

# Psalm 90: Time and Our Mortality

Expository Lessons from the Psalms

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## I. Introduction to Psalm 90 (designated Psalm 89 in the Septuagint)

- a. **Personal Note:** The main theme of this psalm is our mortality and preparing for death. Many hearing this message, who are aware of the recent serious illness I have had, might imagine that I am studying and teaching on this psalm because I suspect my own death may be approaching soon.
  - i. Actually, the opposite is the case. I do expect to recover from my current illness. While I am in my (early) seventies, I anticipate having a few more good years ahead. This message is primarily intended for the benefit of those who consider themselves young and healthy, who rarely think of their own death.
- b. This psalm is unique in that it is the only one attributed to Moses. That likely makes it the oldest psalm by far. Recall that Moses wrote about 400 years before David (author of many of the psalms).
- c. Some of the things we will touch on in this message:
  - ii. This psalm speaks powerfully, and with vivid imagery, about our mortality. Our time here on this earth is short and will soon come to an end; however, most people foolishly act as if their life on this earth will continue indefinitely.
  - iii. Most Christians don't realize it, but a famous statement by Peter, found in **2 Peter**, has its roots in this psalm.
  - iv. This psalm by Moses may give us some additional insight into the timeline of the creation account in **Genesis 1**. At least one early Christian writer thought so, anyway.
  - v. Later in this psalm, in the LXX text (which we will be relying on in this lesson), there is a perplexing reference to a "spider" (but in the Masoretic Text, it speaks of "sighing" instead). We will consider what that might be referring to.

## II. God's Sense of Time Versus Ours

- a. Read **Psalm 89/90:1-4**.
- b. How Moses saw God.
  - i. The Lord is our refuge. He can protect us in times of trouble.

- ii. God is “from everlasting to everlasting”. He has no beginning or end.
  - 1. His nature is beyond our understanding. As created beings, we cannot even comprehend what it means for God to have had *no beginning*.
  - 2. He formed all things.
- c. Many spiritual maladies have, at their root, a distorted view of who God is. While we are made “in the image of God”, He is not like us in many ways.
  - i. One of the most important challenges for us, as we read the Scriptures, is to strive to get a more and more accurate picture of who God really is. How He reveals Himself, and how the great men and women of faith before us knew Him to be.
  - ii. In many ways, our spiritual foundation (for better or worse) is how we see God to be.
  - iii. One of the first verses of the Bible I memorized as a young Christian was **Romans 9:20**. It helped me to remember that I am not like God and have no business challenging what He is doing.
    - 1. “But indeed, O man, who are you to reply against God? Will the thing formed say to him who formed it, ‘Why have you made me like this?’” (**Romans 9:20**, NKJV)
    - 2. God is not my servant or bellhop. He is not my ‘co-pilot’. He does not exist to give me an easy life nor to fulfill all my desires in this life.
  - iv. Likewise, let us consider how the Lord is revealed in the book of **Job**.
    - 1. Job is introduced in **Job 1** as a man who is blameless and upright, who fears God and shuns evil.
    - 2. Satan requests permission to attack Job’s possessions, his children, and finally, even his health.
    - 3. After seeing the suffering that comes into Job’s life, his friends (incorrectly) assume that this was the result of some hidden unrighteousness on Job’s part. They challenge Job to ‘come clean’ and admit wrongdoing.
    - 4. Through all this, Job maintains that he is innocent of wrongdoing. In **Job 31**, he defends his life, explaining how he lived as a righteous man: avoiding sin, resisting temptation and showing generosity to those in need.

5. In the beginning of **Job 38**, the Lord finally addresses Job's question about why all these bad things have happened to him. In that response from the Lord, we are reminded of some incredible things about the nature of God.
  - a. Read **Job 38:1-7**.
  - b. **Rhetorical Question the Lord asks Job:** "*Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? ...when the stars were made and all My angels praised Me in a loud voice?*" (**Job 38:4-7**)
  - c. The Lord reminds Job of Who He is. Job realizes his error in challenging the Lord, repents, and humbly responds to the Lord: "I deprecate myself in dust and ashes." (**Job 42:6**)
- v. When we (like Moses, Job and Paul) grasp who God is, that He is before all things and created all things from nothing, we can appreciate our own (very small) place in the created universe.
  1. Even when He is doing (or allowing) something that does not make sense to us, we can be assured that He has a good purpose, and He knows much more than we ever will!
- d. In **Psalm 89/90:4**, Moses writes (regarding the Lord): "For a thousand years in Your sight are like yesterday, which passed, and like a watch in the night."
  - i. **Question:** Does that line remind you of any similar statement in the New Testament?
    1. **Answer:** Read **2 Peter 3:1-9**, where the apostle Peter is speaking about the apparent delay (in the eyes of some) regarding the return of Christ.
      - a. "But, beloved, do not forget this one thing, that *with the Lord one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day*. The Lord is not slack concerning His promise, as some count slackness, but is longsuffering toward us, not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance." (**2 Peter 3:8-9**, NKJV)
    2. Many Christians assume this famous statement "with the Lord... a thousand years is as one day" originated with Peter. However, we see from **Psalm 90** that Peter knew this from what Moses had written centuries earlier.

- a. Peter applies this concept of God's different view of time to the Second Coming. In this case, the apostle maintains that the apparent delay is for very good reason: to allow more time for more people to repent and *be saved in the end!*
- ii. **Controversial Question:** In the account of the Creation and Fall of Man in **Genesis 1-3**, it speaks of certain "days". Does this statement by Moses in **Psalm 89/90:4** leave open the possibility that any of those "days" could have referred to a longer period of time (such as 1,000 years)?
  1. Most of the early Christian writers took each of the seven "days" of the Creation account as literal days, each with a morning and evening.
    - a. For more on this, see *Dictionary of Early Christian Beliefs*, ed. David Bercot, article on *Creation*.
      - i. An exception to the general pattern was Origen, who believed the seven "days" of Creation in **Genesis 1** should be taken *figuratively*. (See Origen, *De Principiis*, book 4, chapter 1; found in Ante-Nicene Fathers vol. 4, p. 365.)
  2. However, it is interesting to note that this psalm and the book of **Genesis** have the same author: *Moses*.
  3. Consider the following statement from the *Epistle of Barnabas*, written c. 70-130 AD:
    - a. "'And God made in six days the works of His hands, and made an end on the seventh day, and rested on it, and sanctified it.' (**Genesis 2:1-3**) Attend, my children, to the meaning of this expression, 'He finished in six days.' This implies that the Lord will finish all things in six thousand years, for a day is with Him a thousand years. And He Himself testifies, saying, 'Behold, today will be as a thousand years.' (**Psalm 89/90:4, 2 Peter 3:8**)"
      - i. (Source: *Epistle of Barnabas*, chapter 15; found in Ante-Nicene Fathers vol. 1, p. 146)
      - ii. Perhaps Barnabas is saying that the end of the world would come 6,000 years after its Creation?
      - iii. Similar statements by other early Christian writers, such as Irenaeus and Cyprian, are found

in *Dictionary of Early Christian Beliefs*, ed. David Bercot, articles on Days of Creation and *Creation*.

4. From Justin Martyr, writing c. 160 AD:
  - a. “According to the days of the tree [of life] shall be the days of my people; the works of their toil shall abound,’ (**Isaiah 65:22**, LXX) obscurely predicts a thousand years. For as Adam was told that “...in the *day* that you eat of it [*the tree*], you shall surely die” (**Genesis 2:17**), we know that he did not complete a thousand years. [Note: Adam died at the age of 930; see **Genesis 5:5**]. We have perceived, moreover, that the expression, ‘The day of the Lord is as a thousand years,’ (**Psalms 89/90:4, 2 Peter 3:8**) is connected with this subject.”
    - i. (Source: Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho, a Jew*, chapter 81; found in Ante-Nicene Fathers vol. 1, pp. 239-240)
    - ii. Note that in the LXX, the Greek word translated “day” in the **Genesis 2:17** passage Justin refers to (hemera / ἡμέρα) is the same word used throughout the 7-day Creation account in **Genesis 1**.
5. Certainly, the Lord, Who always existed and Who created all things from nothing, could have created the physical universe in seven days. Knowing who God is, this does not stretch my faith.
  - a. Everything in Scripture is true. However, some things are meant to be taken literally, and others are meant to be taken figuratively.
    - i. The challenge for us is to try to discern which statements in Scripture were meant to be taken literally versus figuratively.
    - ii. *No one* takes every statement of Scripture literally. Consider the statements about the Lord that speak of “the arm of the Lord”, “the eyes of the Lord”, “the ears of the Lord”, “shelter me in the shadow of Your wings”, etc. Do we really think that God the Father has literal arms, eyes, wings like a bird, etc? Of course not; everyone knows to take those statements figuratively.

- b. We can see multiple examples in Scripture where statements were made that were meant to be taken figuratively but where those hearing the statements mistakenly took them literally. Examples include:
    - i. “Jesus answered and said to them, ‘Destroy this *temple*, and in three days I will raise it up.’ Then the Jews said, ‘It has taken forty-six years to build this temple, and will You raise it up in three days?’ But He was speaking of the *temple of His body*.” (**John 2:19–21**, NKJV)
    - ii. “These things He said, and after that He said to them, ‘Our friend Lazarus *sleeps*, but I go that I may *wake him up*.’ Then His disciples said, ‘Lord, if he sleeps he will get well.’ However, Jesus spoke of his death, but they thought that He was speaking about taking rest in sleep.” (**John 11:11–13**, NKJV)
  - c. Conversely, there were places in Scripture where people took statements figuratively that actually were intended to be understood literally.
    - i. A classic example was the prophecy of **Deuteronomy 18:15-18** where God said he would “raise up” a prophet like Moses in the future. While people took the expression “raise up” figuratively (as in the expression “*raising up* leaders in a church”), Peter explained that the Lord actually meant it *literally*. The Lord had just “*raised up*” Jesus from the dead! (**Acts 3:22-26**)
6. Whether early Christian writers took the term “day” in **Genesis 1** literally as a 24-hour day or figuratively as representing a longer period of time, this does not appear to have been a cause for division in the early church.
- a. Perhaps we can learn from their example of tolerating different points of view on matters of interpretation.
  - b. It is important to note that regardless of whether they took “day” literally or figuratively, all the early Christians *rejected the concept of evolution*. (Evolution of animal species was a popular theory among some of the Greeks at the time. It *did not* originate with Charles Darwin.)

### III. We Pass Away Quickly, Like Grass

- a. Read **Psalm 89/90:5-12**.
- b. We are here for only a short time.
  - i. The famous passage in **Isaiah 40:6-7** speaks of all flesh as being like “grass” which “withers”. However, I believe the original concept that we are like grass was introduced in this psalm by Moses about 700 years before the time of Isaiah.
    1. Grass can appear in the morning but be withered up by the end of the day. Similarly, our lives will be over quickly. James uses another illustration to make the same point:
      - a. “...For what is your life? It is even a vapor that appears for a little time and then vanishes away.” (**James 4:14**, NKJV)
    2. While this idea of us being like grass that withers can be discouraging, Peter expands on what Moses and Isaiah said to give us hope. While our flesh may wither away, the gospel is like an incorruptible seed that has been planted within us, that we may be spiritually reborn with the hope of eternal life!
      - a. “...having been born again, not of corruptible seed but incorruptible, through the word of God which lives and abides forever, because ‘All flesh is as grass, And all the glory of man as the flower of the grass. The grass withers, And its flower falls away, But the word of the LORD endures forever.’ (**Isaiah 40:6-8**) Now this is the word which by the gospel was preached to you.” (**1 Peter 1:23-25**, NKJV)
- c. How much time do we have?
  - i. Moses, writing about 3400 years ago, indicated that a typical lifespan for a man was 70 years. However, if he is strong, he might be able to get another ten years and live to the age of 80. (Although Moses himself lived to the age of 120.)
  - ii. This is still the typical lifespan for most men today: about 70-80 years.
- d. Let us “number our days aright”.
  - i. Don’t live here on earth as if your life will never end. Keep the end of your life in view, and it will change how you live.

- ii. Many of us just attended a wedding for a couple from church who recently married. It was a joyous time, a celebration with music and food and filled with hope for the future of the new couple.
  1. **Question:** According to the Scriptures, what is the one event that is even better to attend than a wedding celebration?
  2. **Answer:** A funeral!
    - a. Read **Ecclesiastes 7:1-4**.
      - i. “It is better to go to the house of mourning than to go to the house of drinking. For this is the end of every man, and the living will take it to heart.” (**Ecclesiastes 7:2**)
      - ii. “The heart of the wise is in the house of mourning....” (**Ecclesiastes 7:4**)
    - b. **Question:** *Why* is it better to go to a funeral than to a wedding or similar celebration?
    - c. **Answer:** Because it reminds us that we, too, will soon experience the same fate! This is the end of all of us. Despite the parties and other distractions that preoccupy us, we are getting closer and closer to the day of our death. We need to be reminded of that, so we can prepare for it.
- iii. Richard Challoner’s thoughts regarding death.
  1. Challoner, one of my favorite Christian writers, was a Roman Catholic bishop in England in the 1700s. In that capacity, he was also responsible for overseeing churches in the British colonies in America.
  2. His first work, *Think Well On It*, was published in 1728 when Challoner was about 38 years old. It was written in the style of *The Imitation of Christ*, in short chapter format featuring a daily meditation for each day of the month, to help the reader consider and prepare for his own death.
    - a. In the publisher’s preface to the 2006 edition, Thomas A. Nelson explains he wanted to make this available to modern readers not for mere antiquarian or historic purposes, but because he considered it to be “probably the most powerful admonition that exists in the English language for us to heed the words of the gospel, rectify



our lives, and begin in earnest the serious job of working out our salvation.”

3. In Richard Challoner’s fifth day of meditations on death and mortality, he quotes from **Psalm 89/90:4**.
  - a. “...*Consider thirdly* the shortness of all worldly enjoyments. Man’s days are very short: the longest life is less than one moment if compared to eternity. ‘For a thousand years in thy sight are as yesterday, which is past.’ (**Psalm 89/90:4**, D-R) That is the very truth! Alas! Does not daily experience show us that we are here today and gone tomorrow – and no sooner are we out of sight, but out of mind also? For as soon as we are in the grave, those whom we leave behind think no more of us.
  - b. “‘All flesh is grass,’ says the prophet Isaiah, ‘and all the glory thereof as the flower of the field.’ (**Isaiah 40:6**) And what is that but flourishing in the morning and fading in the evening? (**Psalm 89/90:6**) Oh, how truly is our life likened by St. James to a vapor, or a thin smoke, which is dispersed by the first puff of wind, and we see no more of it! (**James 4:15**) How justly is it compared by Solomon to a shadow, or to a passing of a bird upon the wing, or to an arrow from the bow, which leaves no mark in the air behind it! (**Wisdom of Solomon 5:9, 11-12**) Ah, how vain it is to set our hearts upon what we must so soon leave!
  - c. “*Consider fourthly* what is now become of all those great ones of this world, those mighty monarchs, those gallant generals, those wise statesmen, those celebrated beauties, etc., who made such a figure a hundred years ago? Alas, they are all long since dead and gone! And now few, or none, ever thinks of them or scarce knows there ever were any such persons. Just so will it be with us a few years hence.
  - d. “Ah, Worldlings, give ear for one moment to those who are gone before you, who from their silent monuments where the remainder of their dust lies mingled with the common earth, call upon you in the words of the Wise Man, ‘...Remember my judgment, for thine also shall be so: yesterday for me, and today for thee.’ (**Ecclesiasticus / Wisdom of Sirach 38:23**) ‘Remember what we are come to; it will soon be the same with you. It was our turn yesterday; it will be

yours today. We once had our parts to act upon the stage of the world; we once were young, strong and healthy, as you are now, and thought as little as you do of what we are now come to. Like you, we set our hearts upon those trifles and toys that we could enjoy but for a moment, and for those we neglected eternity. Senseless wretches as we were, we chose to be slaves to a cheating world, to inconstant perishable creatures, which abandoned us so soon, rather than to serve that Lord and Master to whom nothing dies and who – neither in life nor in death – ever forsakes those that forsake not him.’

- e. “O Christians, let us take this warning: Let the miscarriages of so many others teach us to be wise; let us not set our hearts on this miserable world or look upon anything as truly great but that which is eternal!”
  - i. (Source: Challoner, Richard, *Think Well On It*, chapter 5, pp. 14-15; TAN Publishers, 2006)
- 4. From the same work by Challoner, from the seventh day of meditations on death and mortality:
  - a. “...*Consider thirdly* that death, being so certain and the time or manner of it so uncertain, it would be no small comfort if a man could die more than once, that so, if he should have the misfortune once to die ill, he might repair the fault by taking more care a second time. But alas! We can die but once, and when once we have set our foot within the gates of eternity, there is no coming back. If we die once well, it will be always well; but if once ill, it will be ill for all eternity. O Dreadful Moment, upon which depends and endless eternity! O blessed Lord, prepare us for that fatal hour!
  - b. “*Consider fourthly* the folly and stupidity of the greatest part of men, who though they daily see some or other of their friends, acquaintances or neighbors carried off by death – and that very often in the vigor of their youth, very often by sudden death – yet always imagine death to be at a distance from them, as if those arrows of death which are falling at all sides of them would not in their turn reach them too; or as if they had a greater security than so many others, who are daily swept away.

- c. “Senseless Worldlings! Why will you not open your eyes? Why will you fondly imagine yourselves secure from the stroke of death, when you cannot promise yourselves so much as one single day of life? How many will die before the end of this month that are as young, as strong and as healthy as you are? Who knows but you may be of that number? Ah, Christians, take care lest you be surprised! Set your house in order; and for the future, fly from sin, the only evil, which makes death terrible. Live always in those dispositions in which you would gladly be found at the hour of your death. To act otherwise is to renounce both religion and reason.”
  - i. (Source: *Ibid.*, chapter 7, pp. 20-21)
  - ii. Throughout his small book, Challoner is reminding the Christians (as Moses reminded us) that our lives here are brief and will soon pass. Let us heed his challenges to us, to soberly consider how we live our lives in the light of eternity!

#### IV. About that Spider

- a. Re-read **Psalm 89/90:9**.
  - i. “...Our years were spent in thought *like a spider*.” (**Psalm 89:9**, OSB, LXX)
  - ii. The passage is similar in the Douay-Rheims version, the traditional Catholic translation based on the Vulgate.
    - 1. “... Our years shall be considered *as a spider*.” (**Psalm 89:9**, D-R)
  - iii. In contrast, we should note that in versions based on the Masoretic text (MT), the same sentence is quite different. The “spider” is not there.
    - 1. “...We finish our years *like a sigh*.” (**Psalm 90:9**, NKJV)
    - 2. “...We bring our years to an end *like a sigh*.” (**Psalm 90:9**, ESV)
    - 3. “...We finish our years *with a moan*.” (**Psalm 90:9**, NIV)
  - iv. When Jesus and the apostles are quoting from the Old Testament, where the Septuagint version is different from the MT, they almost always follow the LXX. In fact, some who have investigated this have concluded that they follow the LXX about 90% of the time. I can’t just default to the MT rendering because it would be easier to explain.

- b. So, what do we do with this perplexing “spider” reference in the LXX? How is this to be understood? What was the writer trying to communicate in that phrase? What on earth is he referring to? In what way is our life to be considered like that of *a spider*?
- i. Some possibilities I came up with when pondering this question (trying to think like a spider), include:
1. A spider is typically just sitting on its web, just waiting for the next fly or other victim to land in its web.
  2. A spider is frequently busy with the work of repairing his broken web.
  3. A spider is a relatively helpless creature, living in fear that someone might step on it, suddenly ending its life.
- ii. Since my attempt at trying to “think like a spider” did not seem to shed any clear light on this question, I wondered if the Greek word in the LXX that the OSB translated as “spider” here might also have another meaning.
1. I found that the Greek word used here in the LXX is *arachne* / *ἀράχνη*. Think of our English word “arachnophobia” (fear of spiders). The Greek word ‘arachne’ can mean *either* “spider” or “spider’s web”.
    - a. (Source: *Greek-English Lexicon of the Septuagint, 3<sup>rd</sup> Edition*, compiled by J. Lust, E. Eynikel and K. Hauspie, 2015)
  2. In fact, the OSB translators render the same Greek word as “spider web” in **Psalm 38/39:12**, where it says: “...And you cause his soul to waste away like a *spider web*”.
    - a. In that psalm, the passage in view communicates the idea the sinner’s soul (or life) wastes away as something flimsy and transient, such as a spider’s web.
  3. Also, note that some of the other English translations of the LXX render the word ‘arachne’ as “spider web” in **Psalm 89/90:9**.
    - a. “...Our years I would ponder *like a cobweb*.” (**Psalm 89:9**, NETS)
    - b. “...Our years were studied *like a spider’s web*.” (**Psalm 89:9**, LES)
- c. My conclusion regarding the “spider” reference here in the OSB:

- i. The more likely meaning is “*spider web*”, as the OSB translators rendered the very same Greek word in **Psalm 38/39:12**. This also is consistent with how some other modern translations of the LXX (including NETS and LES) have rendered it.
- ii. A spider web is the flimsiest structure commonly seen in nature. A breeze of wind of the smallest pressure can destroy it in a moment. In that sense, it provides a sobering illustration of how fragile, flimsy and temporary our time is here in this life!
- iii. Let us not place our hope and trust in the things of this world, mere cobwebs that will so easily be blown away and destroyed in the end!

#### V. **Close of the Psalm: Asking God’s Blessing**

- a. Read **Psalm 89/90:13-17**.
- b. Note that it speaks of the morning here: “We were filled with your mercy *in the morning....*” (**Psalm 89/90:14**).
  - i. This is one of three places in this psalm that speaks of “in the morning”. Perhaps this is the reason that the footnotes of the OSB mention that this psalm was used as a morning prayer.
- c. This very sobering psalm ends on an encouraging note. While our time here is short, we can find joy in the mercy and blessings of the Lord’s presence, if we seek our refuge in Him.