

PSALM 90

God's Eternity and Man's Transitoriness

INTRODUCTION FOR BOOK IV

- A. There are seventeen psalms in this book, classified by Dummelow as:
 1. Penitential Psalms: 90; 91; 94, 101.
 2. Psalms of Thanksgiving: 92; 93, 95-100, 103-106.
 3. National Psalms: 94, 97, 99, 102, 105, 106.
 4. Historical Psalms: 105, 106.
 5. A Gnostic Psalm: 101.
- B. Dummelow's last classification, Gnostic, means, "expressing maxims, or universal truths." Of course, there is overlapping in such a classification, several elements often appearing in the same psalm.
- C. Significantly, the Septuagint (LXX) classifies no less than eleven of these psalms as Davidic: Psalms 91, 93-99, 101, 103, 104. The superscriptions in our version also assign Psalms 101, 103 to David.
- D. Some scholars are unwilling to allow that Moses is the author of Psa. 90, as indicated in the superscription, but no good reason whatever has ever been advanced for denying it. Furthermore, "Rabbinic tradition assigns Psalms 91-100, to Moses." Other Psalms written by Moses are also found in Ex. 15, and in Deut. 32.

INTRODUCTION TO PSALM 90

- A. From Everlasting to Everlasting Thou art God (90:1,2)
- B. As noted above, this Psalm is ascribed to Moses in the superscription; and one objection cited by scholars against this is v10 which declares man's life-span to be "Three-score and ten years ... or even four-score years." That statement is alleged to disqualify Moses as the author, because he lived to be 120 years of age, and his brother Aaron likewise lived well past a hundred.

That objection is worthless, because Moses indeed, as was Aaron, was especially blessed of God for the purpose of God's achieving the exodus of his people from Egypt and bringing them to the borders of Canaan. Not only did Moses reach that advanced age, but his eyesight had not failed, nor was his strength abated.

Also, that foolish objection ignores the fact that all of the Israelites who were above 20 years of age at the Red Sea Crossing died during the subsequent forty years, Caleb and Joshua, of course, being the only two exceptions.
- C. Furthermore, the words here may be viewed as a prophecy of how man's life-span would be restricted in the ages to come. Is it true? Indeed yes. The fact is that a very small percentage of mankind enjoys a life-span any longer than that laid down here. In view of all this, we reject this objection to Moses' authorship.

One other very feeble and incompetent objection is founded upon v1, in which the author glances back upon many generations of God's blessings, the critical allegation being that Moses belonged to the "first generation" of the chosen people and could not have claimed God's blessings for "all generations." This objection is founded on the error that supposes the generation of the exodus to have been the "first generation" of the chosen people. God chose Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob; and the "chosen people" had already been under God's loving protection for almost half a millennium in the days of Moses. As Delitzsch said, "Such trifling points as this dwindle down to nothing."
- D. We shall conclude this study of the Mosaic authorship of Psa. 90 with this paragraph from Delitzsch.

"There is scarcely any written memorial of antiquity which so brilliantly justifies the tradition concerning its origin as does this Psalm ... Not alone with respect to its contents, but also with reference to its form and language, it is perfectly suitable to Moses. Even Hitzig could bring nothing of importance against this view."

- E. A Prayer of Moses the Man of God (Superscription). Three times this title is awarded to Moses in the Scriptures: Deut. 33:1; Jo. 14:6; and Ezra 3:2.
Based upon v7-12, McCaw concluded that, "The definite historical background of the Psalm is the latter months of the wilderness wanderings (Num. 21:14-23)."
- F. Despite the psalm being labeled "A Prayer of Moses," it is a prayer only in the last six verses. The first six are a meditation.

THE TEXT

- 90:1** Lord, You have been our dwelling place in all generations.
2 Before the mountains were born
Or You gave birth to the earth and the world,
Even from everlasting to everlasting, You are God.
3 You turn man back into dust
And say, "Return, O children of men."
4 For a thousand years in Your sight
Are like yesterday when it passes by,
Or *as* a watch in the night.
5 You have swept them 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.
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.
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.
11 Who understands the power of Your anger
And Your fury, according to the fear that is due You?
12 So teach us to number our days,
That we may present to You a heart of wisdom.
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.
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.

COMMENTS.

- A. The Meditation (90:1-6).
No more eloquent comment upon the wretched fate of the human race was ever made. God had warned Adam that, "In the day thou eat thereof, thou shall surely die." And, as the great lawgiver of Israel thought upon the dying generations of the human family, the Spirit of God spoke through Moses

in these precious words. It must have been a sad experience indeed for Moses to watch an entire generation of the Chosen People die in the wilderness.

[v1] "Our dwelling place in all generations". This was true in two ways. In the nation of Israel itself, their faith in God dated back to the patriarchs. The years of Egyptian slavery had not destroyed their knowledge of the Lord. Even the mid-wives of Egypt knew enough about the God of the Hebrews that through fear of God they refused to follow strictly Pharaoh's order to destroy all the male children. "The `God' of this passage is `The Lord,' the covenant God of the Hebrews; and "None can ignore those generations of faithful believers in the developing nation from the days of Abraham, all of whom made the Lord their dwelling place."

It is true in another sense. From the beginning of Adam's race, God has been the only security of the human family. The discerning souls of all generations found their only hope in God, the only exceptions being the "fools" who said in their hearts that, "There is no God" (Psa. 14:1).

An adaptation of these words was used by William Croft for the title of his famous chant (Called St. Anne), "Oh God, Our Help in Ages Past." Kyle Yates made this the title of Psa. 90.

[v2] "From everlasting to everlasting, thou art God." The eternity of God, his prior existence as the First Cause, the God of Creation, the Maker and Sustainer of All Things is eloquently extolled and honored in this sentence, which we have chosen as an appropriate heading for this magnificent psalm.

[v3] "Return, ye children of men." "For dust thou art, and to the dust shall thou return" (Gen. 3:19). Moses' comment here is plainly a reference to this passage from Genesis.

[v4] "A thousand years ... as yesterday ... as a watch in the night." This contrasts the dying generations of mankind with the eternity of God. The Apostle Peter quoted this verse (2Pet. 3:8), warning Christians not to forget it, a warning which some have not heeded. Making "God's days" to be 24 hours long is nothing but a human conceit, contrary to God's specific word and its accompanying warning not to forget it.

It should be noted that "a thousand years" with God are also as a few hours (a watch in the night). It would be impossible to make it any plainer that God's `days' or God's `years' cannot be restricted to the limitations of the human understanding of those terms.

[v5,6] "Thou carriest them away as a flood ... as a sleep." Like the succeeding waves of the sea, the generations of men rise and fade away. As the hours pass away when one is asleep, the lives of men fly away (v10). This writer has read these beautiful words at funerals throughout a period of sixty-four years in the ministry of the gospel of Christ.

"Like grass ... in the morning it flourisheth ... in the evening ... withereth." This simile is also used repeatedly in the NT. Christ used it in the Sermon on the Mount (Mt. 6:30); James utilized it in Jas. 1:10-11; and the Apostle Peter developed it in 1Pet. 1:24. It would be difficult to imagine a simile more expressive of the fleeting, ephemeral nature of human life.

B. The Lament (90:7-11).

Some have referred to these verses as "a complaint," but to us, the word "lament" is better. We do not believe that Moses "complained" about God's established order; but he certainly did grieve that it was the way it is.

[v7] "We are consumed in thine anger." "Such expressions suit the time of the later wanderings in the wilderness," in which the condemned generation which God forbade to enter Canaan, "Were being gradually consumed that they might not enter the Holy Land."

Addis observed on these verses that, "It is the sinfulness of man that makes his life so short." Also, there is the possibility that there is a divine limitation upon human life imposed by the will of God. We have already noted the possibility that v10 here is a prophecy.

[v8] "Thou hast set our iniquities before thee." This stresses the relationship between sin and death. As Barnes noted, "The fact that human life has been made so brief, is to be explained, only upon the basis that God has arrayed before his own mind the reality of human depravity."

[v9] "We bring our years to an end as a sigh." The KJV reads this, "We spend our years as a tale that is told." The implication regards the transitoriness, the fleeting nature, and the brevity of human life. "Here today, and gone tomorrow; yes I know; that is so!"

[v10] "Three-score and ten ... four-score years." See the chapter introduction for comments on this.

[v11] "Who knows the power of thine anger ... thy wrath." "The implication of this verse is that men do not generally take the anger and wrath of God seriously enough." This observation is profoundly true. The current conception of God in our American society regards him as a rather over-indulgent grandfather who pays little or no attention to the crimes of blood and lust that rage beneath his very nose, assuming that his wonderful loving grace and mercy will ignore and overlook anything that wicked men may do. It is against this background of human ignorance and misconception that the ultimate appearance of Almighty God in the Judgment of the Last Day will be an occasion when, "All the tribes of the earth shall mourn over him" (Rev. 1:7).

C. Moses' Prayer (90:12-17).

[v12] "Teach us to number our days ... that we may get ... a heart of wisdom." This is a prayer that God will teach men to live as dying men should live, always taking account of the brevity and uncertainty of life and of the inevitable accounting before God in the Final Day. What a contrast is this with the attitude of many wicked people who live exactly as if they expected to live forever!

[v13,14] "Return ... repent thee." This is a plea, "For a restoration of God's favor." To be sure, God does not "repent" in the human sense, but when the repentance and prayers of his people permit it, God indeed will restore them to favor.

[v15] "Make us glad according to the days wherein thou hast afflicted us." The two clauses in this and in the second half of the verse are synonymous pleadings with God to, "Balance the evil with good things." It is as if Moses is saying, "O God, let us at least have good times that are as long as the evil times we have suffered."

"The prevailing thought in this section is one of confidence in the Lord's kindness and power. The psalmist knows that it is only God's favor that renews the sense of gladness and truly prospers the works of men."

[v16] "Let thy work appear unto thy servants, and thy glory upon their children." Barnes understood this to mean, "Let us see thy power displayed in removing the calamities and in restoring our days of prosperity." It was especially a concern of Moses that the next generation of Israel (their children) would also be made aware of God's glory.

[v17] "Let the favor of God be upon us ... establish the work of our hands." Those who do God's will during their earthly pilgrimage are happy indeed. "Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord, assuredly, for they shall rest from their labors, and their work's follow with them" (Rev. 14:13). This indicates that the works of righteous people shall indeed survive them and follow them even to the Judgment of the Great Day. This must surely be what the psalmist meant by "establish the work of our hands." How glorious is the apostolic assurance that, "We know that our labor is not in vain in the Lord" (1Cor. 15:58).

Alexander Maclaren has a marvelous paragraph on this with which we wish to conclude this chapter:

Fleeting as our days are, they are ennobled by our being permitted to be God's "tools"; and although we the workers have to pass, our work may be established. That life will not die which has done the will of God. But we must walk in the favor of God, so that there can flow down from us deeds which breed not shame but shall outlast the perishable earth and follow their doers into the dwelling places of those eternal habitations.