

Dwelling in God forever **Psalm 90**

Let's pray.

If you are just joining us, we are in the midst of a summer study called – **God in Real Life: Praying our Lives through the Psalms.**

Acknowledging that the Psalms – the prayer book of the Bible – is surprisingly familiar with the real stuff of our lives... That in the Psalms we find the vast terrain of our life experience named, lived and lifted to God in prayer... Which tells us that the whole of our lives – all that we go through – matters to God and is invited into prayer.

All that you are going through right now matters to God and is invited by God into prayer...

I love how James Houston, the founding principle of Regent College (in Vancouver), once defined prayer as simply “**talking with God about the life we share**”.

That's what we find in the psalms. We find *the whole of life* – moments of beauty and thankfulness, experiences of desolation and agony... seasons of confusion and times of dramatic breakthrough... long desolate winters of the soul and the flourishing springtime of the heart... new birth... death... desire... distraction... cross-roads... sin... betrayal and redemption... all named and voice to God in prayer...

Prayer is simply talking with God about the life we share...

And so far in this study, we’ve found ourselves in a lot of different places... In **Psalm 1** – and the ache for blessing and fruitfulness... In **Psalm 77** – and the familiar experience of having life’s trails blur and obscure our vision of God... We’ve found ourselves in **Psalm 23** – invited again to trust God our Shepherd through all the hills and valleys that life entails... And last week we found ourselves in **Psalm 119** – naming to God our need to keep our way pure, and seeking God’s wisdom for this...

And this morning, I want to invite us to jump from the particularity of last Sunday’s text (Psalm 119:9f – “*How can a young man keep his way pure?*”) to a psalm that gives voice to the larger sweep of life and death, the immediate and the eternal – **Psalm 90**.

A Psalm some of us would know through the hymns it has inspired – most-notably: **O God, our help in ages past**. Which we will come to in a bit, but first let us begin by reading this Psalm together. **Psalm 90**.

(Please join me wherever the words are **bright**)

A prayer of Moses the man of God.

(v.1) **Lord, you have been our dwelling place throughout all generations.**

*Before the mountains were born
or you brought forth the whole world,
from everlasting to everlasting you are God.*

(v.3) **You turn people back to dust,
saying, “Return to dust, you mortals.”**

A thousand years in your sight

*are like a day that has just gone by,
or like a watch **in the night.***

Yet you sweep people away in the sleep of death—
*they are like the new grass of the morning:
In the morning it springs up new,
but by evening it is dry **and withered.***

(v.7) *We are consumed by your anger
and terrified by your indignation.*

**You have set our iniquities before you,
our secret sins in the light of your **presence.****

*All our days pass away under your wrath;
we finish our years with a moan.*

*Our days may come to seventy years,
or eighty, if our strength endures;*

Yet the best of them are but trouble and sorrow,
*for they quickly pass, and **we fly away.***

(v.11) *If only we knew the power of your anger!
Your wrath is as great as the fear that is your due.*

(v.12) **Teach us to number our days,
That we may gain a heart **of wisdom.****

(v.13) *Relent, LORD! How long will it be?
Have compassion on your servants.*

Satisfy us in the morning with your unfailing love,
*that we may sing for joy and be glad **all our days.***

*Make us glad for as many days as you have afflicted us,
for as many years as we have seen trouble.*

*May your deeds be shown to your servants,
your splendor to their children.*

*May the favor/beauty of the Lord our God rest on us;
establish the work of our hands for us—
*yes, establish the work of **our hands.****

Let's be honest, it's a sober psalm, isn't it? Not one you'd pick
for **a wedding toast.** Particularly with it's repeated references to

God’s wrath and anger. Which is not something that contemporary Christians – that many of us – often give much time to. And yet this is probably why we **need** to spend some time in a psalm like this. And not just consider it, but to let it shape our prayers. [Which is my hope for today...]

Interestingly, in the Jewish community – this psalm is **very** important. In fact, in the liturgy/established order of weekly worship in the synagogues, this Psalm and the one that follows it (Psalm 90-91) are read as a part of the introduction **every Sabbath** at the start of the service... **Psalm 90:1-2**

*Lord, you have been our dwelling place or our refuge throughout all generations.
Before the mountains were born
or you brought forth the whole world,
from everlasting to everlasting you are God.*

Now as I’ve been studying and praying with this Psalm over the last while, I’ve been surprised how many commentators summarize this psalm and especially this opening portion as being about God being eternal. Which is definitely a part of it, but to leave it at just that is to miss something core to this whole psalm...

Because according to Psalm 90, God is not just eternal – but He has been **our dwelling place, our refuge** throughout all generations.

Which, understandably, is a reality that our Jewish brothers and sisters have had much reason to return to often. **As do you and I...**

Even just this week, it has amazed me how often this reality – this truth – this affirmation has been a comfort and necessary perspective for me and those I’ve been walking and praying with: in the face of decisions that sometimes feel really big... in the midst of tumultuous times in the world and in some of our lives... in the midst of questions about the future and issues that feel so volatile and perilous in our day.

What a gift it is to affirm and declare with the psalmist:

Lord, you have been our dwelling place/our refuge throughout all generations.

*Before the mountains were born
or you brought forth the whole world,
from everlasting to everlasting you are God.*

In the swirl of life sometimes, or even often, this is a truth and reality we need to constantly remember, re-affirm and celebrate.

That we are not lost in the cosmos (as Walker Percy once wrote)... That what **is** right now is not **all that is or will be**. That our moment in time is just one chapter in a Grand, Epic Story – and the primary writer is not us or others, but God... A God who is our Refuge – our Dwelling Place – our Shelter – ***in it all – through it all – throughout all generations...***

As Isaac Watts (the great 17th century hymn-writer) so

memorably put it – “O God, our help in ages past”

O God, our help in ages past,
Our hope for years to come,
Our shelter from the stormy blast,
And our eternal **home!**

Beneath the shadow of Thy throne
Thy saints have dwelt secure;
Sufficient is Thine arm alone,
And our defense is **sure.**

Before the hills in order stood,
Or earth received her frame,
From everlasting Thou art God,
To endless years the **same.**

(Let it be said: a well-written song can be a great way to pray a psalm.)

So, this is where Psalm 90 begins, and then in v.3 it shifts the focus to the relative **shortness of our lives.**

*(v.3) You turn people back to dust,
saying, “Return to dust, you mortals.”
A thousand years in your sight
are like a day that has just gone by,
or like a watch **in the night.***

*Yet you sweep people away in the sleep of death—
they are like the new grass of the morning:
In the morning it springs up new,
but by evening it is dry **and withered.***

The psalmist offers no flattery here, does he? We’d like some, some simple affirmation of the beauty and significance of our lives – but that’s not what the psalmist is after here. Which isn’t to say that

he denies the beauty and significance of our lives – because the end of the Psalm affirms just that. But at this point, **it’s not the point.**

In contrast to God’s Eternal Sovereign existence, our life is simply short/fleeting. *From dust to dust* – God says in Gen 3:19.

And then with this, the Psalmist adds **another observation:** that this short life we live is one that is marked by pain and trouble.

Hear **again what he says:**

(v.7) *We are consumed by your anger
and terrified by your indignation.
You have set our iniquities before you,
our secret sins in the light of your **presence.***

*All our days pass away under your wrath;
we finish our years with a moan.*

Or as the **ESV puts it**, “we bring our years to an end like a sigh.”

Our days *may come to seventy years,
or eighty, if our strength endures;
Yet the best of them are but trouble and sorrow,
for they quickly pass, and **we fly away.***

So, not only is our life **short** in the grand scheme of things, but **it’s hard.** And it’s hard **because of God.**

That’s what it sounds like the psalmist is saying, doesn’t it?

That the suffering and struggle of life is all at the hands of God – **because of God... because of God’s wrath.**

“**We are consumed** by your anger... *All our days pass away under your wrath...*”

Which can make us think or feel that God is *cruel, mean, unjust and oppressive*. Maybe that's why we stay away from Psalms like this – and any mention of God's wrath, for that matter.

It makes God sound un-Christ-like.

But here's the thing – according to the psalm, although God's wrath is real and heavy and to be feared, *the one to blame is not God, but us...* humanity... the very people God created to find their Refuge in Him.

(v.8) *You have set our iniquities before you, our secret sins in the light of your presence.*

And **in response – in response to our sin and the sin of others** – God's wrath weighs heavy upon humanity.

Now, before you decide to walk out or that I need to take my summer holidays and get some rest, we need to take a moment to consider together what the Psalmist and the Bible mean when they speak of God's wrath...

Because this is not some obscure, rarely mentioned reality in scripture – but something that is reference all throughout the Biblical narrative from beginning to end, and not just in the Old Testament, but in the New – and of all the New Testament teachers, no one spoke about God's wrath as much as Jesus. So we can't ignore or remove this from the Story of God and life with God...

And maybe it's best to simply start with a definition.

According to the biblical revelation, **God’s wrath is His active response to injustice, idolatry and evil.**

Let me say that again - According to scripture, **God’s wrath is His active response to injustice, idolatry and evil.**

Which, if we stop to think about it, is something for which we should be thankful.

As odd as it sounds, understood this way – the way the Bible reveals it – the wrath of God is actually **something good**. It is his active response against injustice, idolatry and evil. This is **a good thing**. Hard – Yes. But *deeply, truly, good*.

Stated another way: God’s wrath is the manifestation of his hatred of idolatry, injustice and moral evil. It is a vital expression of God’s Holiness – God’s good and perfect Holy Love.

As many have said before, **“Would a God be good who did not react adversely to evil in His world?”**

No.

Let me state it more personally – **“Would a God be good who did not react adversely to evil in us?”**

No. Though this is a hard truth. It is good. That God is unwilling to simply stand back and allow the evil, injustice and idolatry in the world and in us to go unaddressed.

God’s wrath is not something for which we need to be embarrassed. Truth is, **it is a vital expression of His beautiful holiness.**

→ **Which is imperative for us to understand.**

Because if the wrath of God is something horrible, why would we, or anyone, ever, **want** *God as our refuge – our dwelling place – throughout all generations?*

In reality, this is the very story of the fall, isn’t it? The serpent’s lie that God can’t be trusted, that God’s will and ways will diminish us, that God is out to rob us of life, that real life and freedom and wholeness is found in anything and everything **but God.**

That’s the rotten fruit that Adam and Eve ate – and that we’re tempted to eat every day...

And in response, God’s wrath is upon the earth – and every facet of creation aches with some outworking of the curse...

As one wise pastor distilled the first half of **this psalm**: **“Life is hard and then we die—and it’s our fault.”** (Ben Patterson).

So, what’s our response **to all this?**

Well, that’s where the psalm goes next.

In the light of all that he has said – about the Eternal reality of God, about God being our dwelling place throughout all generations,

and our lives being short and marked by suffering at the hands of our own sin and the sin of others – the **psalmist concludes:**

(v.11) *If only we knew the power of your anger!
Your wrath is as great as the fear that is your due.*

*Your wrath is as great as **the fear that is your due.***

That last line gets to the point – and note that he doesn’t soften this for the sake of our or his contemporary’s ears... He doesn’t shift to say, “*If only we knew how good You are*”. Which is true, but in doing so he’d lose the force of what he cannot deny. That God’s goodness involves His wrath. Which means He is a God to be loved **and feared**. Not a cowering fear, but in **reverent fear**.

A daily acknowledgement that God is God and we are not.

In the light of who God is and that He is God over all generation – from everlasting to everlasting – the only response that makes sense – **is to bow in reverent fear to God.**

To turn and run to Him.

To seek and live the whole of our lives in Him:

- Who alone is **All-Wise**.
- Who alone is the Source of **all Life**.
- Who alone holds the keys of **Life and death**.
- Who alone is **our Refuge throughout all generations...**

As **Proverbs 1:7** **simply states:** “*The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom.*”

We need to ask ourselves:

- Do we fear God? Do you? (not in a cowering way, but in reverence)
- Do we seek to know His will and walk in it?

- Do we know the joy and life and goodness that is found in fearing God alone and trusting God above all?
- Do our lives reflect and reveal the reverent fear of God?
 - How? In what ways?

These are questions for us all.

Questions that led the psalmist to **this prayer-response**:

***Teach us to number our days,
That we may gain a heart of wisdom.***

That’s the prayer at the heart of Psalm 90.

Not simply “*Lord, you have been our dwelling place throughout all generations*”.

But ***because You alone are our Dwelling Place throughout all generations and for all generation... Because we have been made to Dwell in You...***

***“Teach us to number our days,
That we may gain a heart of wisdom.”***

*“Teach us **to number our days** – that we may gain a heart of wisdom.”*

Over the years, our family has had the privilege of going to Hawaii a few times. And I’ll tell you: **we number our days!** We are always aware what day we are on and how many days are left. Why? Because we don’t want to lose track of the passing gift of each day... We want to make the most of every day we’ve got... Because this is a gift... And when it’s done, we want to be able to say that we made the most of what God gave us and the gift of it all.

That’s the prayer of the Psalmist:

***“Teach us to number our days,
That we may gain a heart of wisdom.”***

Some of us might remember Keith Price, a wise Bible-teacher who lived in Victoria for many years until his death. I’ll never forget how, at some point in his life, he took this Psalm and prayer to heart – actually sitting down and calculating how many years he might expect to live and how many days he still had to live. And each and every day he would call this to mind – embracing each day as another day to be lived in reverent fear and trust in God... Another a day to be lived for God, to honor God, to seek and follow God, to trust God, in whatever the day would bring...

Keith’s life embodied this prayer:

***“Teach us to number our days,
That we may gain a heart of wisdom.”***

And here’s the wisdom: **that God can be our Dwelling Place today...** Not just **some day**. Not just at the end of our days. ***But today and for all generations.***

Truth is, this is what we were made for, and this is what the gospel is all about.

- God Himself coming to **dwelt with us** in the incarnate life of Jesus.
- Jesus – God in the flesh – showing us in and through His life what a life ***lived in God*** looks like...

- Jesus – on the cross – bearing the full fury of God’s wrath against our sin – **for us...**
- And the gift of the Spirit coming to live and dwell in us – uniting us to the Father and the Son – for all eternity...

Our sins forgiven, our hearts and lives turned in grace toward the God who is our Refuge – that together we would **become** people, a community of Refuge – where God’s Dwelling Place takes on flesh – in us...

This is what we were made for and to which the gospel restores us... That we would become **Psalm 91 people.**

“Whoever dwells in the shelter of the Most High will rest in the shadow of the Almighty. I will say of the LORD, “He is my refuge and my fortress, my God, in whom I trust.”

Invitation to the Table -----

Let me close by coming back to the confession of this ancient hymn:

O God, our help in ages past,
Our hope for years to come,
Our shelter from the stormy blast,
And our eternal home!

Do you know the reality of this hope in your life today?

Do you long for this song to be true for you?

Come to Christ today. He is calling you.

Benediction -----

(v.13) Relent, LORD! How long will it be?

Have compassion on your servants.

Satisfy us in the morning with your unfailing love,

that we may sing for joy and be glad all our days.

Make us glad for as many days as you have afflicted us,

for as many years as we have seen trouble.

May your deeds be shown to your servants,

your splendor to their children.

May the favor/beauty of the Lord our God rest on us;

establish the work of our hands for us—

yes, establish the work of our hands.