Studies in Psalms: Songs of Faith

Lesson Seven

To Live a Life That Matters

Focal Text
Psalm 90

Background
Psalm 90

Main Idea
Even though our lives are brief and may be troubled, we can experience joy and meaning when we turn in faith to God.

Question to Explore
Where can we find meaning in this all too brief life and the predicaments in which we sometimes find ourselves?

Quick Read
We have only this day to live for eternity.

Commentary
Most of us will never have the chance to change our obituaries. Alfred Nobel (1843-1896) did.

The year was 1888. Alfred’s brother had died, but the local newspaper confused the names and thought Alfred had died. So the next day while reading the paper, Alfred found his own obituary. He was horrified to see the headline: “The merchant of death is dead.”

Alfred Nobel had invented dynamite. He thought his invention would be an instrument of peace, that no one would use such deadly power for destruction. But he was wrong, of course. The newspaper pictured him as someone who spent his life gathering a great fortune from the manufacture of weapons of destruction. As far as the world knew, that was true.
So Alfred Nobel made a new resolution. In his last will and testament he deeded his great funds to the Nobel prizes, including an award honoring those who work for peace and harmony in the world—the Nobel Prize for Peace.¹

When your life comes to its end, will you have fulfilled God’s purpose for your time on earth? Have you discovered God’s joy and peace? Have you been used by God’s Spirit to save souls and change lives? Has your life become all your Father dreamed it would be?

Or, has it been a while since you even thought about such questions? since you wished for more in your experience with God than you have? since you wanted to be more effective and significant in God’s kingdom than you are? since God was real for you?

Psalm 90 is God’s invitation to a life lived with purpose. Let’s learn its steps to significance for ourselves so we can teach them to others this week. We have only today to write our obituary for eternity.

**Use today for eternity (90:1-10)**

Have you seen the old illustration of priorities called “the bricks and the sand”? Start with sand, bricks, and a bucket. If we pour sand into the bucket and then try to add the bricks, the bricks will not fit. But if we put the bricks in the bucket first and then add the sand, everything fits. The trick is to know which is bricks and which is sand. It all comes down to priorities, to the imperatives of life. According to the psalmist, the first essential to a significant life is simple: use today for eternity, because your life must end.

It was so for “Moses the man of God,” the one to whom the psalm is attributed. As we have seen, the superscriptions of the psalms are not original, but they do reflect early Jewish tradition. There is no textual reason to believe that Moses did not compose this psalm. Note that Moses is mentioned a number of times in the psalms of Book IV (appearing in Psalm 99:6; 103:7; 105:26; 106:16, 23, 32) but he appears only once in the other psalms (Ps. 77:20).

Even though Moses was amazingly vigorous at his death, so that “his eyes were not weak nor his strength gone” (Deuteronomy 34:7), nonetheless his life came to its end. If it would be so for one of the greatest of God’s people, it will be so for us as well. Moses’ psalm makes these facts clear.

**God has been our refuge in the past (90:1-2)**

“Throughout all generations,” whether they knew it or not, God has been the “dwelling place” of his people. “Dwelling place” is translated “refuge” in Psalm 71:3. Even before God created the mountains, “from everlasting to everlasting” he is God.

This astounding affirmation of universal sovereignty lays the foundation for all that follows in Psalm 90. Remember that Moses sang these words in a day when each nation claimed its own god or gods and territorial deities were conventional wisdom. Only if we
say to the Lord that “you are God” can we understand his character and ways. Only when God is our God can our lives fulfill his purpose for them.

*All people return to dust (90:3-6)*

People’s returning to dust is God’s initiative (90:3), lest we spend eternity in our fallen, diseased bodies and world. Paul explained the reason God allows death to visit his people (1 Corinthians 15:50-54):

> I declare to you, brothers, that flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable. Listen, I tell you a mystery: We will not all sleep, but we will all be changed—in a flash, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed. For the perishable must clothe itself with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality. When the perishable has been clothed with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality, then the saying that is written will come true: “Death has been swallowed up in victory.”

In the meanwhile, a thousand years are but a day to the Lord or even “a watch in the night” (Ps. 90:4; note that the parallelism reinforces the image). Time holds no real significance to the Eternal One. As C. S. Lewis reminded us, “If you picture Time as a straight line along which we have to travel, then you must picture God as the whole page on which the line is drawn.”

God’s word makes clear the temporal nature of our physical lives:

- “Man is destined to die once, and after that to face judgment” (Hebrews 9:27). Death comes for us all.
- “All can see that wise men die; the foolish and the senseless alike perish and leave their wealth to others” (Ps. 49:10). Neither wisdom nor wealth can prevent death.
- “Why, you do not even know what will happen tomorrow. What is your life? You are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes” (James 4:14). This is true of us all.

Our lives are like grass, which springs up in the morning but withers in the heat of the sun by evening (Ps. 90:5-6). As a shepherd, Moses had seen the devastation of the Canaanite sun on the grass of the fields, and he knew our lives are no more permanent.

*All face the judgment of God (90:7-9)*

The legendary comic actor W.C. Fields (1880-1946) was seen thumbing through a Bible. Someone asked why. His answer: “Looking for loopholes.” He didn’t find any. The death rate is still 100%, as is the percentage of humans who will stand before God in judgment.

God knows our “iniquities” (faults and mistakes, often more public in nature) and “secret sins” which the world does not know (90:8), so that we all stand under the “wrath” of our
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holy God (90:9). As Paul said, “Each of us will give an account of himself to God” (Romans 14:12).

The Bible has much to say on the theme of judgment, as the following brief review shows. We will be judged by Jesus: “We must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive what is due him for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad” (2 Corinthians 5:10; see John 5:22; Acts 10:42; Rom. 2:16). This judgment will occur at Jesus’ return: “When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his throne in heavenly glory. All the nations will be gathered before him,” and he will judge them (Matthew 25:31-32).

Our eternal destiny depends on our inclusion in the “book of life”: “If anyone’s name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire” (Revelation 20:15). Our eternal reward depends on our obedience to God’s word and will, so that at the judgment, “If what he has built survives, he will receive his reward. If it is burned up, he will suffer loss” (1 Cor. 3:14-15a).

We will suffer “loss” of reward for secret, unconfessed sins (see Ecclesiastes 12:14; Luke 12:2-3). Our words will be judged as well (Matt. 12:36-37). On the other hand, “gold, silver, costly stones” are rewarded (1 Cor. 3:12-14). When we persevere under trial, we receive the “crown of life” (James 1:12; Rev. 2:10). When we win others to Christ, we receive the soul-winner’s crown (1 Thessalonians 2:19-20). When we complete God’s purpose faithfully, we receive the “crown of righteousness” (2 Timothy 4:7-8). For Christian leaders, there is the “crown of glory” (1 Peter 5:2-4).

A man in the congregation laughed when the pastor said, “Members of this church, you will all die one day and face the judgment of God.” The pastor asked him why he laughed, and he said, “I’m not a member of this church.” But judgments awaits for all.

Our lives are short (90:10)
This is the conclusion of the matter. We may live to be seventy or eighty years old (note that the statement is descriptive, not prescriptive, and that Scripture nowhere promises tomorrow to any of us). But our years “quickly pass, and we fly away.”

Jerome Irving Rodale (1898-1971) was a leader in emphasizing organic farming and a healthy lifestyle in general. He was being interviewed on a late-night television show when he slumped in his chair, dead from a heart attack. Only a day earlier he had boasted that he would live to be a hundred unless an accident took his life. He is proof that our psalm’s warning is right: unless Jesus returns first, your life must one day end. Use your life for eternity, before eternity comes.

Guard your time (90:11-12)
The first section of Psalm 90 was not inspired by the Holy Spirit to cause us depression but to motivate our urgent obedience. Given the shortness of life and the fact of God’s
wrath on those who are disobedient to his word and will (Ps. 90:11), we must guard our time and days carefully.

Moses’ prayer is a worthy way to begin every day of life (90:12):

Teach us to number our days aright,  
that we may gain a heart of wisdom.

To “number” our days in the Hebrew means to allot or apportion them. We are to redeem the time, to use the day “aright,” in order to “gain a heart of wisdom.” “Heart” in the Hebrew psychology refers to emotions, thoughts, and will. We will live, think, feel, and act wisely only when we guard and redeem every day we have.

Paul offered the same advice to his readers: “Be very careful, then, how you live—not as unwise but as wise, making the most of every opportunity, because the days are evil” (Ephesians 5:15-16). Today is all there is.

Of all our stewardship responsibilities, most of us treat time less carefully than any other resource. The reason is that we don’t live as though our time is limited. We may be careful with money because we know that it is hard to earn. We may be careful with our abilities and gifts because we know they are hard to develop. We think, though, that our time is unlimited, but of all our resources, it is the only one that can never be recaptured. Once the minutes you spend reading this commentary are gone, they can never be gained again. The Monday afternoon I am spending in writing these words will never be mine again.

Sir Walter Scott, Scotland’s great novelist (1771-1832), had the words “Cometh night” inscribed on the sundial of his cottage home at Abbotsford in England. There you can read the novelist’s last words, entered in his diary: “Tomorrow we shall. . . .” But tomorrow never came.

The Austrian composer Franz Schubert was working on his last symphony when death came at the age of thirty-one (1797-1828). The composition came to be called his “Unfinished Symphony.”

Guard this hour, investing it in God’s kingdom as though it were your last hour on earth. One day it will be.

Serve your Lord (90:13-17)
Since life must end and each day must be guarded, how are we to redeem the time given to us? Moses closed his song with five imperatives.

One: seek God’s compassion for your sins (Ps. 90:13). Since you are going to stand before God in judgment, pray for his mercy and grace in forgiving your failings.
Two: seek God’s love each day (90:14). Herein is the source of satisfaction and gladness—not the vagaries of this fallen world but the constant love of our Father for his children.

Three: seek God’s joy for each day (90:15). As joy can come only from the Lord, pray for this gift across the years the Lord gives to you.

Four: seek God’s glory for all time (90:16). As God has demonstrated his magnificent power to you, pray that he would show himself glorious to your children as well. Seek to share God’s glory with all people.

Five: seek God’s significance for your life and work (90:17). Only God can “establish” our work so that it outlives us. Only God can give our lives transcendent significance and value. It has been said that great people plant trees they’ll never sit under. Pray that God would use your life far beyond your lifetime.

Conclusion
Some scholars consider Psalm 90 to be a community lament, a prayer of repentance to be offered by the people to God. Others consider this a wisdom psalm, prescribing practical ways to live by faith. It is both, for each emphasis is essential to the other.

When last did you consider the fact that your life will end one day? When last did you examine your priorities by eternity? When last did you refine your commitments and character so that your life and legacy honor God? When will you next make these commitments to your Father?

Millennia ago, a Sanskrit poet wrote these wise words:

Yesterday is only a dream and tomorrow is but a vision.
Yet each day, well lived, makes every yesterday a dream of happiness
And every tomorrow a vision of hope.
Look well, therefore, to this one day,
For it and it alone is life.

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