

Teach Us to Number Our Days: An Exegetical and Theological Analysis of Psalm 90¹

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Abstract

Psalm 90 is a communal lament authored by Moses in which he sought the wisdom and favor of the Lord. Perhaps toward the end of the Israelites' 40-year period of wandering in the desert, the great lawgiver, intercessor, and advocate of God's people reflected on the brevity of human existence, especially against the backdrop of Yahweh's eternity. Moses noted that even the strongest and healthiest of people are frail and transient before the all-powerful Creator of the universe. Only He, in His grace and mercy, can bring enduring value out of the toils and troubles experienced by His loyal followers. Likewise, He alone can fill the lives of the covenant community with productivity, joy, and satisfaction for His glory.

¹ The views expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the beliefs of the South African Theological Seminary.

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1. Superscription: Providing an Historical Context for Understanding Psalm 90

Psalm 90 is regarded as a communal lament (cf. Clifford 2005:191, 197; Craven 1992:22; Leslie 1949:217, 250; Waltner 2006:442; Weiser 1962:66), that is, a hymn initially composed to express the grief and sorrow of the assembly over a distressing circumstance (cf. Robertson 1977:47, 49; Rosenberg and Zlotowitz 1999:xvi; Seybold 1990:115-116; Westermann 1980:13, 24, 35, 119). The precise nature and cause of the anguish remains unknown, being sketched only in the broadest of terms (e.g., the “long and exhausting hardships” arising from “famine and disease”, Tate 1990:438; cf. Alter 2007:318; Eaton 2003:323). Some conjecture that while the poem contains some ancient stylistic elements (Kraus 1989:215), it nonetheless is a literary amalgam that was created in post-exilic Israel by “learned scribal composers, collectors, and interpreters of psalms and teachings” (Tate 1990:439; cf. Briggs 1906:2:272; Broyles 1999:113; Steussy 2004:163; Terrien 2003:645-646).

The latter view notwithstanding, there is sufficient evidence to support the historical association of Moses to Psalm 90 (cf. Calvin 2007; Deffinbaugh 2001; Hengstenberg 1864:119; Spurgeon 2001). For instance, in the *Targum* (an Aramaic translation of the Hebrew Bible or Tanakh), the following inscription appears at the beginning of the psalm: “The prayer that Moses the prophet of the LORD prayed when the people, the house of Israel, sinned in the wilderness” (Cook 2001). This suggests that toward the end of the Israelites’ 40-year period of wandering in the desert, the great lawgiver, intercessor, and advocate of God’s people reflected on the brevity of human existence, especially against the backdrop of Yahweh’s eternity. In the Hebrew text of Psalm 90, the superscription likewise identifies the poem as a “prayer of Moses”³ (cf. Pss 17:1; 72:20; 86:1; 102:1; 142:1). Admittedly, the exegetical significance of the Hebrew phrase is unclear. It is just as ambiguous in the Septuagint translation. For both versions, the locus of possible meanings include “belonging to”, “dedicated to”, “with reference” / “concerning”, and

³ Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture quotations are taken from *Today’s New International Version* (hereafter abbreviated TNIV).

“for the use of” (cf. Anderson 1983a:43-44; Craigie 2004:33-35; McCann 1996:4:655-656; VanGemeren 1991:5:19).

At least four additional reasons exist for upholding the traditional linking of Moses to Psalm 90 (cf. Barnes 1869:1; Freedman 1985:59; Fruchtenbaum 1998:1; Kidner 1973:36; Leupold 1969:641; Perowne 1989:2:162-163; Stuhlmueller 1983:69): (1) several linguistic correspondences exist between the poem and Deuteronomy 32-33 (e.g., “days” and “years” / “generations” in Deut 32:7 and Ps 90:15; “work” / “works” / “deeds” in Deut 32:4 and 33:11 and Ps 90:16); (2) various thematic affinities are found between Psalm 90 and the Pentateuch (e.g., God’s creation of the universe and humankind’s morality in Gen 1-3 and Ps 90:2-3; God’s eternal existence and righteous indignation in Deut 32:7; 33:27 and Ps 90:2, 4, 9-10); (3) the intercessory nature of the hymn corresponds with Moses’ role as a priest and advocate for Israel (cf. Exod 32:11-13; 34:9; Num 14:13-19; Deut 9:25-29; Ps 99:6; Jer 15:1); and (4) in the remainder of the Old Testament, it is only Moses who petitions the Lord to “relent” (or “turn”; Ps 90:13) from His wrath toward His chosen people (cf. Exod 32:12, 14; Ps 106:23).

What Moses said to God in Psalm 90 was to “become God’s words to successive generations of faithful travelers” (Balentine 2003:467). Moses—an illustrious individual with a “glorious and tragic past” (Terrien 2003:642)—also wrote two other poems, which are recorded in the Pentateuch (cf. Exod 15:1-18; Deut 32:1-43). Because of the Mosaic authorship of Psalm 90, it is the oldest datable song in the Hebrew Psalter (Constable 2006:161; Waltke 2007:874). Moreover, due to the stateliness of its “cadence and style” (Terrien 1952:134), the hymn is both “one of the most magisterial” in the collection (Brueggemann 1984:110) and among the “jewels of the Psalter” (Harrelson 1977:181).

Along with the superscription to Psalm 90, Moses is mentioned eight times in the Hebrew book of prayers (Urbrock 1998:26; Waltke 2007:874 886). These and other related biblical references provide a glimpse into the life and times of the famed lawgiver. This information, in turn, paints a broader historical context to better understand the communal lament he authored. Beginning with Psalm 77:20, it notes that God led His people out of Egypt like a shepherd would guide a flock of sheep; also, He chose Moses and Aaron to be

in charge of the procession. In 99:6, these two are said to be among the Lord's "priests". The latter translates the Hebrew noun *kōhen*, which refers to those whom God appointed to act as intermediaries for His people, especially in times of national distress. According to 103:7, God revealed His ways to Moses. This included His benevolent character, upright statutes, salvific plans, and saving acts.

Exodus 33 indicates that Moses regularly communed with the Lord in the "tent of meeting" (v. 7). Whenever Moses entered it, a "pillar of cloud" (v. 9) came down onto the tent. Inside, God spoke to Moses "face to face" (v. 11), that is, in the direct manner someone would converse with a "friend". In light of this, it makes sense that the superscription to Psalm 90 would call Moses the "man of God", that is, a person who was "God-inspired" (Freehof 1938:260) and who "represented hope and fidelity to his contemporaries" (Schaefer 2001:225). At times this title was used in the Old Testament as a designation for a true prophet (Barnes 1869:1; Tanner 2001:92; cf. Deut 33:1; Jos 14:6; 1 Sam 2:27; 9:6, 9-10; 1 Kings 13:1; 17:24; 2 Kings 4:9; 1 Chron 23:14; Ezra 3:2). Psalm 105:26 refers to Moses as the Lord's "servant", which indicates that the lawgiver was a member of God's royal administration (cf. Delitzsch 1982:3:48).

Such laudable truths notwithstanding, there were times when the Israelites challenged the authority of Moses as their intercessor and advocate (cf. Fruchtenbaum 1998:1-2; Stark 2007:173-174). For instance, while the covenant community was encamped at Rephidim in the Sinai desert, they complained to Moses about the lack of water (Exod 17:1-2). The entire region was a dry and inhospitable place. The topography included barren mountain cliffs, rock-covered valleys, and sandy dunes. Aside from the infrequent wadi, the region had little vegetation. Only the hardiest of desert plants survived the arid climate (for example, salt-loving bushes and acacia trees found in the beds of the wadis).

Moses, being frustrated by the people's lack of faith, responded by asking the Israelites why they constantly wanted to test the Lord; but the people turned their complaint back to the lawgiver, apparently refusing to admit that their quarrel might be with God. They wanted to know why Moses had led them into the wilderness to die of thirst (v. 3). Moses, though perplexed by the

people's short memory, cried out to the Lord (v. 4). God told Moses to take some of Israel's elders with him and to leave the crowds behind. Moses was to walk to nearby Horeb, where he had earlier encountered the burning bush (cf. 3:1-3), and strike a particular rock with his staff. God promised that when Moses did so, enough water for all the people would come out of the rock (17:5-6). As the elders watched, Moses struck the rock, and water began gushing out of it. Because the people argued with Moses and tested God at that place, Moses called the site Massah, which means "testing", and Meribah, which can mean (among various connotations) "arguing" (v. 7; cf. Ps 95:8-11).

According to Psalm 106:16, the chosen people allowed envy and resentment to poison their attitude toward Moses and Aaron. For example, at Mount Horeb, in the episode involving the golden calf (cf. Exod. 32; Ps 106:19-22), the Lord threatened to wipe out all the people for their idolatry. It was only the intervention of Moses that forestalled the Israelites' destruction. God's chosen servant and leader stood in the gap between the Lord and His people and was able to prevent God's wrath from destroying the covenant community (Ps 106:23).

Numbers 20:1-13 recounts an incident in which "trouble came to Moses" (Ps 106:32) because of the discontentment of God's chosen people. Most likely, the reference to the "first month" (Num 20:1) is in relation to the fortieth year of the Israelites' wanderings in the wilderness. It was at that time that Moses' older siblings, Miriam and Aaron, died (20:22-29; 33:38). Also, by then most of the Hebrews who had been at least 20 years old when the Lord freed them Egypt, had died (cf. 14:20-25). They were replaced by a new generation of God's people to begin the next stage of His plan for the covenant community, namely, the conquest and settlement of Canaan. According to 20:1, the Israelites established camp one final time at Kadesh. This oasis of several springs in the Desert of Zin was located south of Canaan and within relatively close proximity to the river of Egypt (that is, the Wadi el-Arish; Num. 34:4-5; Ezek. 47:19; 48:28). The Desert of Zin was situated on the western fringe of the Sinai Plateau, as well as adjacent to and north of the Desert of Paran.

At Kadesh, the Israelites' supply of water ran out. The community, feeling frustrated and unsettled, "gathered in opposition" (Num 20:2), which means

they rebelled against Moses and Aaron. Moses, however, was the primary target of the people's grievance, which they framed as a legal complaint or lawsuit against him. They quipped that it would have been better for them to die in front of the tabernacle along with their kindred (v. 3), whom God had previously struck down in judgement (cf. 14:22; 16:31-35). The ingrates asked why Moses led the entire covenant community into the wilderness. Was it, as they suggested, so that they would perish in the desert, along with their livestock (20:4). More generally, the malcontents asked why Moses would bring them out of Egypt to such a dreadful place where virtually nothing grew. Indeed, in the absence of water, the region was barren of produce such as grain, figs, grapes, and pomegranates (v. 5).

In response to the vociferous complaints of God's people, Moses and Aaron turned away from them and went to the entrance of the tabernacle. Then the two threw themselves down with their faces to the ground, and the Lord's glorious presence was manifested before them (v. 6). Next, God commanded Moses to pick up his staff and assemble the entire covenant community (vv. 7-8). Then, in the sight of the entire gathering of people, Moses was to speak to a nearby rock. When he did so, the Lord promised that water would gush out of it. In fact, so much would be produced that it would supply enough water to satisfy the drinking needs of the entire populace and their livestock (cf. Ps 114:8).

Just as the Lord had directed, Moses went and picked up his staff (Num 20:9). Then he and his brother, Aaron, summoned the people to assemble "in front of the rock" (v. 10). Tragically, what followed deviated from God's original command. Moses, in particular, allowed four decades of pent up frustration to prompt him to speak rashly in a moment of anger (cf. Ps 106:32-33). He chided the Israelites for being a group of "rebels" (Num 20:10). Moses then upstaged God—who alone has the right to act as Judge over His people—by asking whether it was necessary for the lawgiver and his brother to somehow get water to come out of the rock in front of the assembly. Then in a violent act of indiscretion, Moses raised the staff and used it to pound the rock two times (v. 11). Despite Moses' flagrant violation of God's instructions, a large stream of water came out abundantly from the rock, enabling all the people and their livestock to drink.

Instead of trusting that the Lord's will was appropriate and good, Moses had openly violated it. In doing so, the lawmaker, in partnership with Aaron, had offended the Lord, debased His holiness, and failed to credit to Him the miracle that occurred. The Hebrew verb *qādash*, which is rendered “holy” (v. 12), means “to be separate”, “to be distinct”, or “to set apart”. As Leviticus 11:44 reveals, God is incomparable in His majesty and absolutely pure in His moral virtue; but tragically, when Moses acted in a rash and violent manner, he left the covenant community with the false notion that God is temperamental, fickle, and pugnacious—in other words, as emotionally flawed as human beings.

Moses and Aaron, by not displaying sufficient reverence for God “in the sight of the Israelites” (Num 20:12), were forbidden from leading the chosen people into Canaan. Perhaps “one of the most incredibly surprising aspects of the whole biblical story” is that the “illustrious Moses dies before entering the Promised Land” (McCann 1993:156). This outcome serves as reminder that not even a person as great as Moses was exempt from the Lord's discipline (cf. Constable 2006:162). Of the generation of Hebrews who had experienced the exodus from Egypt, only Joshua and Caleb were permitted to enter the land God had promised to give to the descendants of the patriarchs.

The “waters of Meribah” (v. 13) became the name of the place where the Israelites argued with and complained against the Lord, and where His holiness was demonstrated and maintained among the people (for example, by judging Moses and Aaron). The Hebrew noun rendered “Meribah” can mean (among various connotations) “strife”, “contention”, or “quarrel”. In reflecting on this historic incident, Psalm 95:8 exhorted later generations of God's people not to harden their hearts as they did “at Meribah”. Even in such a regrettable situation as this, the Lord proved Himself to be holy and maintained His honor “in the sight of all the people” (Lev 10:3).

First Corinthians 10:1-5 makes reference to various episodes from Israel's years of wandering in the desert to depict the Messiah as the spiritual rock of God's people. Previously in his letter, Paul had warned the Corinthians not to engage in idolatry. Specifically, he had discussed eating food sacrificed to idols (chap. 8). In chapter 10, the apostle used illustrations from Israel's exodus from Egypt and wandering in the Sinai wilderness to show what

befalls people who reject God by succumbing to idolatry (v. 6; cf. Rom 15:4). The generation of Israelites whom Moses led out of Egypt had unparalleled opportunities to witness the majesty of God and grow strong in faith. In an extraordinary act of deliverance, the Lord led them all through the Red Sea. Every day they received divine guidance from the cloud that went before them (1 Cor 10:1). The cloud indicated that the Hebrews were under the leadership and guidance of the Lord (Exod 13:17-14:31).

Through those events that generation became identified with Moses. Being in a sense “baptized into Moses” (1 Cor 10:2), the Israelites were under the submission of this aged leader in a way similar to the manner in which believers are submitted to the Messiah through baptism. Furthermore, God miraculously fed the Israelites every day with manna (Exod 16; 1 Cor 10:3). On more than one occasion, He caused water to gush from rock formations to satisfy the multitude and their livestock (Exod 17:1-7; Num 20:1-13). The people understood that they were eating and drinking out of God’s merciful and loving hand. The manna and gushing rock represented the grace that would appear fully and personally in Jesus of Nazareth, the Rock (1 Cor 10:4). Put another way, our crucified and risen Saviour was the one who provided deliverance for the Israelites.

Regrettably, though, this privileged generation did not live up to its heritage. Most of those Hebrews—including Moses—died in the wilderness because they rebelled against God, provoking His displeasure and judgement against them (1 Cor 10:5). In Paul’s day, some Corinthian believers might have assumed they could get away with certain sins, like idolatry (cf. v. 14), because they had been baptised and were participating in the Lord’s Supper (cf. vv. 16-17). That would explain why the apostle wrote as he did, describing long-ago events in terms of the two Christian ordinances.

Paul was warning his readers that baptism and communion would not automatically protect them from God’s judgement, just as God’s miracles at the Red Sea and in the Sinai wilderness did not shield the Israelites and their leader, Moses, from an ignominious end (cf. vv. 21-22). If the Corinthians were astute, they would flee idolatry (v. 14). It was not enough to know that idolatry was wrong. Paul’s readers had to intentionally run away from it. The apostle was urging not only weak Christians to abandon this sin but also

believers with strong consciences whose actions might cause weak Christians to spiritually stumble.

2. Affirming the Lord as God (Ps 90:1-2)

Psalm 90 contrasts the eternality of God and the mortality of people. The fragility and transience of humankind is brought into sharp relief through a variety of chronologically oriented terms and phrases, including “years”, “day”, “our days”, “watch in the night”, and “morning”. The Lord’s decision to consign an entire generation of Israelites (including Moses) to wander for 40 years and then die in the Sinai desert mirrors the hardship and anguish that typifies the broader human experience. The godly recognise that ultimately life is fleeting and largely undermined by the presence of decay and death throughout creation (cf. Rom 8:20-22). In this regard, rather than label Psalm 90 as a funeral dirge, it is more fitting to view it as a “hymn of faith in the style of a lament” in which “trust in God eternal” is admonished (Terrien 1952:135; cf. Hengstenberg 1864:117-118; Mowinckel 1962:1:196).

Four different Hebrew nouns are used in the poem to refer to God (cf. Anderson 1983b:650; Barnes 1869:2; Craven 1992:88, 95-96; Eaton 2003:28-31; Kidner 1975:328; Kraus 1986:17, 20, 22-23, 28; Smith 1996:368; Urbrock 1998:27; VanGemeren 1991:5:15, 593). In verses 1 and 17, “Lord” renders the word *’ādōnay*. It emphasizes the supreme authority, rule, and majesty of God over all creation. “God” (v. 2) translates the noun *’ēl*. This generic term for the divine underscores His preeminent might and strength, which undo the stratagems of His foes. In verse 17, “God” renders the noun *’ēlōhîm*. Despite its plural form, it is consistently used in the Old Testament as a singular term. *’Ēlōhîm* portrays the Lord as the one, true, and unique God. The totality of Scripture leaves the impression that He is unique in His being or essence, the fountain and source of all things, and the one who unifies all the forces of time and eternity. “Lord” (v. 13) renders the four Hebrew letters making up the divine name, *yhwh* (or Yahweh). This special name for the covenant-keeping God of Israel emphasizes His eternal existence, supreme power, and active involvement in human history. In short, He is the ever-present, ever-living God (cf. Exod 3:13-14).

Moses opened Psalm 90 with the affirmation that throughout each and every generation, the Lord has been the “dwelling place” (v. 1) of His people. The Hebrew noun *mā’ôn* can also be rendered as “habitation” or “refuge” (cf. 71:3). Metaphorically speaking, God is like an oasis in the desert around which the faithful encamp (cf. VanGemeren 1991:5:592). Also, in a sense, the Lord has been and always will be the place of safety for His people and the one who protects them from all sorts of danger (cf. 91:9). Likewise, He is the “foundation, support, [and] mainstay” (Dahood 1968:322) of the covenant community (cf. 90:17). While God is “lofty, He is not inaccessible”. In point of fact, Yahweh is “reachable, always there for those willing to approach Him on His basis, the basis of faith” (Fruchtenbaum 1998:2).

This is the same Lord who, like a midwife, brought the mountains into existence and enabled them to pierce through the crust of the earth and dominate its landscape (90:2; cf. Brueggemann 1997:148; Gill 1999; Terrien 2003:643). Figuratively speaking, “God is not portrayed as Mother Earth, but as mother of the earth” (McCann 1996:4:1041; cf. Kraus 1986:63; McCann 1993:157; Deut 32:18). The Israelites regarded the mountains, which God created, as “being the most ancient and permanent part of the earth” (Freehof 1938:261; cf. Kraus 1989:215). The noun *’ôlām*, which is rendered “everlasting” in connection with God, denotes an unlimited duration of time. Its repetition in this verse stresses the profound truth that before the mountains and the earth were ever created, Yahweh eternally preexisted (Jacob 1958:38; Rosenberg and Zlotowitz 1999:570; Smith 1993:165, 374; cf. Pss 93:2; 145:13; Isa 40:28; Jer 10:10; Rev 1:8). In truth, time “does not bind or limit Him as it does us” (Constable 2006:161; cf. Schaefer 2001:227).

3. Recognizing the Brevity of Life Under God’s Rule (Ps 90:3-6)

The one who created the earth and all its inhabitants is also the supreme Lord. Genesis 2:7 says that He formed the first human being “from the dust of the ground”. Then He breathed into the man’s nostrils the “breath of life” (cf. Deffinbaugh 2001). In an ironic turn of justice, the same creature who dared to transgress God’s command was consigned to die. As 3:19 relates, the great King created Adam from the soil—the “dust” of the earth—and in death he would yield his remains to the soil (cf. Barnes 1869:3; Jacob 1958:156).

Romans 5:12 declares that as a result of Adam's misdeed, sin entered the world and brought the curse of death to the human race and all of creation.

Psalm 90:3 refers to this same sentence of death, which hangs over everyone like an ominous storm cloud. All it takes is God's simple command to end the lives of His mortal creatures. At His directive—"return to dust"—their brief existence suddenly ends. The Hebrew noun *dakkā'*, which is rendered "dust", points to material that has been pounded, crushed, or pulverised (cf. Delitzsch 1982:3:51; Smith 1996:368; Tate 1990:432; Tanner 2001:102-103). Perhaps in a general sense, this is a reference to the "crushing weight of time upon human existence" (McCann 1993:158). Clearly, the laments voiced by the psalmist are "based on the experience of life" as well as observing the "lives of others". Indeed, "no revelation is necessary to learn their truth" (Mays 1994:291).

The epitome of God's judgement is seen in the faithless generation of Israelites, whose hapless end was to return to the arid soil of the Sinai desert after spending 40 years aimlessly wandering in it (cf. Num 13—14). Much of what took place during those dreary decades is passed over without comment in the biblical record. Undoubtedly, there was not much of significance that occurred in relation to the advancement of God's program of redemption (Lawson 2006:81-82). The Hebrews would have travelled from one place to the next. They would have established camp wherever they could find adequate amounts of water and possibly meagre amounts of vegetation. Of course, the Lord kept the people alive by His generous provision of manna. Perhaps now and then over those long years, the covenant community would circle its way back to Kadesh Barnea, the spot where they had first rebelled against God (cf. Deut 2:14).

Mere mortals cannot begin to fathom the truth that to the everlasting God a thousand years are as fleeting as a single day and as momentary as yesterday after it has quickly passed (Ps 90:4). The ancient Israelites divided their days into two 12-hour periods—day and night, respectively. Furthermore, depending on the season of year, they divided the night into three or four equal periods of three to four hours (cf. Jdg 7:19; 1 Sam 11:11; Lam 2:19; Barnes 1869:4; Gill 1999; Perowne 1989:2:165). Psalm 90:4 reveals that to the Lord an entire millennium seems as short-lived as a night watch (cf. 2 Pet 3:8). More generally, God's knowledge of time and eternity is instantaneous,

simultaneous, exhaustive, and absolutely correct. He is always aware of everything that occurs, regardless of whether it is past, present, or future (cf. Brug 2005:82; Kraus 1989:218; Vos 2005:133).

The Hebrew of Psalm 90:5, which linguists have found somewhat difficult to translate (cf. Thomas 1968:267), can be rendered as “You flood them [with] sleep” or “you bring them to an end [with] sleep” (cf. Tate 1990:433; Winton 1968:267-268). Perhaps the imagery is that of a torrent of water that devastates everything in its path, whether animate or inanimate (cf. Cohen and Oratz 1992:298). In the end, nothing survives the onslaught of the deluge (cf. Calvin 2007; Deffinbaugh 2001; Kidner 1975:329). Against the backdrop of God’s eternal preexistence, mere mortals last no longer than a dream before the years of their lives are engulfed and swept away in the “sleep of death” (cf. Briggs 1906:2:274; Delitzsch 1982:3:53; Tanner 2001:103; Tsevat 1985:115-116).

Moses also used the analogy of tender grass that sprouts up at daybreak to represent the potential of youth (Eaton 2003:323; Rosenberg and Zlotowitz 1999:571). In the “coolness of the early morning dew” (Tate 1990:441), it glistens and bursts into bloom; but by dusk the grass has dried up and withered in the unrelenting heat of the sun (v. 6; cf. Barnes 1869:5; Harrelson 1977:186). VanGemeren (1991:5:593) suggests as the possible conceptual backdrop the “dry summer climate in Canaan”, in which a “few days of hot weather” can alter the “green landscape of the winter and spring” into a “brown, parched” dead zone. The existence of every living entity—including human beings—is just as ephemeral and cursory (cf. Jacob 1958:52; Smith 1993:237; Urbrock 1974:7, 15; Pss 102:25-28; 104:29-30; 144:3-4; 129:6; Isa 40:6-8; Jas 1:10-11; 1 Pet 1:24-25).

4. Coming to Terms with God’s Wrath (Ps 90:7-12)

Every day, people throughout the world experience the brevity and impermanence of their earthly existence. Their physical and mental capabilities, which might have held tremendous promise earlier in their lives, diminish and ebb away with the passing of the years and decades. This is a consequence of God’s judgement of sin in the human race and throughout the universe. A testament to this truth is the monotony and misery the Israelites

experienced while wandering in the wilderness, only thereafter to be greeted by death (cf. Deut 4:25-28; 11:16-17).

Psalm 90:7 vividly refers to God's anger wiping out the lives of people through the incessant onslaught of death. The Hebrew verb *kālâh*, which is rendered "consumed", denotes something that has wasted away, failed, or perished (cf. Dahood 1968:324). The noun *'aph*, which is translated "anger", literally refers to the nose or nostrils of the face. The image is that of a snorting sound that is produced by intense annoyance or dissatisfaction over some circumstance (cf. Rosenberg and Zlotowitz 1999:571; VanGemeren 1991:5:551). With respect to the Lord, His anger is an expression of His righteous indignation over humanity's sins, including those involving His chosen people (cf. 2:5; 7:11; 39:11).

The second part of 90:7 completes the thought begun in the first part. When people experience God's "indignation", they are "terrified". The first term renders the Hebrew noun *chēmâh*, which denotes the hot displeasure associated with God's wrath. "Terrified" renders the verb *bāhal*, which draws attention to the alarm and anxiety that people feel. In a manner of speaking, they are overwhelmed by the Lord's fury, which brings about their demise (cf. Mowinckel 1962:2:12).

It is easy for people to imagine that no one knows about transgressions they commit in their heart, such as greed, arrogance, and resentment (cf. Barnes 1869:6; Gill 1999); but before the penetrating light of God's holy presence, nothing is hidden from His sight. Moses depicted the Lord as spreading out our "iniquities" (v. 8) before Him. Every form of mischief is transparent and all our perversities are exposed. Even the sins people try to hide are ever-present before the luminosity of His countenance. In a manner of speaking, God's face is comparable to a lamp that dispels the surrounding darkness to reveal what would otherwise remain hidden (cf. Matt 10:26; Mark 4:22; Luke 8:17; 12:2; John 3:19-21).

In Psalm 139, David noted that God knew the king's every action, all that he undertook, the way in which he pursued his goals, his thoughts before they were formed, and his words before they were spoken (vv. 2-4). According to Hebrews 4:12, God uses His Word, like a double-edged sword, to pierce to the

innermost recesses of our being and judge our feelings and intentions. Verse 13 uses comprehensive language to reinforce this assertion—“Nothing in all creation is hidden from God’s sight” and “Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of him”. In essence, the whole lot is revealed to God, to whom we are responsible to give an account. This explains why David prayed that the Lord would probe his heart and discern his anxious thoughts. Then, should God find any idolatrous bent or any other offensive tendency in the monarch, David prayed that the Lord would guide him in the path that is true and everlasting (Ps 139:23-24).

In 90:9, the Hebrew verb *pānâ*, which is rendered “pass away”, conveys the image of something that is moribund and close to dying. Under the glare of the Lord’s gaze and the heat of His raging fury, a person’s existence withers and feels as if it is cut short prematurely. Life itself tends to be filled with unending struggles, which cripple the ability of people to deal with a successive series of afflictions. At the end of countless misfortunes, weary earthbound travellers end their pain-filled years with a sigh. The Hebrew noun *hegeh*, which is rendered “moan”, can also denote the transience of life, which passes away all too quickly.

In Ecclesiastes 2:12-26, Solomon took a sobering look at the certainty of death. He wondered whether prudence and hard work bring more meaning to life than do foolishness and laziness. It is clear, he admitted, that wisdom is better than foolishness; but all people are destined to the same fate—the grave. Thus wisdom and foolishness, along with labour and laziness, receive the same reward. Furthermore, work seems futile because labourers cannot permanently enjoy the fruit of their efforts but must leave it to others when they die. Nonetheless, the Teacher advised getting whatever satisfaction one can from work. The righteous are blessed, while sinners lose what they accumulate.

Such a perspective is often lost on youth, for whom seven or eight decades of life seem like a long time. In antiquity, seven and “seventy” (Ps. 90:10) epitomised completion and perfection. The parallel construction of this verse reinforces this impression with the observation that some people, due to their God-given strength, live to be 80 years old (cf. Anderson 1983b:653; Robertson 1977:48). Even more impressive is the fact that the span of Moses’

life reached 120 years. Indeed, Deuteronomy 34:7 notes that the eyesight of the lawgiver was still good, and his body remained strong. All the same, he did not escape death (cf. Alter 2007:317; Brug 2005:81). Likewise, it does not matter how long people might live. Against the backdrop of God's eternity all the days of their existence are too few (cf. Calvin 2007; Spurgeon 2001).

“Best of them” (Ps 90:10) renders the Hebrew noun *rōhab*, which literally means “arrogance” or “pride”. The focus is on the prime of life, when young people are filled with confidence at what they imagine they can accomplish in their zeal and strength; yet even the prime of their life, with all its “pageantry” (Kraus 1989:217) and “frenetic activity” (Tate 1990:435), is scarred by “trouble and sorrow” (cf. Barnes 1869:7; Perowne 1989:2:167). The more literal rendering is “destruction and wickedness”, which points to the grief, disappointment, and loss that typifies human existence. After a lifetime of toil and heartache, one's existence suddenly ends. Moses compared the abrupt onslaught of death to a bird that quickly flies away as a result of being “frightened from its roost” (Leupold 1969:646).

In Ecclesiastes 12:6-7, Solomon used a series of poetic images to describe the swift termination of life. He mentioned the severing of the silver cord from which a golden lamp hung, which in turn caused the lamp (representing life) to be broken. In a parallel analogy, the Teacher referred to a clay pitcher being smashed so that it could no longer carry the water of life. Even the wooden waterwheel that drew the water had been broken. Another possibility is that the silver cord is the human spine, while the lamp is the head. The pitcher is the heart, which will no longer carry life-giving blood, and the wheel represents the lungs (carrying air), the heart (carrying blood), or the organs of digestion.

Solomon, after using imagery to describe the inevitable demise of people, next showed the ultimate results of the breakdown of the body. In death, the original components, or “the dust”, will return “to the ground” from which it came. At the same time, the breath of life, which originated from God, returns to Him (cf. Gen 2:7; 6:17; 7:22; Ps 146:4; Eccl 3:19). Understandably, all Solomon's talk of decline and death must have left him feeling depressed. Just as he had done at the beginning of his monologue (cf. 1:2), the Teacher

lamented that life seemed absolutely futile and absurd (Eccl 12:8; cf. Jens 1995:179-181).

Moses wanted the covenant community to recognise that life's afflictions and brevity were manifestations of God's judgement on sin (Ps 90:11). The lawgiver admitted that no one, regardless of how wise and informed he or she might be, has ever fathomed the "full extent" of God's anger or even the "duration" of its intensity and severity (Clifford 2000:65; Clifford 2003:97; Clifford 2005:202). The second half of this hard-to-understand verse is literally rendered "and like your fear [is] your wrath". *Yir'â* is the Hebrew noun rendered "fear" and denotes a reverential trust in the Lord that is the basis for His people knowing Him, doing His will, and fully appreciating His unfailing love (Deffinbaugh 2001; cf. Pss 111:10; 147:11; Prov 1:7). One possible meaning is that God's wrath causes humans to fear Him. Another likely sense is that the awesomeness of God's raging fury mirrors the fear He deserves to receive from human beings (cf. Barnes 1869:9; Freehof 1938:262; Kidner 1975:330).

More generally, as mortals experience God's righteous indignation, it should prompt them to think seriously about the brevity of life. David prayed that God would help His servant more fully appreciate the transient nature of his life (Ps 39:4). The Lord had made the king's existence seem no longer than the width of his hand. Indeed, the entire span of his life was a fleeting moment to God. For that matter, to Him the lifetime of every human being—even those who seemed secure—was but a vapour (v. 5). From the perspective of the eternal Lord, people were as impermanent as shadows. Thus, all their hustle and bustle to amass what they could not keep seemed futile (v. 6). If mortals were wise, they would recognise their accountability to God for everything they did while on earth. In contrast, those who were morally deficient would, in their arrogance, foolishly disregard the swift passage of time and their God-given responsibility to worship and serve the Lord (cf. 10; 49; 73:4-12; 92:6-7; 94:8-11).

Against this theological backdrop, Moses petitioned God to teach the covenant community to "number [their] days" (90:12). The idea is that, in becoming more aware of how short existence really is, God's loyal followers will value the time He has given them, recognise it as His gracious gift to them, and seek

to accomplish His will (cf. McCann 1996:4:1043; Tate 1990:442-443). By their attitudes and actions, they demonstrate the “capacity to submit, relinquish, and acknowledge the decisive impingement of Yahweh on one’s life” (Brueggemann 1984:111). The prudent, as a result of being so inclined, obtain a “heart of wisdom”. *Lēbāb* is the Hebrew noun rendered “heart” and denotes the locus of a person’s thoughts, will, and ethical character (cf. Day 2003:130). *Chokmā* is the noun translated “wisdom” and refers to God-given prudence in all areas of life (cf. Vos 2005:129, 136). Together these terms point to those who astutely use all the allotted time they have on earth—in which life is filled with “opportunity and possibility” (Miller 1986:129)—to bring glory to the Lord (cf. Clifford 2000:66; Clifford 2003:99; Clifford 2005:203; Kraus 1986:145-146).

5. Petitioning the Lord for the Restoration of His Favor (Ps 90:13-17)

In Psalm 90:3, Moses noted that at God’s command, He turns people back to dust. Then, in verse 13, the advocate for the covenant community petitioned the Lord to “relent” (cf. McCann 1996:4:1042-1043; Urbrock 1998:29). In essence, the plea was for God to turn back from His anger and return to a posture of favour with His chosen people (cf. Balentine 2003:470; Freedman 1985:59; Weiser 1962:602). Moses, in literally asking “How long?”, wanted to know when the Lord would bring to an end the suffering of the Israelites, who saw their lives withering away in the Sinai Desert (cf. Clifford 2005:191, 199; Gill 1999; Tate 1990:443). In essence, the advocate implored God to transform the endeavours of the covenant community “from a fleeting, transitory action into a responsible, enduring work” (Jens 1995:184).

Moses used the Hebrew noun *‘ebed* to refer to God’s people as His bondservants. In connection with this, the intercessor used the verb *nācham* to petition God to have pity or show compassion on the Israelites (cf. Exod 32:12, 14; Deut 32:36). As noted earlier in this essay, Moses enjoyed a close, personal relationship with Yahweh (cf. Tanner 2001:96; Tate 1990:438). The lawgiver, being absolutely convinced of the Lord’s righteousness, openly expressed his sorrow over the hardship an entire generation of Israelites had to endure. Moses felt bold enough to go before the throne of God and appeal to His justice, confident that the good and faithful Judge of all the earth would be

merciful to His chosen people (cf. Mowinckel 1962:1:24, 91, 222; Mowinckel 1962:2:75; Isa 40:1; 49:13; 51:3, 12). For believers this “plea . . . is set within the framework of a larger human experience” (Steussy 2004:163). As such, the poem functions as a “prayer for God’s community in every period of crisis and loss” (Clifford 2005:205; cf. Lawson 2006:84; Urbrock 1974:1).

In Psalm 90:14, Moses compared the wilderness experience of the Israelites to a nighttime filled with seemingly endless anguish (cf. Barnes 1869:9; Rosenberg and Zlotowitz 1999:573). The advocate prayed that God would end the suffering of His people by filling each and every morning thereafter with His “unfailing love” (cf. Pss 30:5; 46:5; 49:14; 59:16; 143:8; Lam 3:23). The latter renders the Hebrew noun *chesed*, which points to the Lord’s steadfast goodness, kindness, and faithfulness (cf. Kraus 1986:43-44). Yahweh’s displays of grace toward His people were an outflow of His covenant relationship with them (cf. Exod 34:6-7; Deut 7:9, 12; 2 Sam 7:15; Pss 89:24, 28, 33, 49; Isa 55:3). The resurrection of the righteous remnant at the second advent of the Messiah will be the ultimate display of the Lord’s covenant faithfulness (cf. Mays 1994:295; StuhlmueLLer 1983:70-71; Rom 5:2-5; 8:18-23; 2 Cor 4:16-18).

Moses, perhaps representing the sentiments of the Israelites wandering in the Sinai Desert, longed for God to shower His people with His compassion so that they might once again delight in a life of service to Him. It would be a renewed opportunity for them to celebrate the Lord’s goodness and sing for joy at what time they had left on earth to revere Him (Ps 90:15). The intercessor petitioned God to give them as many days of gladness as He had of affliction. Put another way, Moses asked God to exchange the Israelites’ years of misfortune and misery with times of prosperity and happiness (cf. Cohen and Oratz 1992:300).

The parallel sentence structure of verse 16 indicates that the “deeds” of God “on behalf of his people” (VanGemeren 1991:5:597) are characterized by “splendor” (cf. Isa 40:5). The latter term renders the Hebrew noun *hādār*, which can also be translated “glory”, “majesty”, or “honor”. Psalm 111:3 states that the Lord’s work in the world is glorious, majestic, and righteous. His deeds include providing food for His worshippers and enabling them to triumph over their foes (vv. 5-6). It was the heartfelt petition of the psalmist

that future generations of Israelites would experience God's covenant blessings, including His ongoing acts of redemption (v. 9; cf. Mowinckel 1962:2:102).

The latter included the "favour" (90:17) of the sovereign Lord, Israel's covenant-keeping God, resting on them. The underlying Hebrew noun is *nō'am* and can also be rendered "beauty" (cf. 27:4). In either translation, the focus is on God bestowing His kindness on His chosen people. The Lord's approval would be evident in enabling future generations of Israelites to be successful in all their endeavours (cf. Deut 2:7; 14:29; 16:15). A literal rendering of Psalm 90:17 brings out the fervour of Moses' petition: "and the work of our hands establish over us, and the work of our hands, establish it". The historical books of the Old Testament, beginning with Joshua, reveal that the Lord did indeed grant Moses' request by giving meaning, significance, and enduring value to the labour undertaken by future generations of Israelites in the promised land (cf. Delitzsch 1982:3:59; Miller 1986:130).

6. Postscript

Psalm 90 emphasises the frailty and morality of people in a sin-cursed world. This profound truth notwithstanding, the poem's sombre depiction of human life should not remain detached from the rest of God's Word. In point of fact, the canonical arrangement of the Hebrew Psalter pairs Moses' communal lament with the more hope-filled declarations recorded in Psalm 91. Here one finds a temple worshipper (possibly a priest or Levite) expressing categorical trust in the Lord despite the trials and tribulations of life. The references to shelter, refuge, protection, and so on, emphasise that God watches over and preserves the covenant community from a multitude of perils that often threaten humanity.

As a balancing contrast to the preceding analysis of Psalm 90, a brief discussion of Psalm 91 is provided in this postscript to the essay. In a didactic or wisdom poem declaring confidence in Yahweh, His loyal followers are encouraged to go to Him for habitation and safety. Verse 1 depicts them as living in the shelter (perhaps originally a reference to the protective precincts of the temple) of the Most High (cf. 23:6; 27:4-5; 31:20), who alone is the one, true, and sovereign God. Like an attentive parent eagle who covers its

young under the shadow of its outspread wings (or alternatively, like the pinions of the cherubim on either side of the ark of the covenant in the Most Holy Place of the temple), so too the Almighty (Hebrew, *Shadday*) tenderly provides sanctuary for His people to shield them from harm (cf. 36:7; 57:1; 61:4; 63:7). Because He is the all-powerful King and Judge of the universe, the faithful can look to Yahweh as their defender and protector, the true and living God in whom they have placed their trust (91:2).

Such confidence in the Lord is not misplaced, for as verse 3 relates, God rescues His people from every secret trap (whether human or demonic in origin). The poet depicted these as the snare used by a fowler to hunt birds. Not even a deadly plague would overtake the righteous remnant. Amid the hidden dangers of life (including war, disease, wild animals, and demons), they are safe in the Lord's care. His metaphorical "feathers" (v. 4) protect them and His "wings" give them refuge. His faithfulness is comparable to a shield or a rampart that protects the covenant community.

God watches over His own at all times and in all places. He safeguards them from the terrors of the night and sudden attacks during the day (e.g. originating from arrows shot by an enemy; v. 5). Not even an epidemic—such as a dreaded communicable disease that strikes in the dark or a scourge that ravages at noon—would harm the Lord's chosen people (v. 6). Even if a thousand persons fell dead beside God's loyal followers and ten thousand perished around them from the wasting disease, they would remain safe and secure (v. 7). In contrast, they would see with their own eyes the retribution of the Lord on the wicked, namely, those who refuse to trust in and obey God (v. 8).

Psalm 90:1 affirms that Yahweh has been the dwelling place of His people since time immemorial. In corresponding fashion, 91:9 encourages the righteous to take refuge in the covenant-keeping God of Israel and to find shelter in the one who reigns sovereign over all the earth. Verse 14 further notes the Lord's pledge to rescue those who cling to Him in love. He even promises to keep safe those who acknowledge Him as Lord and live according to His Word (cf. Rom 8:28). In their time of trouble, He will answer their prayer for help by delivering and honouring them (Ps 91:15). Verse 16 serves as a fitting response to 90:17. What Moses requested, the Lord declared to do

for His loyal followers. He would let them live to a ripe old age and show them His salvation.

The New Testament similarly teaches that the Father safeguards those who trust in His Son (cf. Rom 8:31-39). For example, 1 Peter 1:5 says that God's power protects and preserves believers to receive salvation in Christ, which is ready to be revealed at the end of time. The Greek verb *phroureo*, which is rendered "shielded", conveys the idea of vigilantly defending a fortress. Believers can count on God's protection regardless of the hardships they might encounter. The "salvation" the apostle mentioned refers to the believer's complete deliverance from sin in the future. When the Messiah returns, He will raise His people from the dead and give them glorified bodies. They will then enjoy the riches of heaven.

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