

Psalm 90 and 2022 (Psalm 90:1–17)

By Pastor Jeff Alexander (January 2, 2022)

Introduction

1. Moses is regarded as the author of this psalm (the only psalm attributed to Moses) which makes it the oldest of the psalms.
2. Ezra the scribe placed the psalm between the earlier and later psalms. In its present location, it begins book four (90–106) of five books.
3. The occasion for the psalm was Israel’s failure at Kadesh-Barnea (Numbers 13; 14) and the subsequent wilderness wanderings.

The Lord was testing them. Would they trust God or succumb to fear? Based on the report of ten spies who described the land God promised them as devouring its inhabitants and filled with the *Nephilim* (giants), the people turned coward and refused to cross the Jordan River. This refusal not only failed to regard the greatness and power of God but attributed to the Lord the wicked motive of wanting them destroyed at the hands of the Canaanites.

Their sinful rebellion stirred the anger of Yahweh, who turned them back into the wilderness to wander for 40 years until the unbelieving generation died off. This psalm reflects Moses’ grief and anxiety for the next generation. Will they obey? Moses turns his thoughts to pray: “*Return [repent—change Your mind], O LORD! How long? Have pity on your servants! Satisfy us in the morning with your steadfast love, that we may rejoice and be glad all our days.*”

4. This psalm is a prayer (vv. 12b–17), prefaced by the preparatory arguments for its hearing. It is clearly suited to the circumstances of our present day, especially at the opening of this new year with all its uncertainty.

I. Eternity and Human Finality (vv. 1–6)

1. Psalm 90 opens with a statement of great faith (v. 1).
2. The statement of faith is supported by a description of the supreme greatness of God to support the faith required by verse one (vv. 2–6).
 - a. One’s faith must rest on God’s *eternality* (v. 2).
 - b. More importantly, one’s faith must rest on God’s *supremacy*.

Three observations: (1) Moses mentions the *mountains* first to indicate that mountains hold a spiritual significance not quickly understood by modern readers. For example, Psalm 48 (Isaiah 14:13). (2) The reference to the *earth* as opposed to the seas refers to the abode of man (v. 3). (3) The *world*, tangible and temporal, as opposed to the eternal unseen realm of the spiritual (Hebrews 13:8; Malachi 3:6).

- c. The need for faith is seen in the human condition due the sovereign decree of the Supreme Lord as judgment on Adam’s sin (v. 3; Ecclesiastes 12:5–7). The Hebrew of verse 3 is very strong and suggests the state of one that is pulverized and ground to powder. Here the fragility of human existence is brought into the strongest contrast with the eternity of God.

- d. This contrast is further developed between the sovereign eternal Lord and the brevity of human existence (vv. 4–6). For God, a thousand years is no longer than the span of a day (2 Peter 3:8). We are dust, creatures of time, and sin has robbed us of the vital relationship Adam once enjoyed with his Creator/God. Only in Jesus Christ are we promised to regain *eternal life*.

II. Holiness and Human Sinfulness (vv. 7–12a)

1. Human *helplessness* in the fury of divine wrath (v. 7). The King James has it, “*By Your wrath we are terrified.*” There is a natural instinctive fear of death. Satan plays on this fear and torments men. However, we must understand that this condition is not an accident but the direct effect of divine wrath.
2. Human *guilt* exposed in the light of divine knowledge (v. 8). For those whom He has called in Jesus Christ, the fury of His wrath toward them was diverted to His Son on the cross (Romans 8:32).
3. Human *vulnerability* and God’s wrath revealed in light of eternity (vv. 9, 10). No doubt Moses was thinking of the lifespan of the pre-flood patriarchs and comparing that to the brief lifespan of post-flood people. This shortened life is a mercy due to human sinfulness.
4. Human *condition* and the question, “*Who considers the power of your anger, and your wrath according to the fear of you?*” (vv. 11, 12a). What does it take to awaken the sin-darkened heart to regard seriously God’s disposition against our sin, and how may we apply the remedy provided in His steadfast covenant love for His people?

With the arguments presented in the preceding verses, Moses turns to prayer and pleads that God would bless His people and crown them with underserved glory. In the last section of the psalm (vv. 12b–17), Moses asks four petitions.

III. Providence and Human Desperation (vv. 12b–17)

1. Teach us, Lord. Enable the heart to understand properly one’s life before God: “*So teach us to number our days that we may get a heart of wisdom*” (12b). What man desperately needs but sadly often lacks is the *fear of God*. Only understanding our sinfulness in light of His holiness will enable a holy fear and compelling us to live holy lives in obedience to His will.
2. Turn away from Your fierce anger against our sinful ways and have pity on us. Moses pleads with God to repent of anger towards His people: “*Return, O LORD! How long? Have pity on your servants!*” (v. 13). God does not “repent” as man does, for God never sins. When God repents, He changes His dealings with His people.
3. Grant us joy in this short life through covenantal mercies. Satisfy us early by Your covenant love promised to Your people (vv. 14, 15).
4. May Your will be done so that Your work in us brings glory to Your name. Moses was saying, in effect, “You are not glorified as Israel wanders aimlessly in the wilderness. Your glory is shown when, by Your awesome power, there is conquest over the enemy in the establishment of Your kingdom. Grant to Your people success in doing Your will” (vv. 16, 17).

May these four requests dominate our prayers as we enter this new year.