



Life in the Face of Death: Touching Eternity in Mortality

On a handful of occasions I have had the opportunity to ask small groups of people how many of their great-grandparents they can name. Of the eight great-grandparents most had, I have yet to encounter anyone who can name more than six. Much more commonly people can name only two or three—and many cannot name any of them. Even among those who can name several, not one has been able to tell me what even one great-grandparent's favorite meal was, or favorite song, or what they did for a living. As these are facts we would know about anyone close to us, their ignorance is surprising. From these informal surveys we learn a shocking truth.

After our death, within three or four generations perhaps, no one will remember us, not even our families. And, as death comes to us all, we all face unavoidable oblivion. Death is our inevitable end, the last enemy, the final indignity.

The Scriptures do not shrink from confronting us with this awful truth. Moses addresses this very theme in Psalm 90 in one of the great prayers of all human history. As commentator Isaac Taylor notes, “The 90th Psalm might be cited as perhaps the most sublime of human compositions, the deepest in feeling, the loftiest in theological conception, the most magnificent in its imagery.”¹ Such an important aspect of human existence surely deserves the highest literary and theological treatment, as well as our closest attention.

Before turning to the text, we would do well to place this psalm into its literary context. An astute reader will notice that Psalm 90 begins Book IV of the Psalter. This is not incidental. The books of the Psalter (Book V excepted) conform to periods in Israel’s history, as seen in figure 1. Thus, Psalm 90

¹ As quoted in J.J. Stewart Perowne, *The Book of Psalms: A New Translation with Introductions and Notes*, one-volume ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1976; originally published by George Bell and Sons, 1878): 2:161.
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introduces the book of the Psalter dealing with Israel's exile, the nadir of Israel's history. Psalm 89, the final psalm in Book III, prepares us for the exile. In shocking language, the psalmist questions God's faithfulness to his promises in the light of the Babylonian captivity and the deposing of the Davidic heir,

Book I (Psalms 1-41)	David's early reign
Book II (Psalms 42-72)	David's and Solomon's reigns (the apex of Israel's history)
Book III (Psalms 73-89)	The divided kingdom
Book IV (Psalms 90-106)	The exile (the nadir of Israel's history)
Book V (Psalms 107-150)	Ahistorical praise

Figure 1

Zedekiah, by King Nebuchadnezzar in 597 B.C. If the king, the son of David, has been overthrown, what becomes of the covenant God made with David centuries before? So the psalmist asks, "Lord, where is your steadfast love of old, which by your faithfulness you swore to David?" (89:49).²

Though in turning to Book IV we might expect an exilic psalm that more directly answers the questions raised by Psalm 89, instead we encounter the only psalm attributed to Moses—writing a millennium before the exile. While this might seem strange at first, we will soon discover that this short prayer implicitly provides the assurance the exiled Israelites would need. Indeed the circumstances of the wilderness and exilic generations are remarkably similar: both were faithless and were punished for it, and both were "wandering" outside the Promised Land. In the midst of this wandering Moses describes God as our dwelling place. Thus, wherever we are—in the wilderness or in Babylon—God is there. He is our home, not some arbitrary national boundary.

Moses provides no explicit reference to the historical circumstances in which he penned this psalm, but it would be easy to conjecture any of events recorded in Numbers as a likely context. That is,

² Unless otherwise indicated, all quotations are from the ESV. Any italics are mine.

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the psalm makes sense as a response to wandering in the desert, probably after having experienced God's wrath and seen thousands destroyed, considering the psalm's emphasis on death and God's fierce anger. Did he write it after Korah's rebellion? after the poisonous snakes attacked the camp? after the Israelites turned to the Ba'al of Peor and sexual immorality? Whatever the circumstances, the psalm answers two questions that have continuing, universal relevance: who is God? and who is man?³ The two-part answer given to each question strikes at the heart of the vast differences between God and humanity.

Moses first addresses the question of God in the opening four verses and reminds us that *God is eternal*. He begins, "Lord, you have been our dwelling place through all generations" (verse 1). The image of a dwelling place is a rich one, suggesting an oasis, a place to rest and refresh. To those wandering about in the desert for decades this must have been a sweet solace. Imagine yourself—sunburned, feet blistered, sand in your throat—happening upon your favorite air-conditioned restaurant where they make that oh-so-delicious fresh-squeezed lemonade. The euphoria you would feel! This is what God has proved himself to be, no matter the wilderness we traverse.

Actually, it is an interesting word used for "dwelling place." While often used of the temple, God's dwelling place, it elsewhere refers to God too, as in Psalm 71:3: "Be my rock of *refuge*, to which I can always go." This oasis is always open to weary travelers. The word is frequently used of jackals to describe their haunt. This makes Jeremiah's comment all the more bitingly ironic: "I will make Jerusalem a heap of ruins, a *haunt of jackals*" (9:10). So, for those in exile, having seen their dwelling place become the dwelling place of jackals, the fact that God is the ultimate dwelling place would be a crucial reminder.

³ So Hans-Joachim Kraus, *Psalms 61-150: A Continental Commentary*, trans. C. Oswald Hilton (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1993) in his comments on the psalm.

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Moses continues, “Before the mountains were brought forth, or ever you had formed the earth and the world, from everlasting to everlasting you are God” (verse 2). Here we see God’s enduring help from all time, first in creation, as he forms the world *ex nihilo*, and then in history, as he proves faithful from generation to generation. The God who brought forth the mountains in a massive display of creative power is the same God who invites us to dwell with him throughout time.

The tone shifts dramatically in verse 3: “You return man to dust and say, ‘Return, O children of man!’” Moses emphasizes God’s responsibility for human mortality. As he brings forth creation by his word, so humanity’s death. The allusion to Genesis 3:19 is transparent: “You are dust, and to dust you shall return.” We do face a translational issue in this verse, brought out by comparing NIV with ESV (a useful method of Bible study, I might add). The former translates, “You turn men back to dust, saying, ‘Return *to dust*, O sons of men.’” The italicized phrase, “to dust,” does not appear in the original text, however. It represents an interpretational gloss, for better or worse. The ESV renders it more literally: “Return, O sons of men!” The question is, do we simply return to dust (as in Genesis 3:19), or is God calling us to return to him, as the word “return” is often used of repentance—as we will see in verse 13. That is, do we have mere repetition or is God calling some to life even as others perish? I suspect it is a deliberate ambiguity. Upon first reading the psalm, the Israelites would likely understand it as simple parallelism; but after reading through to the end and seeing God’s marvelous mercy, the phrase takes on a fuller nuance.

As verse 3 has already hinted at our mortality, it is unsurprising that verse 4 should contrast God’s eternity with our transience: “For a thousand years in your sight are but as yesterday when it is past, or as a watch in the night.” Time has meaning for God, but not in the same way that it does for us. A thousand years is more than an age in human history. Think of the world a thousand years ago. No internet, computers, TV; planes, trains, or automobiles; running water, electricity, the printing press. We

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would still have almost 500 years before Columbus would reach the “New World.” Calvin, Luther, Aquinas were yet to be born; likewise da Vinci, Shakespeare, Mozart. And yet . . . all this passes as a watch in the night for the eternal God. Interestingly, 2 Peter 3:8 affirms the converse truth: “With the Lord one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day.” Apparently, in some moments that pass quickly for us the Lord lingers: perhaps the salvation of a sinner, when all of heaven rejoices, or at Calvary, when the Father forsakes the Son who has become our sin. But we are playing now where angels fear to tread! His ways, surely, are beyond ours. In any case, God is clearly eternal—but in verses 5-6, Moses will depict humanity in a very different light.

God may be eternal, but *we are mortal*. The transience of humanity stands in stark contrast to creation and especially the eternal God who created out of nothing. Moses, in another difficult verse to translate, says, “You sweep them away as with a flood, they are *like a dream*” (verse 5). Here the ESV adds the gloss, “like a dream.” NIV similarly adds an interpretational phrase, rendering it as, “You sweep men away in the sleep of *death*.” A woodenly literal translation might read, “You pour sleep over them.” That these two excellent translations paraphrase somewhat shows the difficulty of understanding this verse. While the sleep mentioned could certainly be death (as sleep is a common euphemism for it), this is not necessarily so. More likely this sleep is simply a bad sleep, a sinful slumber that dulls our spiritual senses and keeps us from responding adequately to God and this life. Certainly this is the sense of the same word as it is used in Nahum 3:18: “O king of Assyria, your shepherds *slumber*; your nobles lie down to rest. Your people are scattered on the mountains with no one to gather them.” As Nahum is prophesying Assyria’s demise, it seems clear that this sleep leads to death, but also prevents us from “numbering” our days well.

To depict our mortality Moses employs a common Near-Eastern image: “They are like grass that is renewed in the morning: in the morning it flourishes and is renewed; in the evening it fades and

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withered.” I live in Colombia. Last year we had a months-long drought, after which some of the grass seemed to yellow slightly. Clearly we are in the tropics! But grass in shallow soil, as in the Near East, is subject to the vagaries of drought and rain. It becomes quickly brown with heat, quickly green with moisture. Indeed, even the morning dew can renew grass in such a climate. Unsurprisingly, then, Scripture most often references grass as an illustration of the brevity of human life. God is eternal—the one who existed before even the ancient mountains—but we are mortal, passing away like grass, a wisp of smoke scattered by the first light breeze.

We have now answered the two questions—who is God? who is man?—once. Starting in verse 7, Moses takes us back through them and gives us another perspective. Note that verse 7 begins with the word “for”: “For we are brought to an end by your anger; by your wrath we are dismayed.” Thus, this verse gives us the reason we are mortal, living our lives under the specter of death—because *we are evil*. Life is not only brief, but it is lived under divine wrath because of our sinfulness. Moses provides no historical context to this wrath—murmuring at Kibroth Hattaavah? faithlessness at Kadesh Barnea?—making the passage more applicable to us. We might not have sinned as the Israelites did in the wilderness, but we have still sinned and fallen short of his glory, and are therefore by nature objects of his wrath.

The structure of this stanza is interesting. Verses 7 and 9 remind us of God’s anger towards us; verse 8 gives us the reason: “You have set our iniquities before you, our secret sins in the light of your presence.” The human sin that God keeps before him is like a “radioactive core which poisons all of life.”⁴ Moses employs an interesting word for “light” in this verse. It is not the light of divine revelation or God’s countenance, which would suggest approval. Rather, it is the word “luminary” from Genesis

⁴ Marvin E. Tate, *Psalms 51-100*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 20, ed. David A. Hubbard and Glenn W. Barker (Waco, TX: Word, 1990): 442.

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1:14. Thus, this light shines on the hidden evil in our hearts. And, as God sees nothing but our sin (verse 8), so his wrath is always there (verse 9): “For all our days pass away under your wrath; we bring our years to an end like a sigh.” Sighing is the appropriate human response to what happened in Eden and a summation of the human condition in the Old Testament.

In light of God’s wrath, “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” (verse 10). Of course, even if we lived to be one thousand, as Methuselah almost did, our lives would still be but a night watch to God. And even lives that last eighty or more years fly by quickly and are full of trouble. Surely this is reason to sigh.

Moses concludes this section by asking a question, “Who considers the power of your anger, and your wrath according to the fear of you?” (verse 11). While deeply literal, this awkward translation hardly makes sense in English. What is Moses asking precisely? The point is that neither the power of God’s wrath nor the fear due him are fully understood by humans. As wrath and fear are the divine and human sides of the same coin, it seems we simply have not taken God’s anger at our sin seriously enough, and as a result do not accord him the fear he deserves. Really, even as evangelicals we do not often think of divine retribution. We are more apt to explain away the frustrations of life in other terms. But we should not ignore God’s wrath, pretending it does not exist, that our God is just a “nice” God, a kindly old grandfather who would never grow angry with us. If we grow angry with sin, why shouldn’t God? When I hear stories of injustice, murder, rape, I grow unabashedly angry. Should we expect any less from a perfectly holy God? This is the wonder and horror of Calvary. While the cross of Christ is undoubtedly the supreme manifestation of God’s great love for his people, it is simultaneously the fullest demonstration of his wrath, his hatred of our sin, poured out on the sinless Christ. Instead of ignoring God’s wrath, the greatness of it should evoke fear leading to wisdom.

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Because of our sin, we should (and to some extent do) live our lives under God's wrath. But that is not the whole story. As we well know, especially this side of Calvary, *God* is not only wrathful but also wondrously and marvelously *merciful*. We do not fully understand God's wrath or the fear we owe him, so what should we do? Moses pleads with God in our behalf: "So teach us to number our days that we may get a heart of wisdom" (verse 12). What is needed in the face of God's wrath and the brevity of evil human life is wisdom from God to "number" our days. Of course, "number" in this context does not simply mean "count," as we would not need God to teach us how to do that. Rather, the word has a moral or wisdom nuance here, suggesting that we need to "reckon" with our days—that we may gain a heart of wisdom. This petition leads into Moses' prayer for God's mercy.

Moses, who remembers God as a place of refuge—his "dwelling place"—knows he will not just visit his wrath upon his people or judgment upon their sins. He had seen God's mercy time and time again in the wilderness, and he expects it once more. In fact, he had prayed the same words in Exodus 32:12 when he asks God not to destroy Israel after the incident with the golden calf (though it is translated as "have pity" here and as "relent" in Exodus). Having seen God's mercy then, he prays that Yahweh would visit them with his *chesed* once more. I hesitate to translate *chesed* because the word carries with it such theological profundity. Nevertheless, it has been translated as "steadfast love" (ESV), "unfailing love" (NIV), and—my personal favorite—"God's Never Stopping, Never Giving Up, Unbreaking, Always and Forever Love" (*The Jesus Storybook Bible*). This is God's loyalty and faithfulness to the covenant he has made with his chosen people, the source of all our peace, hope, and joy.

There are three elements to Moses' prayer for mercy.⁵ First, Moses asks for the restoration of God's favor: "Return, O Lord! How long? Have pity on your servants" (verse 13). Note the ironic use of

⁵ Willem Van Gemeren, *Psalms*, The Expositor's Bible Commentary, vol. 5, ed. Tremper Longman III and David E. Garland (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2008): 695.

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"return" here, translated as "relent" in the NIV, the same word used back in verse 3. Whereas before God had turned men to dust, here he may himself turn from his fierce anger and pour forth his mercy instead.

(As an aside, we see again the importance of consulting various translations when doing Bible study. The ESV maintains the literal translation, "return," allowing us to see Moses' dual use of the word in the psalm. The NIV translates the word differently in the two instances, but helps us understand the significance of its use in each location.)

Second, Moses pleads for a restoration of the joy of his salvation: "Satisfy us in the morning with your unfailing love, that we may rejoice and be glad all our days" (verse 14). The purpose clause is all-important here. Should God satisfy us with his unfailing love (*chesed*), we should respond in worship. The two are linked as inextricably as wrath and fear. No wonder Paul famously said, "Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God's *mercy*, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God—this is your spiritual act of *worship*" (Romans 12:1, NIV).

Finally, Moses prays for the continuity of God's blessing: "Make us glad for as many days as you have afflicted us, and for as many years as we have seen evil" (verse 15). Here we see the counterpoint to verses 9-10. The long life of sorrow is exchanged for a long life of joy. The years of joy will be equal to the years of distress, when God no longer hides himself. Moses prays for this unveiling in verse 16: "May your deeds be shown to your servants, your splendor to their children." The deeds to which Moses refers are probably his work of grace, bringing his people into their inheritance. This is similar to Isaiah's words in 61:3: "[God's people] will be called oaks of righteousness, a planting of the LORD for the display of his splendor" (NIV). God's deeds, including the redemption of his people, are for his glory.

Moses concludes his prayer by asking that God's beauty would rest upon them: "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

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our hands!" Note the order: first God establishes his work (verse 16) and then ours (verse 17). God's acceptance ensures the permanence of our work. That is, the grass will fade, so what will remain? It seems, as one commentator put it, ". . . as though the one great use of the shortness of life, and the coming on of death, were to stir us up to use the very utmost of the time that is left."⁶ I suspect this is the case.

In turning to our own lives, surely this is the issue that should captivate us. In light of who we are (mortal and evil) and who God is (eternal and merciful), how should we live our lives? How will we live life in the face of death? As I see it from this psalm, *we must number our days so that we dedicate our lives to work that God will establish eternally*. We must face death in order to live life well. And as a culture, we do not do this as we should. Throughout history humanity prepared for a good death—consider the heroes of Greek mythology, for example, or even Patrick Henry's famous dictum—but now it is an unpopular subject, really the only taboo topic today. As I shared some of these thoughts with a group of teenagers a few weeks back, many grew angry with me for reminding them that their lives are finite, that death would come to them sooner than they expect. But this is the harsh truth, surprising though it seems to some: we will die, and presently.

If this is the reality that confronts me, then I want to ensure I make the most of the time left to me. I want to steel myself with the resolve of Jonathan Edwards, who at age eighteen resolved, "that I will live so as I shall wish I had done when I come to die."⁷ If, as I suggested earlier, no one will remember us—not even our family—within three or four generations, how will we make our lives matter? How will we touch eternity in mortality?

⁶ As quoted in Perowne, 2:169.

⁷ Jonathan Edwards, "Resolutions," in *A Jonathan Edwards Reader*, ed. John E. Smith, Harry S. Stout, and Kenneth P. Minkema (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995): 275.



Most all that we accomplish in this life will pass away either by the ravages of time or the fire that God will rain down upon this earth at the end of time. Architecture provides a clear example. Every building an architect designs and build will tumble and fall. The devastating earthquakes in Haiti and Chile are proof of this—and proof that it can happen unexpectedly and catastrophically. Our work, even more than our lives, will pass away faster than grass withering in a dry heat. If the grass fades, what will remain?

Well, friends, we will remain.

Our souls will persist into eternity. Thus, if we want to touch eternity in mortality, we must do it with people. Our primary work must be building into the souls of the men and women who surround us. It is curious that Moses uses the phrase “the work of our hands” in verse 17. Though normally used of idols in the Old Testament, Isaiah’s handling of the same phrase suggests an important nuance for us: “Then will all your people be righteous and they will possess the land forever. They are the shoot I have planted, the *work of my hands*, for the display of my splendor” (60:21, NIV). What is the work of God’s hands? We are. People. The men and women he calls to himself.

What part will you play in this process? What work will you do that he will establish eternally?

If you are a parent (or will be someday), this thought should be on your mind ceaselessly. God has entrusted to you precious young souls, and you will have no greater ministry responsibility than raising them well. How it breaks my heart to see so many Christian parents abdicating this holy calling, too busy or apathetic to be troubled by these dear treasures given us by an incomparable Father! God sets the standard high for parents: “And these words that I command you today shall be on your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise” (Deuteronomy 6:6-7). These are not words for the church or the school; these are words for parents. And so I ask, are you teaching your

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children the Word? Do you open it together every day as a family? Do you worship together? Do you pray together? Are you training them in godliness—to obey, to submit, to love, to forgive? Are you shepherding them toward the Good Shepherd to whom they will give account one day? Or are you just crossing your fingers and hoping for the best? Raising your children is a mandate God has given to you. If you abdicate your role in their lives to someone far less able than you, you will face judgment, I am sure. And you will have passed on one of your great opportunities to make an eternal difference in the world.

If you are a husband (or will be someday), you are the spiritual head of your home. Certainly this means you must tend to your children, leading the family devotional times daily. But you have a responsibility to your wife as well. Paul wrote, “Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, so that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish. *In the same way husbands should love their wives as their own bodies*” (Ephesians 5:25-28). Just as Christ nurtures his church, working to grow her in righteousness, so are we to love our wives. Do you pray for your wife? with your wife? Do you lead her deeper into the Word? Have you taken care of her soul by the grace of God and in the power of the Spirit? Neglect not this holy work.

If you are neither a husband nor a parent, you are still a human, and you still have the same commission, to make disciples of people everywhere. Are you in the disciple-making business? Wherever you are in life—whatever stage, whatever career, whatever culture—there are people around you who need Jesus. Take the initiative, step out in faith, and do what God has commanded you to do. Share the gospel with unbelievers at your work or school. Tell your story. Start meeting with someone regularly for prayer and accountability. Take someone under your wing and help them grow in their faith, as Moses did with Joshua, Jeremiah did with Baruch, Paul did with Timothy.

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Start today; don't wait. Eternity is coming, and faster than we realize. Live today in light of eternity, with a recognition of your sure and certain death, and make sure your life mattered. Devote your life to work that God will establish eternally. Devote it to building into the souls of the men and women who surround you.

"So teach us to number our days that we may get a heart of wisdom."

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