

God, Time, and Human Frailty – Psalm 90

Within Tolkien's book *The Hobbit*, there is an encounter between the evil Gollum and Bilbo Baggins. Gollum wants to eat Bilbo, but Bilbo challenges Gollum to a game of riddles. If either of them asks the other one a riddle which he cannot answer, he loses. At one point, Gollum asks Bilbo this riddle:

*This thing all things devours:
Birds, beasts, trees, flowers;
Gnaws iron, bites steel;
Grinds hard stones to meal;
Slays king, ruins town,
And beats high mountain down.*

Bilbo thinks and then comes to the right answer: Time. Time devours all things, birds, beasts, mountains, towns, iron and stone.

Science is desperately trying to conquer time. As they have come closer to understanding aging, many are hoping to crack the code, and genetically engineer ourselves to live forever. Because if we live forever, we really can fulfill the serpent's promise in the Garden – we can be autonomous, independent beings defining our own good and evil, and we can do it without consequence. We can live forever. Time will no longer threaten us; it will assist us to build our Towers of Babel.

Without God, time is your enemy. It will defeat your body. It will defeat your fame and popularity. It will defeat your achievements. It will defeat every thing you did to make your mark and be significant, and get to the top, and beat the rest, and be the exception. You will not be the exception to what time does.

*Time like an ever rolling stream, Bears all its sons away,
They fly forgotten, as a dream dies at the op'ning day.*

But there is one solution to what time does. The solution was written by a man who lived 120 years: Moses. Moses understood this. Moses had lived a life where he knew the pain of what seemed like wasted years. His life really came in three sets of forty. The first forty years were spent as a prince of Egypt, learning their ways, living like an Egyptian. And after he tried to deliver the Israelites by his own hand, murdering a man, he had to flee. For another forty years, he lived as a shepherd of Midian. It must have seemed to him that his first forty years had been wasted, and his second forty years bore no relation to the first. And then God calls him to lead Israel out of Egypt. He does so, and when they rebel, God judges them with another forty years of wandering in the wilderness. Moses spend the last forty years, travelling in circles, while the rebellious Israelites die off.

Here was a man who at the end of his life knew what it was to feel as if your years have no purpose and have been wasted. He saw how time can be your enemy. He also saw how time can be your friend. He saw how time could ravage and destroy one life, and become the opportunity for the reward and blessing of another.

So Moses wrote a song, a poem, this Psalm – Psalm 90. This may well be one of the oldest poems on earth. Around 3500 years old, this poem is there to teach us about time, eternity, mortality, and mercy. Moses will report the hard sad facts of our frailty. He will remind us of the soaring, high truths of God's eternity. And then, for those who have ears to hear, he will tell us the necessity of grace. He will point us to what we should do in light of the passing of time.

Let's begin in verse 3, as Moses lays out the sad, hard truths about the frailty of man.

I. The Frailty of Man

3 You turn man to destruction, And say, "Return, O children of men." 4 For a thousand years in Your sight Are like yesterday when it is past, And like a watch in the night. 5 You carry them away like a flood; They are like a sleep. In the morning they are like grass which grows up: 6 In the morning it flourishes and grows up; In the evening it is cut down and withers. 7 For we have been consumed by Your anger, And by Your wrath we are terrified. 8 You have set our iniquities before You, Our secret sins in the light of Your countenance. 9 For all our days have passed away in Your wrath; We finish our years like a sigh. 10 The days of our lives are seventy years; And if by reason of strength they are eighty years, Yet their boast is only labor and sorrow; For it is soon cut off, and we fly away. 11 Who knows the power of Your anger? For as the fear of You, so is Your wrath.

Moses compares man to God. God, who made us out of dust, calls us back to dust. Our lifetimes are to Him like a blink of an eye. A thousand years may as well be yesterday to God, like one hour. The longest lifespan to God pales into significance. People by the droves are swept away by God's hand of time. In the grand scheme, we are like a forgotten dream.

The images here are all things that pass quickly: yesterday, a dream, a watch in the night, a flash flood. And then comes the saddest image in verses 5 and 6. We are like grass that sprouts in the morning sunlight and freshness, but by the end of the same day it is cut down and withers into brown death. Our lifespans seem like the briefest life on earth.

Verse 10 tells us that our lifespans average seventy years, and if for some reason we reach eighty, those extra years are years of struggle, exhaustion, and sorrow. We are soon cut off.

What is Moses trying to tell us? Our lives are quick and frail. Time defeats every human life. If you live life for only the here and now, your life is a tragedy. Psalm 90 is really a short form of the whole book of Ecclesiastes.

The book of Ecclesiastes is really a book about how time wins and has the last laugh. If you live for what exists under the sun, time will not only beat you, it will mock you. Solomon shows us, in painful, depressing detail what happens with every pursuit.

You pursue pleasure, whether through food, or sexuality, or music, entertainment, but in the end, as chapter 12 so painfully shows you, the body gives in, and no more pleasure is possible.

You pursue achievement or success, and however successful you are, at some point you leave it, and it goes to someone else. Time catches up, and that business you built, that church you helped grow, that idea you came up with and developed, it goes to someone else, who takes it in another direction, and either ruins it or changes it beyond recognition.

You pursue knowledge and understanding. You fill your shelves with books. You become learned and a teacher of others. But time catches up, and you die. And your books are forgotten, and your grave is exactly the same dimensions as the fool who was proud of the emptiness of his mind.

You pursue wealth, and with great sacrifice and toil, over the years, you build up your wealth. But time catches up. And the amount of money you had in your hand when you came out the womb is exactly the amount you can take with you beyond the tomb. No matter how swift, how strong, how just, how wise, time and chance happens to all.

Death is the great leveller.

The enemy of human achievement is time. No matter what we do or achieve, time defeats us in the end. Apart from God, time is the enemy.

The young woman worries that time will march on, defeat her natural beauty, without her finding marriage and family. And many a Christian young lady sacrifices her purity, or settles for a marriage with little to no spiritual unity, because she fears time.

The young man worries that time will make him just one of the crowd. So he fights to make his mark, and show his significance. But time defeats him, and he finds out with growing disillusionment, that he will not change the world.

The middle-aged man or woman fights time with some plastic surgery, or by buying a Ferrari, or by climbing a mountain, as if to say, "See? Time hasn't made a dent in me! I'm actually better than I was before!" But time marches on, and those loud boasts and flamboyant acts become more muted as time keeps doing its work.

And the one going into the later years decides he will beat time with a legacy. Maybe I won't be able to beat time with my body, but I will beat it by leaving my mark on this world. So he hopes to leave his mark through a book he writes, or through his successful children and grandchildren, or through his business. But in his honest moments, he knows that those will be like footprints on the beach next to the incoming tide.

Our culture lives in denial of this. It pretends it is not true. It denies what Psalm 90 says.

You know what is a sobering experience? You come across a magazine with a glamorous model on the cover. There she poses with shiny hair, flawless skin, alluring eyes, perfect smile, the image of youthful perfection. Be like me, she says. Open this magazine and be beautiful and seductive and the envy of others. And then you look at the date of this magazine. It's August 1988. And then it strikes you: this model, on this front cover, was probably 23 or 24 when this was taken. But that was 26 years ago. How old is she now? She must be around 48. What does she look like now? Where is she now? Would she still be invited to pose for a glamour magazine? No she wouldn't, because that would advertise the truth about time. She is disposed of, paid, and then must disappear into anonymity, so that some current 23 or 24 year-old can pose. Was she a real human being, with hopes, fears, desires, longings? Was she made in God's image, a being who will live forever either in Heaven or in Hell? When her body loses all health and beauty, is she still precious to God?

It is the lie of our culture, by ever putting before us images of youth, pretending that time has no effects. It is the lie of pornography, putting before people youthful bodies, a fantasy of timeless youth and valueless sex. It is the lie of the soap operas, the music videos, the billboards, the movies. They say, "We do not fade. Live vicariously through these people. You are them. Imagine yourself like them."

I have been to a website called "Whatever Happened To?" It's a website that tells you where certain superstars of the world of pop music, or sports are now. It's really sobering. Likewise some of the heroes of sport. Where are they now? What do they look like? What can they do? Time has reduced them from heroes to forgotten curiosities.

Man is frail. There is no escape from time and its effects.

Moses saw this as he marched through that desert for the last 40 years of his life. God had sworn that no Israelite over the age of 20 would enter Canaan, so that entire generation died off. Imagine it: a group of around 2 million people, and everyone over 20 is going to die. If that was about two-

thirds of the population, then that would be 1.3 million people who were going to die. If you do the maths, that averages 90 people dying every day. Ninety funerals a day, for forty years. Israel left a trail of graves behind itself for forty years of wandering.

That's why he says, “ *7 For we have been consumed by Your anger, And by Your wrath we are terrified. 8 You have set our iniquities before You, Our secret sins in the light of Your countenance. 9 For all our days have passed away in Your wrath; We finish our years like a sigh.*

Life under God's judgement, life under God's discipline is a sad, exhausting end. Moses says in verse 11 *Who knows the power of Your anger? For as the fear of You, so is Your wrath.*

God did not make man originally to live, enjoy life, and then die. Death is the judgement, the wages of our rebellion. Death is what has come to us for wanting the autonomy to judge like God, and to live in His world as if it is ours alone. God's judgement of physical death for sin catches up with every human.

Life without a personal relationship with God is a life of judgement. Apart from God, time is your enemy.

Moses does not only remind us of our frailty, He wants to remind us of the One before whom we live out our frail lives.

II. The Eternity of God

2 Before the mountains were brought forth, Or ever You had formed the earth and the world, Even from everlasting to everlasting, You are God. 3 You turn man to destruction, And say, "Return, O children of men." 4 For a thousand years in Your sight Are like yesterday when it is past, And like a watch in the night.

In comparison to man, God was present before the beginning. God was there before the most ancient things on Earth had their fiery beginning. If you go back before the moment of creation, God was not a young God at that time. Before the angels woke up and saw their Creator, God was ancient and ageless.

Moses tells us in verse 4 that the ages do not age God. A thousand years to us is an enormous period of time. What was happening in the world in the year 1014? What has happened since 1014? Can you begin to imagine the world in the year 3014? For God this is like our experience of yesterday. For God this is like a watch in the night – a few hours.

It is this God who watches us as we work, and gather, and play, and learn and grow. The ageless God watches us age. He watches us in our infancy, our childhood, our youth, our middle years, and our old age. The Ancient of Days sees us the way we see wilting blades of grace.

In fact, it's He that is in control of the whole process. He gives life, and He takes it back. He can consume us in judgement, He can chasten us in anger.

So what should we do in response to God's judgement of aging and death? There are a few responses you can make which continue to shake your fist in the face of the Eternal One.

Epicureanism is one solution to this. It says “eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow we die.” Yes, we acknowledge we will age and die, so instead of seeking meaning and permanence in what we do, let's just party and pleasure ourselves before our time is up. You only go around once, so get all

the gusto you can. Or the motto “Live fast, die young, and leave a good-looking corpse.”

The scientific fight against ageing is another. It says, “Our body is nothing more than a machine. We will learn how to replace the parts, change the system, and keep it running, like a vintage car which we keep upgrading. We will learn to live forever.” I don't believe God will allow that. This ticking clock that God places in us is actually a restraint on our evil. It is a judgement and a mercy in one.

Another response is to become bitter at God. You can rage at him for your mortality, and tell him that death is a cruel joke, and in response for all the loved ones you have lost and your own failing strength, you will not serve him, and not seek him.

And when you are done with any or all of these responses, how will it have affected the ageless, eternal God? He will watch your choices, as your body weakens, He will remain as unaffected by time as before. As you succumb to frailty, He will be as youthfully powerful as He was when the first angels opened their eyes to look upon Him. It will be only you condemning yourself to live under judgement.

There is another response: a better response. Moses gives it to us in verses 12 to 17. If you know the frailty of man, and you acknowledge the eternity of God, then you should see the necessity of grace.

III. The Necessity of Grace

12 So teach us to number our days, That we may gain a heart of wisdom. 13 Return, O LORD! How long? And have compassion on Your servants. 14 Oh, satisfy us early with Your mercy, That we may rejoice and be glad all our days! 15 Make us glad according to the days in which You have afflicted us, The years in which we have seen evil. 16 Let Your work appear to Your servants, And Your glory to their children. 17 And let the beauty of the LORD our God be upon us, And establish the work of our hands for us; Yes, establish the work of our hands. (Psa 90:1-17)

Moses does the right thing. Moses prays. Moses does not curse the Curse. He does not try to escape. He does not distract himself. He turns to the only One who can make sense of our swift lives: God. He turns to God, and looks upon Him not only as a God who judges, but as a gracious, good, and loving God.

He asks for God's grace in three ways that dramatically change our experience of living and growing older.

First, He asks for God to give us the right **perspective** on our lives. 12 So teach us to number our days, That we may gain a heart of wisdom.

Let us know that we will *last* forever, but we will not *live* forever, at least in these bodies. Our time in these ageing bodies is a temporary assignment, a test, a trial, in which we determine how we would live for an eternity.

So fill us with a sense of the limited nature of our days, of the unpredictability of one day over another. Help us to remember that we are finite. Help us to keep in front of us that fact that time is a limited resource.

The young person makes fun of time. It doesn't seem to affect him or her. No matter what he does to his body, it doesn't seem to age. He looks at those older folks at the gym or doing their walks and he mocks them. Look at what time has done to them, he thinks. She scoffs at these old folks who worry about their wrinkles and grey hairs. Time affects other people, not me, the young person thinks. The only problem that the very young person has with time is that it seems to move too slowly. There is

this feeling of immortality, that time is a friend, one that is making you stronger and more beautiful every day. Time only works negatively for other people. But if you think that way, you are one of many who thought that way. And it is not you who will laugh at time, in the end. Time always has the last laugh.

Moses says, be gracious to us. Give us perspective. Help us to know every day, that it is one more day, and also one less.

Because how do you live if you recognise that your life is like the sand in that egg-timer, flowing from top to bottom? You apply your heart to wisdom, Solomon says. You do not pursue what is foolish, weightless, useless. You ask the right questions.

2 Better to go to the house of mourning Than to go to the house of feasting, For that is the end of all men; And the living will take it to heart. (Ecc 7:2)

I've been privileged to be at a number of bedsides as the heaving chest goes up and down one last time. I've been privileged to do enough funerals to continually remind me, "This is the end of all men, including you. So what is it all about? What are you really living for?"

Death has the effect of having people reflect on what matters most. Numbering our days has the same effect. It is a mercy. It is grace.

Because when you turn this around and look at it from another angle, the same God who sees our lives as grass which withers, sees how tragic that is for us. He does not see it only in judgement, He sees it in mercy. He of all Beings knows how swift our lives are. He of all knows how we seem to reach the end before we have begun. And He is ready to redeem our lives, love us, add significance and eternal value to our lives, though they be to Him like a watch in the night.

Moses does not only ask for perspective, He asks for more. He asks for God's **presence**. Verses 13 to 16 have this idea. 13 Return, O LORD! How long? And have compassion on Your servants. 14 Oh, satisfy us early with Your mercy, That we may rejoice and be glad all our days! 15 Make us glad according to the days in which You have afflicted us, The years in which we have seen evil. 16 Let Your work appear to Your servants, And Your glory to their children.

He asks for compassion and mercy. This begins with salvation in Jesus Christ. We need Him to come and forgive us our sins, enter our lives, and satisfy us. We need Him to bring joy into our lives for as much time as we spent it in rebellion and darkness.

And after we are born again, we begin a life-long process of living in God's presence, learning of Him, and becoming like Him. What God does here is He, in a way, turns back the clock. He begins to redeem our lives, buying back their uselessness and turning them into usefulness.

25 "So I will restore to you the years that the swarming locust has eaten, The crawling locust, The consuming locust, And the chewing locust, My great army which I sent among you. (Joe 2:25)

Life lived with God and in God transforms the moments. Whereas life without God is, as Solomon said, vanity of vanities, lighter than air, weightless, meaningless frustration, life lived with God and in God is weighty, precious. Why did David say, "For a day in Your courts is better than a thousand (Psa 84:10)"?

A day spent in God's presence is worth a thousand spent in vanity. Moses says, Redeem our moments that are slipping away by investing them with yourself and eternal significance. Notice how Moses began the psalm: Lord, You have been our dwelling place in all generations.

Lord, you yourself have been our dwelling place. We want to live with you and in you, the eternal One. He is your time capsule. Live in Him, and the moments are fruitful, the work is satisfying, the

life is meaningful.

Ageing in Christ takes on a whole new significance.

Paul sees a whole new dimension on death once we live in Christ. *21 For to me, to live is Christ, and to die is gain. 22 But if I live on in the flesh, this will mean fruit from my labor; yet what I shall choose I cannot tell. 23 For I am hard pressed between the two, having a desire to depart and be with Christ, which is far better. 24 Nevertheless to remain in the flesh is more needful for you. (Phi 1:21-24)*

Paul is not choosing between evils; he is choosing between goods! Either way he wins. This is life in God, life under grace.

Moses asks for God's gracious perspective, for God's gracious presence. He asks for one more thing. *17 And let the beauty of the LORD our God be upon us, And establish the work of our hands for us; Yes, establish the work of our hands. (Psa 90:1-17)*

Moses asks, grant our work **permanence**. In light of how things decay, in light of how we are here for just a season and then are gone, be merciful to us, and establish the work of our hands. This Hebrew word for *establish* has the idea of setting up firmly, securing, making something lasting, enduring. It means to give permanence to our works.

Part of the pain of life under the sun is that what we do seems to just wash away and be forgotten. We ask ourselves, "Did I really make a difference? Does it make a difference that I lived?" One of God's mercies and graces is that He will grant to your and my life, and to our efforts, permanence. With God's blessing, what we do will outlast us. What we do will have effects, not only now, but into eternity.

Unless the LORD builds the house, They labor in vain who build it; Unless the LORD guards the city, The watchman stays awake in vain. (Psa 127:1)

Unless God gives your work His blessing, it will end up in the dustbin of history. But Jesus said even a cup of cold water done for one of His people will by no means lose its reward. What is done for Him, and to Him, and through Him is never wasted. As we have often said, "Only one life to live, soon past, only what's done for Christ will last."

Here is Moses' one last cry for grace. Come and invest what we do with your blessing. Let us do what we do for eternal reasons. Let us do it with all our might. Let us do it for your glory. And then bless it and give it permanence.

The ultimate solution to our predicament is resurrection: dying and then living forever with God. But before then, Psalm 90 is the oldest, and the best answer to the problem of time as our enemy. Ask God for perspective. Accept your frailty, the limited number of your days. Then ask the eternal God for His presence. Abide in Him. Live in Him. And then do you what you do for Him, asking Him to bless what you do with permanence.

Then we can say what Isaac Watts wrote:

*Our God, our help in ages past,
Our hope for years to come,
Be Thou our guard while troubles last,
And our eternal home.*