

Sunday, 03-Sep-2017

Bethel Christian Fellowship, Fair Lawn, NJ

[Peter Flowers]

Summer in the Psalms (10): Psalm 90:

“Learning to live wisely” [Alan Ross]

Psalm 90; Psalm 91:1-4 -- NIV Pew Bible, p. 588 f.

Let the words of my mouth, and the meditation of my heart, be acceptable in thy sight, O LORD, my strength, and my redeemer. [Ps. 19:14, KJV.]

Good morning, friends!

Our text this morning is Psalm 90, a prayer of Moses, the man of God. There is a sense in which we almost know this Psalm too well -- if there could possibly be such a thing as knowing a Psalm too well. It is very familiar because we hear it read at the service for the burial of the dead -- “For a thousand years in thy sight *are but* as yesterday when it is past, and *as* a watch in the night.”

And I imagine every English speaking Christian knows Isaac Watt’s paraphrase of Psalm 90, “Our God, our help in ages past.” This is hymn #30 in the Trinity hymnal, and we are going to sing it together in a few minutes.

As I was preparing this sermon, I tried to guess how many times I’ve sung “Our God our help in ages past.” I’m nearly 70 years old (an age, you will observe, explicitly mentioned by Moses), and I’ve attended church most Sundays for most of those years. How many times do we sing this hymn each year? Twice? Three times? More? Thinking about it in that way, I suppose I must have sung this Psalm more than a hundred times.

So we love the Psalm and we love Watts’s hymn. And yet if we listen to the Psalm carefully, we may find ourselves emotionally uneasy. I told my 89 year old mother that I was going to preach this Psalm, and she loves the hymn. But while I was outlining the psalm for her, and got to the brevity of human life and to God’s wrath and anger, she said, “oh dear, that sounds hard.”

Is the Psalm depressing? In the end, I think it is not. It is realistic about our human condition, but it also is hopeful, ultimately leading us to wisdom and comfort. Because, as I read it, *the message of this Psalm is that man's mortality and sin are ultimately overcome by the unchanging grace of our eternal God.*

Now that is a message of hope, not despair. The editors (we don't know who they were) who arranged the book of Psalms, putting them in the order we find in our Bibles today, emphasized this hope by putting the very encouraging Psalm 91 immediately after Psalm 90. We shall come back to this arrangement in a few minutes.

Although commentators outline the Psalm in different ways, I have chosen to treat it in four sections.

First, in vv. 1 and 2 Moses describes who God is: he is eternal, he is our refuge.

Next, in vv. 3-6, he contrasts our human lives: we are like grass that withers.

Verses 7-12 describe the power of God's anger. Why are human lives so short and full of labor and sorrow? They are like that because God is angry at our sin.

Finally, vv. 13-17 are a prayer asking God to satisfy his people with unfailing love.

We turn first, then, to:

1. God is our eternal refuge (vv. 1 & 2)

Moses begins his prayer with this: the Lord has been our dwelling place, our refuge, throughout all generations.

Moses was speaking for the community of Israel during the wilderness years. The Lord is OUR dwelling place, OUR refuge. It is true that the Israelites were wandering in the wilderness for 40 years because of their sin. The generation of people who had left Egypt were dying, and only when they were replaced by the next generation would the nation finally enter the promised land.

But in all the generations which had followed one another -- the generation of Abraham, then Isaac, then Jacob, the generations who lived during the 400 years in Egypt, and the generation wandering in the wilderness -- all the generations, so swiftly passing, all found that God was their dwelling place. He was the one who watched over them.

Only people who belong to the community of faith can pray this way. I am going to circle back to this opening verse at the end of the sermon this morning. Yes, the psalm is going to say, our lives are brief and sorrowful. Yes, God is angry at our sins, and whisks us away like a puff of wind. But -- this is the key -- BUT: "Lord, you have been our dwelling place throughout all generations."

In v. 2 Moses describes the creation of the world using the image of a woman in labor. "The mountains were born." "You brought forth the world" is like the moment when a child comes forth from her mother's womb. God created them all: the mountains, the earth, the generations which come and go so swiftly -- but he himself is eternal.

## 2. Human lives are like grass that withers (vv. 3-6)

In the next section, verses 3-6, Moses describe the sharp contrast between the Lord and you and me. And what a contrast! The Lord, the creator, is from everlasting to everlasting. But you and I are like grass which seems so green and fresh when it springs up in the morning, but in the blaze of the afternoon sun it wilts and withers and reduced to dust. When we hear this, we remember we are sons and daughters of Adam -- from dust he came, and to dust he returned.

Think back to when you were young. Didn't the days seem endless? When I was growing up, I used to spend 6 weeks each summer at my grandparents' home. They lived in Virginia on a tidal, salt-water creek which emptied into the Chesapeake Bay. They had a canoe and I used to paddle all around the creek all by myself. It is not coincidence that it is named Mosquito Creek. You needed bug spray! The summer days stretched on and on.

But the years pass, and my grandparents died, and parents die and friends die and my sister, who was younger than I am, died. Each one of us learns that human lives are very brief. In our society it is considered impolite to dwell on this -- “Oh that is too depressing.”

But Moses, speaking as God’s prophet, won’t let us forget.

What is more, it is God himself who is acting when we die: “You turn people back to dust, saying, ‘Return to dust, you mortals’” (v. 3). “You sweep people away in the sleep of death” (v. 5).

For a moment I found myself surprised, almost shocked, by these words. What? It is God who ultimately causes my death? How could God do that?

But then I came to my senses. How could I ever have thought that God was not in control behind everything that happens? Did I think that when someone dies, it comes as a surprise to God? Of course not!

Listen to what Job said:

“Naked I came from my mother’s womb,  
and naked I will depart.<sup>9</sup>  
The Lord gave and the Lord has taken away;

-- and do you recall what Job says next? We hear in his words the mark of someone for whom God really is a refuge:

may the name of the Lord be praised.” [Job 1:21.]

### 3. The power of God’s anger (vv. 7-12)

But if what we just heard was surprising, what Moses says in the next section, verses 7-12, seems even more disturbing. Why are human lives short? They are short because we mortals are consumed by God’s anger.

Moses uses the plural “we” here -- “WE are consumed.” This is the confession of the whole community. It is the confession of the generation of Israel dying as they wandered in the wilderness. Do they know why God is striking them down? Yes, they do know.

Do you remember what they had said? “Oh how we wish we had never left Egypt,” they had whined -- “gosh they had wonderful onions there, not like this stinking manna we have to eat day after day.” God is striking them down because they have been unfaithful and rebellious, sinning both openly and secretly.

No wonder God was angry with them. “All our days pass away under your wrath; we finish our years with a moan.”

Are we better than they were? No we are not. The Bible is clear. The last time I had the privilege of preaching to you, I preached from Psalm 14. Do you remember what it says in verse 3?

All have turned away, all have become corrupt; there is no one who does good, not even one.

The result is that all our days pass away under God’s wrath. You may be given 70 years (like me), perhaps some are given 80. But everyone sees trouble and sorrow even in what seem the best parts of their lives. Believers as well as unbelievers experience much affliction, as we have seen with our own sister Jean over the past few days.

What are we to learn from this? First, in v. 11, Moses tells us that knowing the power of God’s anger is not a bad thing -- it is a good thing! It isn’t depressing -- it is essential!

Only when you *know* the power of God’s anger will you give to him the fear which he is owed. This is not abject fear, where we cower in a corner of the basement: no it is the honest respect we owe to our majestic God. Because he is creator, and everlasting, and holy, we love him, we obey him, and when we sin, we lay our sins before him and repent.

But do the people in the world around us pay any attention to God's anger and wrath? Mostly, they don't appear to. They go on in their lives just as if God didn't exist.

The famous poet T. S. Eliot (who, by the way, was a Christian) ended his most famous poem [The Hollow Men] like this:

This is the way the world ends  
This is the way the world ends  
This is the way the world ends  
Not with a bang but a whimper.

That is how life ends for those people who do not know the true God -- with a whimper.

So is this Psalm depressing? Well, if you do not know God, do not respect him, do not trust in his son Jesus Christ, then this is what you have to look forward to: meaninglessness, emptiness, a moan, a whimper, ... the horror of the final judgment.

Depressing? You bet!

But when we truly fear and respect God, when we reflect on the "number of our days," when we remember that *he* controls those days -- then, and only then, do we achieve true Biblical wisdom.

#### 4. Prayer: Satisfy us with your unfailing love (vv. 13-17)

We learn Biblical wisdom by listening to the prayers of Moses in vv. 13-17.

Relent! Turn again to us, and have compassion on those who belong to you!

Satisfy us in the morning with your unfailing love, your covenant love, your loving kindness. Only when we are bathed in your unfailing love do we find the strength and the courage and the passion to sing for joy and be glad all our days!

Did God answer these prayers of Moses? Absolutely! For wandering Israel did enter into the promised land and did enjoy God's mercy and grace for as long as she remained faithful.

And God answers our prayers as well. For those believers who take refuge in the Lord, then he will make them glad, like Israel, even though they see affliction! When his favor rests on them, then they are enabled to do the work he gives them.

As I mentioned earlier, many commentators have noted how the editors of the book of Psalms deliberately placed Psalm 91 right after Psalm 90. It is as if Psalm 91 were God's answer to the prayers of Moses.

Hear the first verse of Psalm 91:

He who dwells in the shelter of the Most High  
Will rest in the shadow of the Almighty.

So if we dwell in the Most High -- which for us today, after the resurrection, means to trust in Jesus Christ -- then his shadow hovers over us, like the wings of the mighty eagle protecting her chicks: under his wings you will find refuge.

Do you want to receive the same blessings of answered prayer [*repeat*] which were experienced by the people of Israel when they entered the promised land? Then sing verse 2 of Psalm 91:

I will say of the LORD, "He is my refuge and my fortress,  
My God, in whom I trust."

This, then, is the wisdom we must learn, the wisdom that Moses sets before us. We have a God who is our refuge, and the way to that refuge is to believe in our Lord Jesus Christ. He is the only way in.

This does not mean that we who trust in Christ will live forever. Where today is Paul? Augustine? John Calvin? Moses? They all have died. We should not be

shocked, then, when Christians die, or when we experience suffering and troubles.

Yet the message of Psalm 90 is the opposite of depressing. It is surely a message of grace. When you trust in Jesus Christ, then God really is your dwelling place.

What about those sins Moses refers to? You know you have not loved the Lord with all your heart. Nor have I.

But Christ has paid the penalty for sin -- for MY sins, both the public ones you see, and the secret ones I try with all my might to keep hidden -- he has paid for all our sins! When we trust in Jesus Christ, we are forgiven, completely, by the one true judge, the eternal God. That is why when we dwell in Christ he gives us strength for today and bright hope for tomorrow.

Here, then, is the wisdom we should learn from Moses:

*Man's mortality and sin are ultimately overcome by the unchanging grace of our eternal God.*

Isaac Watts knew this, and put it into the well-loved words we are about to sing.

Our God really is our help not only in ages past but for years to come, for eternity. He is our sure defence, our guard while troubles last, and he is -- he really is -- our eternal home.

[Closing prayer.]

[The Aaronic blessing (Num. 6:24-26).]