this would not be possible if everyone perished in the Flood, but not everyone did. Noah survived because of the refuge that Yahweh provided him. At this point, Psalm 104 breaks off from Psalm 90 in message and structure and speaks of Yahweh raising the heights of the mountains and lowering the depths of the oceans to prevent the Flood from ever reoccurring, only further affirming Yahweh's commitment to

His covenants. There is no escaping the waters of His wrath except through Yahweh and His dwelling place.

Psalm 90's Context within the Book of Psalms

As previously mentioned, Psalm 90 is a natural flow of thought from Psalm 89. Psalm 90 not only begins the fourth book within the Psalms but also was chosen specifically because it continues the argument made at the close of book three, specifically verses 38ff, which starts a new section within Psalm 89. Following a lengthy discourse on God's lovingkindness, Ethan the Ezrahite shifts to a sudden departure of Yahweh from His anointed and allowed His anointed's enemies to be exalted and rejoice over His departure. Ethan beseeches Yahweh "How long, O Lord" (vs. 46), echoing the similar request of Moses in Psalm 90:13. After great praise comes a request for Yahweh to return to His anointed. This argument flows directly into Psalm 90, which structurally begins as a continuing cry for Yahweh to return His presence to Israel, culminated in 90:12-13.

Ethan then makes four statements regarding the other primary theme seen in Psalm 90, further explaining the intentionality of the placement of such psalms at the end and beginning of their respective books. "You have shortened the days of his [the anointed] youth" (vs. 45); "Remember what my span of life is" (vs. 47); "What man can live and not see death?" (vs. 48); and "Where are Your former lovingkindnesses, O Lord" (vs. 49). That these core statements are how the compositor of the Psalms leaves off book three is significant in how it sets the stage for book four's introduction with Psalm 90. These concepts of days being shortened, that the brief days of man be

remembered by Yahweh, the inevitability of death for man, and the overarching request for Yahweh to return lead directly into not just Psalm 90, but the whole of book four as well. Several concepts introduced by Moses in Psalm 90 continue in their development throughout the remainder of book four. These include Yahweh as a glorious and beautiful refuge for His people (91:1-4, 9; 94:17, 22-23; 96:6-9), the flourishing of the righteous (92:10-15), and most notably Yahweh's lovingkindness (92:2; 98:3; 100:6; 101:1; 103:2-5; 105:1-3, 44-45).

At the conclusion of Psalm 90, Moses asks that Yahweh confirm for Israel the works of their own hands—in fact, Moses makes this request twice in his final words. However, after the developments in Psalm 91 speaking directly to handing over control of one's life to the will of Yahweh, the psalmist makes a 180-degree turn by praising Yahweh for the works of His hands (92:4). This can hardly be viewed as incidental considering the content of Psalm 91, which then returns of Psalm 90's primary request of Yahweh to teach Israel. Moses wants Yahweh to teach Israel to number their days so they may have hearts of wisdom and so their days to not end in labor and hardship, yet that is how their days will be because of the curse on ground in the Garden (Gen. 3:17). In light of this, and the content of Psalm 91 imploring Israel to trust in God's sovereign work, it is hard to ignore the idea that Yahweh did teach them, correcting this view of exalting one's own work to the view represented in 92:4, to instead exalt the work of Yahweh.

The final theme and primary theme conveyed in book four, as related to Psalm 90, is the idea of man's mortality and death and Yahweh's sovereignty over it all. That in spite of the massive thunder of the Flood—it's voice, pounding waves, mighty

breakers—Yahweh is mightier (93:2-4). All creation sing of Yahweh’s great works; the sea and all within it roar, the rivers clap their hands, the mountains sing together for joy (98:7-8). We are His people created by Him and not He created by us (100:3). Yahweh was, is, and always will remain Yahweh, from everlasting to everlasting (102:27). Yahweh knows the thoughts of man, whom are mere dust (94:11). Yahweh knows how we were fashioned with dust and that his days are as a flower that first flourishes, then fades away (103:14-16).

Shifting to the larger context of the Book of Psalms as a whole, Psalm 90 offers an interesting insight into how the entire book is structured. Psalms begins with an introduction through chapters 1-2 and conclude with a five-chapter, Torah-like conclusion. As Dr. Tim Mackie so excellently observes, the Book of Psalms in its entirety can be summed up with the themes of “Torah and Messiah,”⁵ although throughout this discourse I have translated מְשִׁיחַ as “anointed” rather than “messiah.”

In brief, Psalm 1 is all about the contrast between the blessed man and the wicked, and it all comes down to how they treat and use the תּוֹרָה “Torah” (which means instruction) of Yahweh. As it pertains to Psalm 90, how peculiar it is that the themes of teaching, water, and time all arise in such an introduction, specifically in verse 3. The blessed who meditate on the instruction of Yahweh are like a tree that has been firmly planted by water. The blessed who meditate on the instruction of Yahweh will bring forth fruit of their labors in time. The blessed who meditate on the instruction of Yahweh will not fade away, such as the wicked who are driven away by the wind. Psalm

⁵ Mackie, Tim and Jonathan Collins. “Read Scripture Series: Psalms.” The Bible Project, 2015.

90, while by itself is about pleading with Yahweh to return so Israel can be taught to number their days and make the most use of their brief time, the introduction of Psalms, arguably laying the groundwork for the theology of the book, affirms that desire. Moses would not ask Yahweh to teach Israel if Moses did not believe Yahweh's instruction would bring forth wisdom and blessing.

Psalm 2 continues the depictions of the actions of the wicked, namely their devising of an evil plan against Yahweh's anointed one. But Yahweh's anointed one, described as the begotten Son of Yahweh is to be given the nations and the whole earth as an inheritance; he will rule. Then, taking language so clearly conveying the promise Yahweh made to Adam and Eve in Genesis 3:15, Yahweh's anointed will break the wicked with a rod of iron and shatter them like earthenware (2:9). Finally, the psalmist presents the rulers of the world with a warning: Yahweh's anointed Son is coming soon to claim what belongs to him; therefore, worship Him with reverence and take *refuge* in Him. In other words, meditate on the teachings of Yahweh and take refuge in Him for time is limited; Yahweh's anointed is soon coming to claim His land and rule over it. Psalm 90 is clearly a continuance of those themes through the progression of the whole book.

Psalm 90 also looks forward to the conclusion of the Book of Psalms. We have already seen some development regarding the desire for the works of the people's hands to be confirmed, then leading to the work of Yahweh being confirmed. This development continues in 146 instructing Israel not to put their trust in princes or mortal man because in them is no salvation; only through Yahweh is there salvation so Yahweh is the only one in whom there is worth putting trust. Other areas of Psalm 90

saw development as well as a return to themes continued in Psalm 90 from Psalm 1-2 and 89.

Psalm 146 continues the psalmist discourse on the blessed one, describing him as someone whose help comes from Yahweh the creator who loves the righteous and thwarts the way of the wicked, and who will reign from everlasting to everlasting to all generations. This language is unmistakable in light of Moses' depictions of Yahweh in exactly the same way. Psalm 148 continues the concept that Yahweh has established his anointed and has remained sovereign over all creation from everlasting to everlasting. Furthermore, Psalm 149 ascribes further clarification that Yahweh's anointed is the promised King who will bind the kings and nobles with chains and iron.

Lastly, Psalm 147 does not so much touch on Yahweh's anointed, but returns to the discourse of Psalm 1, specifically that Yahweh favors those who wait on His lovingkindness—who brings forth fruit in its season. 147 also attributes to Yahweh the act of sending teaching to Israel in order to melt them, cause the wind to blow, and the waters to flow. Here we have an ingenious correlation between the teaching of Yahweh and the blessed one that Moses is undoubtedly aware of and so deeply desires in his pinnacle request in 90:12-13. For the blessed one meditates on the teaching of Yahweh and is subsequently planted firmly by a stream of water, which will not blow away with the wind. So the Word of Yahweh instructs the blessed one how to live, the Word causes the wind to blow the wicked away, and the Word is itself a stream of water constantly fueling the blessed who are firmly planted by it.

Application to Contemporary Life

It would be amiss to write so much on such a topic and not present the Gospel, for time is short—our days are numbered and Yahweh's anointed who has come already is soon to come again. In Acts 2, Peter preaches that the Father raised Jesus the Anointed Son, against whom the wicked devised and executed an evil plot to kill, back to life. Therefore, those who repent—those who rely on Yahweh and confess to Him their *secret sin*—and are baptized into Jesus' death will be forgiven of their sins, tabernacled by the Holy Spirit, and like Christ be raised to new life for the rest of eternity in worship and praise of Yahweh.

Secondly, in light of Psalm 90, we must not ignore the teaching of Yahweh that has been so clearly handed down to us through the generations. While all Scripture is inspired and good, often the Old Testament is neglected in churches and personal Bible studies for a variety of reasons, yet the Torah is the teaching within the teachings of Scripture. We must heed the instructions of Yahweh presented to us in the original teaching section for all the remainder of scripture is premised on those truths. Yes, the evangelical position is that the Bible points toward the Messiah, but to discredit the influence the Torah has on the entirety of scripture is to misunderstand scripture. The promises to Abraham reverberated through the patriarchic generations, the Passover and Sinai narratives within Exodus and Numbers, the atonement in Leviticus, and the Shema instructions in Deuteronomy echo all throughout scripture. We must read Yahweh's instructions, but particularly the Torah.

In order to present Yahweh with hearts of wisdom, we must monitor the voices and influences we allow into our lives. The teachings of Yahweh are the first logical

voice and influence that we must regularly include in our lives, but since the Bible does not have specific answers to each specific dilemma that arises in our everyday life, we also need Godly voices and influences in our life as well. Therefore, thirdly, we need to join a community of believers who are firmly planted by the stream of Yahweh's Word so that as the brief days of our lives pass by, we have voices and influences on whom we can rely for such issues; these are people who can hold us accountable and whom we can hold accountable. These are also people with whom we can meditate over Scripture. This will aid us on our individual progression toward making the most of the limited time we have as mere men—but dust—to present Yahweh with hearts of wisdom. These voices of individuals should never be given more weight than scripture, for our trust cannot be placed in mortals but in Yahweh who alone can fuel us, melt us, protect us, teach us, indwell us, and save us, but the voices of the blessed whom are firmly planted by a stream of living water have inherent value for believers in community.