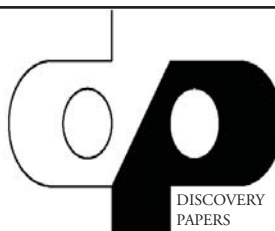


HOW GREAT THOU ART

**SERIES: LET US KNEEL BEFORE THE LORD,
OUR MAKER**



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Psalm 90
2nd Message
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My first experience of life-changing worship occurred when I was sixteen years old. I was a new Christian and didn't have much Bible content or a lot of instruction in the faith, but the experience of feeling thunderstruck or deeply moved in the presence of God occurred singing *How Great Thou Art*.¹ I had sung it before, but on this particular occasion I was with about five hundred other high-schoolers in a big auditorium at Forest Home Conference Center in southern California. It was a very dark night, no moon, and there was a strong wind blowing—even inside the auditorium, we were aware of the wind blowing through the trees. And we stood there and sang these great lyrics. I remember it clearly more than forty years later. Adoration of God. Theological poetry. Speaking and hearing. Imagery in music. Utterance and perception. My voice offered to God in a large chorus of other worshippers. I knew what the words meant, even when singing them, but there was an experience that went way beyond just what the words meant that took place for me that night.

Well, the enduring song book of the people of God is, of course, the Psalms in the Bible. It has been the place where those who want to direct their attention to God in worship, who want to pray, who want to find words for adoration or hope to express to God will turn and have turned and generation after generation the psalms have served this purpose, and we are in a series of studies in Psalms. Scholars of the Bible, of the Old Testament in particular, have more frequently in recent years focused on an aspect of the psalms that was less apparent or less commented on in earlier times, and that is the arrangement of the psalms in the book. There are 150 psalms, and they are broken into five books of psalms, and what has been given attention in recent decades is how particular psalms are put next to one another, why series of psalms occur and what the point of them is. The recognition is especially in books four and five. Book four begins with Psalm 90, where we are today, and particularly beginning there and through the rest of the 150, there is conscious arrangement so that one psalm is connected to another, one leads into another, one comments on another. We find that their connection is an important part of what we are supposed to experience. And beginning today, Psalm 90 will be followed next week by Psalm 91 and Psalm 92 the following week—these three are united together, put together with intention. They were probably read by Israelites on occasions of festivals or worship, read and sung and prayed together, and so we are going to consider them together and how they comment on each other.

The opening verses of Psalm 90:

A prayer of Moses the man of God.

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

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

Now these verses are not just the beginning of Psalm 90 as we read it, but they are the beginning of this threesome of psalms, setting the stage for our consideration of all of them together. And there are some important observations that we can make with this opening. The first is that this is Moses' psalm. Now as I said, this collection of psalms took place in a thoughtful manner, probably during the period

of time after Israel's exile in Babylon. They had returned home, they looked back on their history and were broken and hurt by what they saw of themselves as the people of God. How often they had failed. How much hope they had in their kings and how inadequate their kings had been, and the nation they had hoped to be as a light to the world had not been, and they were struggling with whether the promises of God could be true and how they would be true, and in an effort to make sense of these things, we find these psalms collected to speak to God and to teach the people as they prayed them to learn to think about their history, and so Moses, going way back before the monarchy, before the nation had entered the promised land, Moses' psalm is the beginning of this series because it reminds us that God is faithful over long generations. "You have been our dwelling place throughout all generations" (Psalm 90:1), casting all the way back to the exodus. You have not failed us; you have not given up on us. You are our dwelling place in all generations. We find ourselves as the people of God, living in your presence. And beyond that, you are the God who has made everything that exists, brought the mountains into being, brought the world itself into its form. You are the God of creation, you are the God of our history, you are the God of all generations. You are the great majesty who has been faithful to us where we have not been faithful to you.

So the first of the psalms that we are combining together now will have as its primary theme the fear of God. Verse 11 of Psalm 90 contains a phrase that I think is central to the entire text: "Your wrath is as great as the fear that is due you." Acknowledging that we dwell in the presence of God, acknowledging that he is majestic and eternal and beyond our generation and every generation, the creator of everything, in his presence now the first thing we will discover, the first encounter, the deep truth that begins our inquiry and our study in the presence of God is that we are unworthy of him and that he is fearsome. The fear of God is the beginning of wisdom. We encounter a breathtaking majesty and find that we have nothing to say of ourselves. That is the first lesson in Psalm 90.

The second, somewhat surprisingly, is the exact opposite in tone. Psalm 91 is about the tender nearness of God, about his loving intimacy, about his involvement in the simplest and most prosaic things of our lives, his attention to us in great detail. On the one hand he is majestic; on the other hand he is immanent. On the one hand he is a towering holiness; on the other he is a tender refuge to us. And these things are both true, and we read them one after the other as we pray to God. We connect these two ideas: fear of the Lord and delight in his nearness. And then, finally, the third of these psalms, Psalm 92, says "Therefore, we must sing." Worship is the only reasonable outcome to what we discover in the presence of God. We the people of God who dwell in his presence. Psalm 92, verse 1, says:

**It is good to praise the Lord
and make music to your name,**

**O Most High, to proclaim your love
in the morning and your faithfulness at night.**

Fear of the Lord, delight in the nearness of the Lord—these things held together lead to worship of the Lord.

This morning, we are going to look at the first of these songs, Psalm 90, but first I want to say something about the phrase “fear of the Lord.” It has been misunderstood. The idea that we should fear the Lord is a notion that is misunderstood in a lot of quarters. Language about God’s strength, his power, and his holiness has sometimes been used abusively by religious leaders who take those characteristics on themselves and misuse them in the presence of other folks. The language that God should be feared is sometimes stated in ways that suggest that there is no love in the fear of God, there is only anger, fury, and negativity. Of course, that is not true. The fear of the Lord is filled with the love of the Lord. Fear of the Lord is not cringing horror of the Lord. It is not destructive. It is not degrading or cruel. God’s purity and power do not create an impenetrable barrier that keeps us from him. But what it does mean to say is that we should and must fear the Lord and that I have no rights to claim. I am unworthy of God’s attention. I am certainly unworthy of his love. Grace should always be received by us as a joyful surprise, not as a reward for something we have accomplished. Fear of the Lord is the opposite of presumption. I have no claim on anything coming from God. The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. It is the first reaction we should have. It is the first lesson we should learn, with more to follow.

So let me read Psalm 90 and we will consider some of its phrasing.

A prayer of Moses the man of God.

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

**You turn men back to dust,
saying, “Return to dust, O sons of men.”
For a thousand years in your sight
are like a day that has just gone by,
or like a watch in the night.
You sweep men away in the sleep of death;
they are like the new grass of the morning—
though in the morning it springs up new,
by evening it is dry and withered.**

**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.
The length of our days is seventy years—
or eighty, if we have the strength;
yet their span is but trouble and sorrow,
for they quickly pass, and we fly away.**

**Who knows the power of your anger?
For your wrath is as great as the fear that is**

due you.

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

Relent, O 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 of the Lord our God rest upon us;

establish the work of our hands for us—

yes, establish the work of our hands.

The first sets of images that we find in this psalm, the first encounter we make with truth about God and truth about ourselves is that we are transients. Our lives are a breath. Seventy, eighty years perhaps, then utterly forgotten. We are transients. We do not last long. Now, if you read the literature of pretty much every civilization and every culture that has left behind its thoughts on the nature of being human, you will find over and over again, in every place, that if people live long enough to comment on life, if you have elders in a village, in a culture, or who write literature, those who have lived for a while will comment on how fast life moves by. You will find it among the saints in this church. It seems like yesterday that I was in high school. It seems like a moment ago that we were getting married, and now we have kids, and now they are married and how did it go by so fast? How did life turn out that I am here now, and I don’t feel this old, but there it is. Life has gone by at an enormous pace. Over and over again, human beings have made that reflection that, having lived some years, I can’t believe that the time has gone by so quickly.

There is all sorts of folklore and stories and imaginations that want to defeat the passing of time. Amulets and incantations that allow people to sort of stave off the effects of aging, explorers looking for the fountain of youth in some far place where it is imagined to be because, if you find the fountain of youth, age will not be the enemy that it is to us. So people go exploring around the world looking for such things. Time travel is imagined in science fiction. Vampires are invented who don’t die but live to great long age doing their terrible deeds. The only good thing about being a vampire is you get to live a long time and defeat the aging process. Ecclesiastes is sort of an extended mid-life crisis recorded in the Bible, but it starts with the immutability of the cycles. Over and over again the same thing happens, and the same thing happens, and it will happen again, and it will happen again, and the cycles will never change, and all is vanity and striving after wind. Nothing will change. My life some day will be gone, and I will be forgotten, and it will make no difference.

When the first edition of Trivial Pursuit came out in 1979, I was thirty years old, and I was terrific at Trivial Pursuit. I used to win all the time and impressed everybody. I was the most trivial person I know. But here is the deal. I was right in the height of being in the midst of whatever my generation was, and I sort of knew all the stuff that was referred to, but ten or fifteen or twenty years later, other

things had happened I wasn't quite as aware of, that weren't part of my world, and I realized that the later editions of Trivial Pursuit I didn't know anything about. We watch Jeopardy at our house, and it is the same deal with Jeopardy. If they have categories that are about history or language or geography, I do pretty well, but if they are about TV celebrities of the twenty-first century, I have no chance. And the realization of all this is that time is moving on. Whatever I stand for isn't current, but it seems like only recently it wasn't that way. It turns out that 1979 is a long time ago. So the frustration is that we want to last, we long to have significance that will stay, and yet the reality is that we don't. And God is seen as observing these things and being unmoved by our circumstance. We can inject Botox into our skin, we can airbrush photos to make ourselves look better, we can undergo cosmetic surgery to improve our appearance, but eventually the effects of time will win out and we will pass on and be forgotten. And God doesn't feel sorry for us. He doesn't pat us on the head and say there, there. He doesn't tuck us in at night and say it will all be OK. In fact, it says he sweeps us away with his hand. "You sweep men away in the sleep of death; they are like the new grass of the morning" (Psalm 90:5). Our dustiness, our transience, makes no claim upon God. That we have come and gone doesn't change him at all; he is the same yesterday, today, and forever. And so we find that our transience in the presence of his glory is made less important, and we are smaller than we would have believed ourselves to be if we hadn't seen God as he is.

But here is the curious thing: these words are a prayer. They are written to God. We have no right, we have no claim to make. There is nothing about him that is changed by our plight. He isn't reduced in any sense. His eternity isn't shortened by our difficulties, and yet, having acknowledged that those things are true, we still speak to him of our plight. Why? Why are these things written as a prayer to God rather than a cry into the darkness against the unfairness of it all? They are written because here is what is also true: God doesn't have to respond to us, we have no claim upon him, but he loves us. He has chosen to have our lives matter to him. And again, the writer of Ecclesiastes says he has made everything appropriate in its time, but he has also set eternity in the hearts of human beings (Eccl 3:11), and we believe of ourselves that we matter. God has let us believe of ourselves that we matter, that we are created not to pass away as grass that withers and is blown by the wind, but we are made to live forever, to matter forever, and God has given us those longings because he intends to do something about it. He doesn't need to, but he has chosen to. And so we enter the presence of God and discover his towering beauty, his eternity, his strength. We discover ourselves tiny before him, and yet we pray we'll hear him respond to us. We were made to live forever, as it turns out, and that is the gospel, the offer of eternal life.

Now why is this good news? Finding out that you are going to die is good news. Everyone here, if the Lord doesn't return in our lifetime, will die for sure. I promise you, that is an absolute certainty. Whatever you do to fight or resist or kick against it or however you feel about it or whatever choices you make, it is going to happen. And that is good news because it means that the to-do list that is sitting on your desk or on your PDA or wherever it is, is not as important as you think. All the stuff that we spend ourselves on, give attention to, and whirl around doing is not as big a deal as it seems to us, and if we know that, if we can give our attention to what really matters, listening to the Lord God, entering into what he is doing, we gain freedom. As long as we are fooled about how important we are and how lasting our contribution is, we won't listen to what is really important. So it is good news to dwell in the presence of God and hear of our short-lived, transient reality, because that will make us hope for eternity as it really is.

The second form of language, beginning in verse 7, regards not transience in particular but brokenness. It is about sin. Not only are we short-lived, we are also iniquitous. We are guilty. "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" (Psalm 90:7-9). We are in God's presence with all of our failure and rebellion and hardness of heart, the hurt we have inflicted on other people, the unrighteousness that we have gleefully held on to, the selfishness—all are there in the gaze of God. And you know what? He is not interested in our explanation, the extenuating circumstances, the blame we would give other people, or how much better we are than someone else. He doesn't want to hear any of it. Not interested. He sees us as we are, guilty as charged, and to make it even worse, particular attention is paid to the secret sins. The searchlight of God focuses on the secret sins that we don't want anybody else to know about and we wish we didn't ever have to attend to in our own experience of ourselves. And once again he is not patting us on the head and saying it is "OK." His anger is raised that those who are made in his image should treat people the way we treat them and should think what we think, can do what we do. He is righteously angry. But why is that good news? Why is it to our advantage to know that we are guilty as charged and that God is not willing to listen to any explanations, any getting out of, or any cleaning up of our stuff? It is good news because he is going to answer his anger with his love. He is going to bear the punishment. He is going to take what we deserve on himself so that we can be genuinely free of sin, not just manage it well, that we can be cleansed, forgiven, and made new. As long as we are not dealing with the real stuff, we are never going to be really healed. If we deal with the real stuff in the presence of God, he can give us cleansing, newness of life, and beauty that we can never achieve by trying to attempt it for ourselves. Jesus said remember that those who hunger for righteousness will be satisfied. The ones who in the presence of God wish they were different than they are, who long to be different than they are, who receive his word about who they are. Those are satisfied. Hungering to be different. It is those who mourn for their sin who are comforted. God can give a gift to us when we stop pretending we are different than we are. We get off the cycle of trying harder, of hypocrisy, of denial, blaming others, sitting in wretchedness, giving up, and promising to do better. We get off the cycle of those things, admit the truth, and receive the gift of God that he didn't have to give us, but chose to give us.

CONVICTION

Verse 10 goes on to wrap the two ideas of transience and sin together into a kind of a further word of conviction. Verses 10-11:

**The length of our days is seventy years—
or eighty, if we have the strength;
yet their span is but trouble and sorrow,
for they quickly pass, and we fly away.**

**Who knows the power of your anger?
For your wrath is as great as the fear that is
due you.**

And then in verse 12 the first request of this psalm, we ask him to help:

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

Lord, help us to see ourselves and the world we live in and the reality of our experience the way you see it. Help us to care about things wisely, to take into account the majesty of God, the neediness of our human soul. Help us make choices that are worthy instead of foolish,

that we would rather please God than trick him, that we would value what he values, that we would stop pretending. Teach us those things.

I have a dear friend who most mornings gets up and sends pulses of love into the universe. She meditates and she has decided that the best thing she can do to fix her life and everybody else's is to send these pulses of love into the universe. And she doesn't like to talk about things like sickness, financial plans careening off the cliff, and bad people doing bad things. Her approach is that if we don't talk about such stuff, it won't happen, and the best thing we can do is to be positive. Put forth positive energy and send pulses of love into the universe, and that is the best approach to making life work. But it is not. Verse 12 tells us: Lord, teach us to see the world as it really is, to tell the hard truth, even when we would rather not, but having done so, receive the real gift of life that lasts forever, of righteousness that is Christ's, not something we have manufactured for ourselves. Teach us to engage the world with truth about ourselves and our place in the grand scheme of things, and joy that comes from knowing that God has chosen to invest himself in us.

There are some who have mocked the hard language of the Christian faith, the old Jonathan Edwards' *Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God*, and they hope to move beyond that sort of discussion as if there can be a better version of Christianity than that. But in the long run, the only version of life with God that is real begins with the fear of the Lord. The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. And in fact, the wages of sin is death, and in fact, death and the grave are the final enemy, and in fact, God has done something about them both. Death does not reign, the grave cannot hold life, and we receive these things as a gift.

Let me read the closing verses and wrap up.
Verses 13-17:

Relent, O 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 of the Lord our God rest upon us;
establish the work of our hands for us—
yes, establish the work of our hands.**

There is a series of requests made here. The requests are all about magnifying God in our experience, not ourselves. Satisfy us with your love, make your deeds known to us, make your glory known to us, and grant us your favor. Lord, become larger in our experience. Help us

grow in our appreciation for you, our awareness, and our connection to you. Lord, make yourself greater—make us smaller. Make sense of the world by being in it with us. All these requests come because God has inwardly, by the Spirit, invited us to make them, because he intends to answer them. If we do not fear the Lord, if we are presumptuous, if we treat him as some sort of occasional acquaintance, if our knees do not buckle at the towering holiness of God, and our unworthiness before him, we are in no position to receive the immense gifts that he wants to give us. The longer we stay impressed with ourselves, the less impressed we will be with God.

*Oh Lord, my God, when I in awesome wonder
Consider all the worlds Thy hands have made,
I see the stars, I hear the rolling thunder
Thy pow'r thro'out the universe displayed.
When thro' the woods and forest glades I wander...
When I look down from lofty mountain grandeur...
Then sings my soul ...
And when I think that God, His Son not sparing,
Sent Him to die, I scarce can take it in,
That on the cross, my burden gladly bearing,
He bled and died to take away my sin.
Then sings my soul, my Savior God, to Thee;
How great Thou art! How great Thou art!¹*

The oldest lie, the original lie, is that we can be like God, that we can replace God in our world, and that we have no need of him because we are like him. It is the oldest and deepest lie. We are in desperate need of him. We are nothing without him, and the fear of the Lord, the awful possibility that we could be just ourselves without his touch on our lives, should terrify us and make us listen and allow us to hear the good news that comes from fearing the majestic person of the Lord God.

Isaac Watts is perhaps the greatest writer of English hymns, a tremendous, brilliant writer, and the song *O God, Our Help in Ages Past* was based on Psalm 90. Let us close our reflection on this psalm with the first verse from this hymn.

*O God, our help in ages past,
Our hope for years to come,
Our shelter from the stormy blast,
And our eternal home!²*

NOTES

¹ Stewart K. Hine, text of *How Great Thou Art*, 1953, renewed 1981.

² Isaac Watts, text of *O God, Our Help in Ages Past*.