

MERCY IN PERSPECTIVE

A sermon on **Psalm 90** | Jan 19 & 20, 2019 | by Alex Kirk

I think of this Psalm as a New Year's psalm—but it's not the kind of thing that is filled with optimistic resolutions. It's kind of the opposite of that. I think of it as a New Year's prayer “for the rest of us.” Psalm 90 is a dense, heavy, and beautiful cry for help.

PSALM 90 (ESV)

A Prayer of Moses, the man of God.

- 1 Lord, you have been our dwelling place
in all generations.*
- 2 Before the mountains were brought forth,
or ever you had formed the earth and the world,
from everlasting to everlasting you are God.*
- 3 You return man to dust
and say, “Return, O children of man!”*
- 4 For a thousand years in your sight
are but as yesterday when it is past,
or as a watch in the night.*
- 5 You sweep them away as with a flood; they are like a dream,
like grass that is renewed in the morning:*
- 6 in the morning it flourishes and is renewed;
in the evening it fades and withers.*
- 7 For we are brought to an end by your anger;
by your wrath we are dismayed.*
- 8 You have set our iniquities before you,
our secret sins in the light of your presence.*
- 9 For all our days pass away under your wrath;
we bring our years to an end like a sigh.*
- 10 The years of our life are seventy,
or even by reason of strength eighty;
yet their span is but toil and trouble;
they are soon gone, and we fly away.*
- 11 Who considers the power of your anger,*

- and your wrath according to the fear of you?*
- 12 *So teach us to number our days
that we may get a heart of wisdom.*
- 13 *Return, O Lord! How long?
Have pity on your servants!*
- 14 *Satisfy us in the morning with your steadfast love,
that we may rejoice and be glad all our days.*
- 15 *Make us glad for as many days as you have afflicted us,
and for as many years as we have seen evil.*
- 16 *Let your work be shown to your servants,
and your glorious power to their children.*
- 17 *Let the favor of the Lord our God be upon us,
and establish the work of our hands upon us;
yes, establish the work of our hands!*

INTRODUCTION

What would you do if your life's work—whatever that might be, a business, your children's happiness, a craft or a product, a cause you have poured your every free moment into—just vanished? We desperately want to reach the end of life and feel that we have contributed something, that our life had some meaning or value. We invest countless hours and massive amounts of energy into our families, our careers, and our hobbies because we hope that through them we can wrestle some kind of meaning out of life. Jim Coffield is fond of saying that depression is a goal that becomes blocked and then starts to feel unattainable. If we don't see any **meaning** in our life, it saps our joy and makes it nearly impossible for us to go on living. Man is what you might call a meaning-seeking animal. Nietzsche (of all people) has this great phrase, "He who has a *why* to live for can endure almost any *how*." That's what this Psalm is about. It is a prayer for a *why*.

You can see this clearly if you start from the end of the Psalm. Look at **v. 17**: *Let the favor of the Lord our God be upon us, / and establish the work of our hands... / yes, establish the work of our hands!* We are driven to pray this way because we know how tenuous our

lives are. We are haunted by our mortality. In **v. 10** it says, *The years of our life are ... soon gone, and we fly away*. Why spend your life building sand castles that the next tide will wash out to sea without a trace? This prayer understands that our deepest need is not just to be spared from death—our deepest need is actually to find something to live for. When it asks for our work to be established it is asking for the ability to create something of value, something with permanence. **This is a prayer for meaning.**

In Psalm 90 God is teaching us that **If we want to find meaning in life, we need true perspective on ourselves in light of God.**

DOCTRINE

I. True perspective comes through embracing God's wrath and our mortality. In fact, Psalm 90 connects these two ideas. In **v. 3** God *returns man to dust*. In **v. 7** *we are brought to an end by [God's] anger*. And in **v. 9** *all our days pass away under [God's] wrath*.

The spiritual and emotional context for this Psalm is exile. Notice two things. First it says that it is a Psalm of Moses—the only Psalm by Moses in the book. But also notice that it is the first Psalm in book IV of the Psalms. Have you ever noticed that the Psalms are in five volumes? This is because the Psalms make up a spiritual and emotional Torah—they tell the whole story of Israel in song. If you read straight through the Psalms you'll notice some emotional patters—high points of praise and thanksgiving and low points of petition and lament. The end of book III is the lowest point in all the Psalms—Psalm 89 recounts the fall of the house of Judah. The LORD established a great kingdom for David and his sons, but as the centuries passed the kings led the people astray and collectively they began worshiping other Gods and engaging in wholesale immorality and injustice. In punishment for this, the LORD, as promised, handed them over to foreign invaders who razed Jerusalem and took the Israelites as captives to Babylon.

Thematically, book IV of the Psalms is set in this exile. These are prayers behind bars. So why place the only psalm by Moses here. Remember when Israel sinned by worshiping the golden calf? It was Moses's prayer for the LORD to have mercy on the people that saved them from just annihilation (Exod 32–32). I think that by placing the only Psalm of Moses here in the book of exile, they are connecting their current experience of God's wrath with their previous experience of God's wrath... and pointing toward his mercy as their only hope.

In his commentary on 1–2 Kings, **Peter Leithart reflects on the modern period as an exile for the church.** He says that as long as we claim *Jesus is Lord* there will be some level of marginalization from mainstream culture and politics. He also makes the connection between God's wrath and our mortality—remember the millions of believers slaughtered under “manic modern ideologies:” the wars of religion in Europe in the 17th century, the expunging of religion from France during their revolution, the Christians killed in the Nazi death camps, millions tortured and murdered in the Soviet gulags, not to mention Idi Amin and Pol Pot's sociopathic killing fields. To which we might add the pervasive lack of education, starvation, fatalism, and brutal warfare that characterize the developing world—the dark shadow of colonialism. “The modern world has been drinking the cup of wrath to the dregs and beginning to stumble like a drunkard (Jer 25).”¹

We live in a world of our own making and yet it threatens to destroy us. Notice that nowhere in the Psalm is there a hint that God's wrath is unjust or undeserved. It is accepted, especially in **v. 8**, that we deserve our current predicament. Scripture teaches us that all of humanity (collectively) is under God's wrath. It isn't that we are being punished in a one-to-one manner for individual sins, but rather that our very mortality points to the fact that all humanity is under God's wrath.

ILL: I have a good friend at TLI whose family recently experienced a catastrophic tragedy. His sister-in-law and her husband, Jamison and Kathryn Pals (29) strapped their three small children (ages 3 years to 2

months) in the family minivan and set out on a road trip from the Twin Cities to Colorado for the last stage of their training before going to Japan as missionaries. They had raised their support and had recently been appointed by Bethlehem Baptist Church. Somewhere on I-80 in Nebraska they came to a stop for a construction zone. As they sat, perhaps playing games with the kids or dreaming about the opportunities for them in Japan, a semi truck hit the back of their van going nearly 70 miles an hour. All five members of the Pals family were killed instantly.

APP: We can hardly imagine a death that feels more meaningless. More of a waste of potential. These are the kinds of stories that can cripple us with anxiety or tempt us to despair of living. Coming to terms with our limits is chastening. Like the 400 years Israel spent in slavery in Egypt, the 40 years wandering in the wilderness, or the 70 years exiled in Babylon, we find ourselves waiting for our God to act—to end the brokenness we see all around us.

By acknowledging that we lead a limited, tenuous existence we are being honest with ourselves about our weakness, our brokenness, our need for God's mercy. This frees us from striving after things that vanish like a dream and wither like grass and opens us up to true dependence on God.

David Gibson writes, "Death reorients us to our limitations as creatures and helps us to see God's good gifts right in front of us all the time, each and every day of our lives. Instead of using these gifts as means to a greater end of securing ultimate gain in the world, ... take the time to live inside the gifts themselves and see the hand of God in them. Ordinarily, we eat and drink simply as fuel to enable us to keep going with our work. Ordinarily, we work not just to earn a living but to find satisfaction and purpose and very likely to make a reputation for ourselves and to achieve success. What if the pleasure of food is a daily joy that we ungratefully overlook? What if our work was

never intended to make us successful but simply to make us faithful and generous? What if it is death that shows us that this is how we are meant to live?”²

Have you faced this reality? Have you come to terms with your limits? Has this changed the way that you think about your family? your career? your hobbies?

True perspective comes through embracing God’s wrath and our mortality.

II. True perspective comes through deep trust.

Verses 1–12 are a prayer that walks us through an intricate poetic argument asking God to have mercy on us. This argument lays the foundation for the petitions in **vv. 13–17**. It goes something like this: First, we acknowledge that God is eternal creator, **v. 2** *Before ... you had formed the earth and the world, from everlasting to everlasting you are God*. Now, as the eternal Creator, God is the one who controls the fate of man. **v. 3** says, *You return man to dust*—notice how this echoes the language of **Gen 3:19**, *For you are dust, and to dust you will return*. It’s un-creation, end-of-life language. We are at God’s mercy. In light of this, the Psalm develops a profound reflection on the nature of time and our mortality in order to develop the case that the punishment humanity is under is nearly unbearable. What is a very short time to God is an eternity for us. In **v. 10** it says, *The years of our life are seventy, or even by reason of strength eighty*, compared with **vv. 4–5**, *a thousand years in your sight are but as yesterday when it is past ... they are like a dream*. For God our whole life is like an afternoon nap when you wake up and need the clock to tell you how long you have been out because it feels like no time at all has passed. Though this period of wrath may seem like an incredibly short time to God, it fills our entire life. **vv. 9–10**, *For all our days pass away under your wrath; / we bring our years to an end like a sigh...*

The argument concludes that our lot is unbearable because we can’t put it into perspective: **v. 11**, *Who considers the power of your anger, / and your wrath according to the*

fear of you? This verse is obscure, but I *think* it is saying that we don't know how long we will be able to last under God's wrath because we can't gauge its strength. How much longer will he go on like this? When will the wrath of God be satisfied? What does it take to run its course?

ILL: In his Holocaust memoir, *Man's Search for Meaning*, renowned psychologist, Victor Frankl, recounts the story of a well-known composer that was with him at Auschwitz: This man came to me one day and said, "I would like to tell you something, Doctor. I have had a strange dream." In the dream, the man said, I was told that "I should only say what I wanted to know and all my questions would be answered." The one thing the man wanted to know was when the war would end for him—when he would be liberated. "What did the dream voice answer?" asked Frankl. "Furtively he whispered to me, 'March 30th.'" When Frankl had this conversation with his friend it was early March and his friend "was still full of hope and convinced that the voice in the dream would be right. But as the promised day drew nearer, the war news which reached our camp made it very unlikely that we would be free on the promised date. On March 29th, [the man] suddenly became ill and ran a high temperature. On March 30th, the day the prophecy had told him the war and suffering would be over for him, he became delirious and lost consciousness. On March 31st, he was dead. To all outward appearances he had died of typhus.³ Frankl provides this reflection, "The prisoner who had lost his faith in the future—his future—was doomed. With this loss of belief in the future, he also lost his spiritual hold; he let himself decline and became the subject of mental and physical decay."⁴

When we lose our perspective—when we lose the ability to number our days—we lose hope. This lack of perspective on ourselves and God's wrath threatens to destroy any shred of meaning and joy in our lives. The request in **v. 12**, then, is a

prayer for perspective in light of God's wrath and our mortality. *So teach us to number our days / that we may get a heart of wisdom.* The idea is not just that we need simply to keep our mortality in mind because this makes us uncommonly wise or intellectual—the idea is that we will not be able to survive this life unless we have some assurance that an end to God's wrath is coming. Tell us how much longer we have to hang on, O LORD! We are counting down the days.

APP: Do you see the depth of trust here? We must learn to pray like this. It is God's wrath that threatens to destroy us, but it is God that we must lean into. You see... where do we have to turn except to God? *Lord, you have been our dwelling place / in all generations (v. 1).* We are the guilty ones—we've made this world into the mess that it is in. The LORD brought us from the dust and he returns us to the dust, we have no other home. In order to pray like this you have to simultaneously acknowledge your sins and weakness and yet boldly cry out to God. You have to simultaneously believe in the justice of God's wrath and in his inexhaustible capacity for mercy. Praying this way takes incredible intellectual honesty and boldness. If you make it a regular mental habit it will reorient your perspective on the world and give you a deep foundation of trust that is anchored in who God is. Don't be afraid to pray prayers where you both confess your sins and the sins of the world and yet simultaneously cry out for God to be merciful. **True perspective comes through deep trust.**

IMPROVEMENT

III. True perspective comes through God's mercy.

Verses 13–17 are a string of requests that call on God to be merciful. Look at **vv. 13–14**, *13 Return, O Lord! How long? / Have pity on your servants! 14 Satisfy us in the morning with your steadfast love, / that we may rejoice and be glad all our days.* Give us a reason to get up in the morning!

Listen, the LORD has answered your cry for help. He himself was born as a mortal human being, whose days on this earth were numbered. His own life was cut short—swept away when he bore the wrath of God as he was executed on the cross. This unjust death paid the penalty for all the sins of humanity, even those that are still playing themselves out in our broken world today. **When we see God’s mercy clearly it transforms our perspective.**

1 Pet 1:3–6

3 Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! According to his great mercy, he has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, 4 to an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, 5 who by God's power are being guarded through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time. 6 In this you rejoice, though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been grieved by various trials,

The work of Christ has given us an inheritance beyond this life that reaches back into this life so that the work of our hands has permanence and meaning. He has opened up the way for us to find joy and meaning even in suffering. Look at how the Apostle Peter goes on to interpret our psalm in **2 Pet 3:8–9**, *8 But do not overlook this one fact, beloved, that with the Lord one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day. 9 The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance.* Now instead of looking at all the death and destruction in the world with despair we can see it as a kindness. Instead of crying out “How long!” we rejoice because the longer the Lord delays the judgement the more people come to repentance. The mercy of God in Christ teaches us to number our days because it gives us true perspective. Jesus’s suffering was the most meaningful suffering there ever was because it makes it possible for all of our suffering to have meaning.

ILL: Victor Frankl tells another story of a young woman he cared for in the camps as she was dying. This young woman knew that she would die in the

next few days. But when I talked to her she was cheerful in spite of this knowledge. “I am grateful that fate has hit me so hard,” she told me. “In my former life I was spoiled and did not take spiritual accomplishments seriously.” Pointing through the window of the hut, she said, “This tree is the only friend I have in my loneliness.” Through the window she could see just one branch of a chestnut tree, and on the branch were two blossoms. “I often talk to this tree,” she told me. I was startled and didn’t quite know how to take her words. Was she delirious? Did she have occasional hallucinations? Anxiously I asked her if the tree replied. “Yes.” What did it say to her? She answered, “It said to me, ‘I am here—I am here—I am life, eternal life.’”⁵

We don’t find meaning in what we accomplish, but in how we live, and most importantly in whom we trust. Will you lean into this God, this God who created you and holds your fate in his hands? Will you lean into his mercies so that you are fully trusting in him? Think of the Pals family again—from this perspective we can begin to perceive that their lives were not wasted—but filled with joy and meaning because the “work of their hands” is an imperishable inheritance with Christ.

There’s a beautiful modern hymn that we often sing at New Year’s:

“Should nothing of our efforts stand
 No legacy survive
 Unless the Lord does raise the house
 In vain its builders strive
 To you who boast tomorrow’s gain
 Tell me what is your life?
 A mist that vanishes at dawn
 All glory be to Christ!”⁶

1. Peter J. Leithart, *1 & 2 Kings* (Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible, Grand Rapids: Baker, 2006), 279.

2. David Gibson, *Living Life Backward: How Ecclesiastes Teaches Us to Live in Light of the End* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2017)

45.

3. Victor Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning* (Boston: Beacon, 2006), 75.

4. *Ibid.*, 74.

5. *Ibid.*, 69.

6. From *Joy Has Dawned*, released 27 November 2012. Words by Dustin Kensrue, arrangement by Kings Kaleidoscope / © Dead Bird Theology (ASCAP), It's All About Jesus Music (ASCAP).