

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

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Sermon manuscript

God, and the Time of Our Lives

(Psalm 90)¹

Study #2

Sermon Series: Learning to Pray
(Studies in selected Psalms)

Introduction: The universal commodity...

The 2011 movie, "In Time" (starring Justin Timberlake), imagined a future in which people stopped aging at twenty-five.

In this movie, when you turn twenty-five, you are biologically engineered to live only one more year. The key to living past that year is to have the resources to buy other people's "one more year."

If you can buy someone else's extra year, you'll cut their life short, but you can continue to live - even for hundreds of years.

No, the movie didn't win any Academy Awards. But I thought at the time that the plot was intriguing because it identified time as life's ultimate commodity. Not knowledge. Not gold. Not power. Time.

The writers were on to something. When it all comes down to it - everybody works by the hour.

It is hard to define time and you can't hold it in your hand. But, given one wish, many of us would use that wish to get more time.

¹ This is the beginning of the fourth book of the Psalter. As far back as the second century BC, the Jews arranged the 150 Psalms into five divisions.

We lead busy lives. We constantly face hectic schedules and deadlines. We could all use more time. And the passing of years reminds us daily that time waits for no one.

This morning we are going to turn in our Bible to a Psalm that deals with the commodity of time. It is the oldest of the one hundred and fifty Psalms we have.

According to the Psalm's introduction, the writer was Moses. And Moses lived around 1500 BC, making Psalm 90 about three thousand five hundred years old.² It's old.

And Moses was old when he wrote it - far older than anyone you've ever known. But to disregard the Psalm because it's old or to discard it because Moses wrote it when he was old would be foolish.

Just because something is old, doesn't mean it's old-fashioned or out of date. And Psalm 90 is both timeless and timely.

Moses' backstory...

Moses was born to Jewish parents who were slaves in Egypt. But he (having been rescued from infanticide by Pharaoh's daughter) was raised in luxury in the palace of the Pharaoh until age forty.

On day, when he saw an Egyptian beating one of his enslaved fellow- Jews, he killed the Egyptian - and then had to flee to the desert for safety.

Moses spent the second forty years of his life in the land of Midian, tending sheep and raising a family with his wife, Zipporah.

When Moses was around eighty years of age, God appeared to him in a burning bush and drafted him to lead the Jews out of Egypt to the Promised Land.

The stories that follow tell us of the beginning of the Jews' national life as the people of God.

² It has been noted that this Psalm contains more striking parallels to the Pentateuch than to the other Psalms, giving more credence to Mosaic authorship.

Moses approached Pharaoh. God sent ten terrible plagues against Egypt. And Moses led the Jews in an exodus from Egypt through the Red Sea.

Moses was the great Lawgiver. He received the Ten Commandments and the rest of the Law from God on Mt. Sinai. He was charged by God to lead the people from Sinai Sea into the Promised Land of Canaan / Palestine.

But Moses wasn't allowed to lead the people into the Promised Land because he had disobeyed God at a critical moment in his life. Every time I think about that, I'm struck with the sadness of it.

Just as tragic is that the generation of Jews who left Egypt with Moses were also barred from entering the Promised Land because they also all disobeyed God at a critical moment in their journey.

As we'll see in Psalm 90, they had to wander around in the desert for forty years until they all died, leaving the privilege of entering the land to the next generation.

Students of this Psalm are agreed that Moses wrote this one near the end of those forty years of wilderness wandering.

So, he was about one hundred and twenty years old when he wrote his only contribution to the book of Psalms we have. He wrote out of the depth of a wealth of life experience and out of the depth of a deep knowledge of God and His ways.

During his lifetime, he has watched the entire generation of his children die in the wilderness. That's a lot of funerals.

Not surprisingly, these hundreds of thousands of deaths, witnessed over four long decades in the desert, prompted lots of thoughts from Moses. Being in the presence of death invariably prompts reflective thinking about life's big issues.³

³ [Ecclesiastes 7:2] *It is better to go to a house of mourning
Than to go to a house of feasting,
Because that is the end of every man,
And the living takes it to heart.*

Moses' first big thought is of God.

God's Permanence and Our Temporality (vv. 1-6)

Home, Sweet Home (v. 1)

[1] Lord,⁴ You have been our dwelling place in all generations.

The dwelling places of God's people

Remember the physical setting for this Psalm.

Shortly after Moses wrote these words, the Jews would be living in Canaan. They would be led into Canaan by the younger Joshua (he was only at least 60-something).

When Moses wrote, though, he and the people of Israel were still stuck in the desert somewhere between Canaan and Egypt.⁵

For the previous four centuries, the Jews had been living as slaves in Egypt. Before that, the patriarchs Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob lived in Canaan.

So, the people of the Jews had done some moving around. They had dwelt in a number of different places.

Here, Moses lists only one.

The true dwelling place of God's people

When he mentions "**dwelling place**", Moses isn't thinking of zip codes and neighborhoods. He's thinking more personally.

⁴ The name use for God in this verse is, significantly, the Hebrew word, "*Adonai*." The thought being emphasized when this name is used is that God is the One who rules over human history. Significantly, Moses doesn't use the name Yahweh here, which has more the idea of God's relationship with His covenant people. But, he does use Yahweh later (v. 13) when he asks God to deal with the nation in mercy.

⁵ If you would like to plot some of the wanderings of the Jews during those 40 years, you could check out the book of Numbers (especially chapter 33, which details dozens of their encampments).

He's saying that regardless of where the Jews physically dwelt, their real habitation was God. The presence and power and love of God was the sphere in which His people lived.

Throughout every generation, in every circumstance, in every conceivable situation, Abraham's descendants lived *in God*.

Whether they were flourishing in Canaan in the days of Abraham, suffering as slaves in Egypt, or wandering in the desert, God was their home.

They may have been walking in righteousness, rebelling against God, worshipping a golden calf at the foot of Mt. Sinai, or eating their daily manna. Their life, their dwelling place was God.

We believe that Moses wrote this Psalm not long before the Jews crossed the Jordan River to enter Canaan. His words assured them that even when they were living in stick-built houses within walled cities in the Promised Land, God would be their home.

God is, was, and would always be the ground of their security.

Kathy and I make our dwelling at 15315 Grey Fox Terrace. That's been our home since 2003. Before that it was 5915 Forest Cove. Before that it was 6227 Farragut. And before that, it was 11823 Flamingo Lane in Dallas.

You may have had lots of different addresses. Your current address is your home.

And, as it was for the Jews, so it is for us. God is our most certain, most fundamental, dwelling place. Our personal security isn't really tied to any physical structure or to any external protection.

No.

God is the only sure source of security available to us. As it is put in the very next Psalm:

***[Psalm 91:2] "My refuge and my fortress,
My God in whom I trust."***

Moses goes on to tell us that this God who is the dwelling place of His people, is Himself completely fixed, solid, permanent.

The Relativity of Time (vv. 2-4)

God has been God since before the world was (v. 2)

***[2] Before the mountains were born
Or You gave birth to the earth and the world,⁶
Even from everlasting to everlasting, You are God.***

God created everything there is. He existed before anything was. God is eternal. Here, treating time as a "thing", Moses says that God exists independent of time.

There has never been a time when God was not God. Looking forward, God will continue to be, immutably, God.

People like you and me? Not so much.⁷

We return to dust, from whence we came (v. 3)

***[3] You turn man back into dust
And say, "Return, O children of men."***

Moses is calling to mind something we learn from the early chapters of Genesis. That God created the first man, Adam, from earth (Genesis 2) and that after Adam and Eve sinned in the Garden of Eden, God promised (Genesis 3):

***[Genesis 3:19] "By the sweat of your face
You will eat bread,
Till you return to the ground,
Because from it you were taken;
For you are dust, and to dust you shall return."***

⁶ The thought of a mothering, nurturing role for God is repeated in this verse (as it was found also in verse 1) in the picture of the mountains being born, and of His giving birth to the worlds. The word used here is the Hebrew word that describes the bringing forth of children by the mother, "travail."

⁷ Moses heightens the sense of God's eternity by contrasting it with man's temporality.

That is God's sovereign decree. Because of sin, nobody lives in an earthly body forever. Humanity continues its march through time by allowing one generation to pass *by* the generation that is passing *on*.

Our lives are temporal, brief, fleeting. No exceptions. Every one of us is going to turn to dust. We will all die.

Over the years of our congregational life, we've held lots of funerals for dear friends. I've officiated at many of these. One day, someone will officiate at my funeral. Someone will speak words over you, too.

We may not like to dwell on this, but our impermanence forms a huge part of the argument of Moses' Psalm. We need to embrace our temporality. We're all on a short leash, when it comes to time.

Of course, as Moses reminds us, there is no leash on God.

God - sovereign OVER time (v. 4)

***[4] For a thousand years in Your sight
Are like yesterday when it passes by,
Or as a watch in the night.⁸***

We think, "*A thousand years. That's a long time.*"

And we're struck by the record of the genealogies of Genesis along this line. There, we read of the patriarchs before the flood of Noah who lived hundreds of years.

The longest living among them was Methuselah. The Bible records nothing special about Methuselah. All the Genesis genealogy says is that he lived nearly a thousand years.

[Genesis 5:27] So all the days of Methuselah were nine hundred and sixty-nine years, and he died.

Period.

Have you ever thought about the last several centuries of Methuselah's life?

Were they kind of monotonous? Anything new for breakfast at age five hundred? Did he get a charge out of holding his great-great-great-great-grandkids? Was it hard to climb out of bed at age seven hundred and fifty? Maybe.

To Methuselah, a thousand years may have been tedious. To God, a thousand years is like a snap of the fingers. And in the shortest time frame God can accomplish the most wonderful things.

Moses' mention of "***a watch in the night***" refers to one third of the night.

The ancient Jews divided the night into three periods of time. Three "*watches*."

"***A watch in the night***" is a way to refer to a part of the night that was spent sleeping.

Thus, in the same way that we experience a period of sleeping - *as timeless* - so God experiences the passing of a millennium.

God looks at the long march of human history and sees Adam, Nebuchadnezzar, Julius Caesar and Abraham Lincoln at a glance.

Time doesn't touch God. He doesn't age and He's never been immature.

That is the thought, after all, behind the proper name for God "*Yahweh*." It identifies God as the great "*I AM*." He continually experiences all history as the great present.

That is God's relationship to time. But at the end of the Psalm's first stanza, if we needed to be reminded, Moses reminds us of our own relationship to time.

⁸ See 2 Peter 3:8 for the converse, where the Apostle Peter says, "*with the Lord one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day.*"

Summary: We are soon out of time (vv. 5-6)

***[5] You have swept them⁹ away like a flood, they fall asleep;
In the morning they are like grass which sprouts anew.
[6] In the morning it flourishes, and sprouts anew;
Toward evening it fades and withers away.***

In the grand scheme of things, our lives are day lilies.

Think of all the great heroes and villains of the past - those who have made their mark on history. They have one thing in common. They have all *"fallen asleep"* (as Moses euphemistically says).

Your great, great grandparents may have been wonderful people. But, with almost mathematical certainty, they're not alive now. You never knew them. I'll almost surely never meet my great, great grandchildren.

Hold on to that thought.

Up to this point, Moses has been speaking in the abstract about time, eternity, temporality. Here, he makes a dramatic shift and gets real concrete as he draws attention to the immediate wilderness situation in which he and the people of Israel find themselves.

Moses does more than *observe* the short duration of their lives. He *explains* it.

God's Holiness and Our Sinfulness (vv. 7-12)

Sin's Consequences (vv. 7-10)

Case in point: Kadesh-barnea from Numbers 13 (vv. 7-8)

***[7] For we have been consumed by Your anger
And by Your wrath we have been dismayed.
[8] You have placed our iniquities before You,
Our secret sins in the light of Your presence.***

Moses isn't dealing here with the general frailty of people.

He wants us to remember the story of his people during his own lifetime. And the historical setting Moses has in mind brings to mind one of the saddest scenes in the Bible.

We find this scene in the Bible's book of Numbers (chapter 13). The people are in the wilderness. But they are poised to head north to enter Canaan. They are camped at a place called Kadesh-barnea.

They have seen God's power at the Exodus. They possess both the Law of God and the presence of God. They had everything they needed to take the land God was giving them.

So, Moses sent twelve spies into the land, one from each of the tribes of Israel, to gather information and to then make a report of what they found before the nation took the land.

The spies went to Canaan, as commanded. But, when they returned to the camp, ten of the twelve reported that the Law of God and the presence of God combined were not enough to assure victory.

The spies admitted that the land was good but argued that *"The people in the land were really, really big. Like giants. We felt like grasshoppers compared to them. The land itself devours people like us."* (Numbers 13:27-33)

When all the people of the Jews heard that report, they believed the ten.

There was a minority report given by the two faithful spies - Caleb and Joshua who said, ***[Numbers 13:30] "We should by all means go up and take possession of it, for we will surely overcome it!"***

That report was rejected. And because of this awful rebellion against God's good promise, the people were ***"consumed."*** (v. 7)

⁹ He is speaking about people, generally.

Specifically, the entire generation of the Jews who had refused to take the land - aged twenty and up - was consigned to die in the desert without ever seeing the Promised Land.¹⁰

Moses and all the Jews with him saw God's "**wrath**" and "**fury**."

They were all **dismayed**" at the severity of the punishment. They learned that God may choose to deal immediately when His people sin, even with what we may think are our "**secret sins**."

Of course, with God, there are no secret sins.

He shines His light into the darkest places on earth *and* into the darkest places in our hearts. He knows all of it.

And Moses, who has watched a generation's worth of funerals, describes the all too-soon end to all those lives.

Ending too soon with a sigh (vv. 9-10)

**[9] For all our days have declined in Your fury;
We have finished our years like a sigh.**

**[10] 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.**

Moses lived to be an unusually old one hundred and twenty-year old man. Nobody he knew came close to that.

Nobody he led out of Egypt survived the desert. Because of the judgment of God for the rebellion at Kadesh-barnea, everyone twenty or over died. Nobody made it past sixty.

And, no, there is no divine "cap" on how long any of us might live today.

But for all of us here this morning, it's still true that we're extremely fortunate to make it into our seventies or eighties. Ninety is rare and one hundred is rarer still.

It will seem to all of us at some point that the prime of life is soon "**gone and we fly away**."

We'd love to end our lives with a shout of triumph, but mostly, as Moses says, "**we...[finish] our years like a sigh**."

Today, if someone dies young, it's a genuine tragedy. To die young is to die before our time, whether it's by illness or accident, war or other violence.

And if we live long enough to age, we eventually slow down. We tire out. And as we die, we "**sigh**."

We die, today, because of the tragic brokenness of the world and because, sin having entered the world and wrecked everything, death now reigns. (See Romans 5)

But Moses wanted his audience of Jews there in the desert to not forget that the reason for their early dying was God's anger over their sin.

He's writing about his fellow-Jews, but he's speaking directly to God. He laments that it seems like nobody takes seriously the very serious fact that God's anger - His "**fury**" - is a real thing.

A Reasonable Fear of the Lord (v. 11)

**[11] Who understands the power of Your anger,
And Your fury, according to the fear that is due You?**

I suspect that world-wide and through the ages, it's a small club of people who *fear* God the way they should.

¹⁰ The exceptions were Joshua and Caleb, the two spies who were confident that God would give them victory.

If we thought about God the way we should, we would see that this God who holds the universe and the atom together, who is everywhere present at once, who is light and in whom there is no darkness at all deserves our *reverence*.

This God is righteous. For forgiveness of sins, He requires that a sacrifice must be made.

And, to match His righteousness, He is merciful and gracious. He accepted the death of His own Son, Jesus, on the cross as the sacrifice all of us guilty sinners need.

The proper response to this perfectly holy God is reverential awe. We would do well to take Him seriously.

And taking God seriously, in Moses' view, will prompt our engagement in a little exercise.

Summary: Making the most of our time (v. 12)

***[12] So teach us to number our days,
That we may present to You a heart of wisdom.***

Numbering our days...

The right way to respond to God's holiness and permanence, His justice and foreverness, is to meditate on our weakness and sin and on the fleeting nature, the brevity of our lives.

A long time ago, I read about a man who, after reading Psalm 90:12, tacked up a multi-year calendar on a wall in his home to "***number his days.***"

Working off the assumption that he had a total of eighty years to work with, his calendar included the number of years between his current age and eighty.

Every day, he marked a day off the calendar. Every day was one less day to live.

I was so taken by that story when I first heard it that I followed suit and "numbered my days."

It was 1992 and I calculated that I had 15,695 days left. I undertook the same exercise this past week and discovered that I am down to 5,840. (Of course, since life expectancy is way up these days, I recalculated to age 95 and found a few more days...)

You could do your own calculations. Just multiply 365 by the number of years between how old you are now and eighty.

Or be more optimistic about lifespan. Add years to your calculation if you wish. It'll change things by a few hundred or even thousands of days.

The point of the exercise is not to calculate when you'll die. The point is to "own" the idea that your time is limited. Each day is precious. There is a period at the end.

Moses says that if we will "***number our days***" we'll be able to present to God "***a heart of wisdom.***"

A heart of wisdom...

This - gaining "***a heart of wisdom***" to present to the Lord - is what Moses has been aiming at from the beginning of Psalm 90.

The essential meaning of the Hebrew word for *wisdom*¹¹ is "*skill in living.*"

Two men are singled out in the Old Testament as being wise, and they are called "wise" in surprising contexts. Bezalel (key in the construction of the Ark of the Covenant and the tabernacle) and Hiram (key in the construction of Solomon's temple) are both called "wise" because they both had great skill in building.

You have essential wisdom if you can tackle a challenge with skill, with artfulness.

¹¹ Hebrew for wisdom: chokmah

But the special kind of wisdom Moses is referring to here is a skill that is crucial to our life with God.

It *begins* with **“the fear of the Lord”** (See Proverbs 9:10; Psalm 90:11) and *ends* with service to the Lord.

Your wisdom will be seen in how you handle your friendships, your sexuality, your emotional life, and your finances.

Your wisdom will be seen in how you carry out the Great Commandment (love God), the New Commandment (love fellow Christ-followers) and the Great Commission (make disciples).

If you handle these to the glory of God, Moses would say you are presenting to God **“a heart of wisdom.”**

The generation of Jews who died in the wilderness saw obstacles in the way of taking the land and feared *them* more than they feared *the Lord*. And they didn’t figure out a way to enter Canaan.

Moses doesn’t want you and me to miss out on golden opportunities to win victories for God.

We need wisdom - and wisdom is ours when we remember that God is eternal, solid, permanent, stable; God is holy, just, righteous.

And we’re none of that. We’re unstable and sinful.

Our holy, eternal God has lavished His grace on us in Jesus. And we have only a few “days” here to express our extreme gratitude to Him, to trust Him, and to honor Him.

- Parents, how will use the days you have in front of you to pour Jesus into your kids while they still live at home with you?
- Teens, will you use the school year before you to both learn all that God wants you to learn AND to shine for Jesus?
- Young adults, in your work life, will you honor the Lord by your diligence to do excellent work?
- Is your nest empty? How will you invest the days you now have to press Jesus into the lives of family, neighbors, and friends?

- Are you physically frail and unable to get out much? Could your days be given to encouraging correspondence and to intercessory prayer?

The entire Psalm is a prayer to God. In the final stanza, we hear Moses crying out to the Lord with requests that ring true, three thousand five hundred years later.

God’s Grace and Our Hope for Joy and Satisfaction (vv. 13-17)

[13] Do return, O Lord; how long will it be?

And be sorry for Your servants.

***[14] O satisfy us in the morning with Your lovingkindness
That we may sing for joy and be glad all our days.***

***[15] Make us glad according to the days You have afflicted us,
And the years we have seen evil.¹²***

***[16] Let Your work appear to Your servants,
And Your majesty to their children.***

***[17] Let the favor of the Lord our God be upon us;
And confirm for us the work of our hands;
Yes, confirm the work of our hands.¹³***

¹² The phrase **“in the morning”** is significant in that it implies that Israel has been in the grips of a long night.

¹³ **“The work of our hands”** is a phrase that runs all through Deuteronomy. Again, this is a testimony to the Mosaic authorship of this Psalm.