

## Psalm 90

A sermon for the Season of Lent

Some years ago, the beloved father of a family died, and his son asked to read Psalm 90 at his father's funeral. It is a beautiful psalm, and it ends like this:

"Let the favor of the Lord our God be upon us, and establish thou the work of our hands upon us, yea, the work of our hands establish thou it."

As the son was reading the Psalm, it became clear why the family wanted it. It was their way of saying their father had done a lot of "good works," and "we can tell that," and "these are established." What counts is being good and doing good, and Dad measured up.

What is Psalm 90 about? Let's look at it. It opens with words familiar to many of us:

<sup>1-2</sup>"Lord, thou hast been our dwelling place in all generations. Before the mountains were brought forth, or ever thou hadst formed the earth and the world, from everlasting to everlasting thou art God."

It goes on:

<sup>4</sup>"For a thousand years in thy sight are but as yesterday when it is past, or as a watch in the night."

These images are familiar to us. Isaac Watts borrowed them when he wrote the hymn: "O God, Our Help in Ages Past." We see them in the third and fourth stanzas of his hymn:

"Before the hills in order stood or earth received its frame,  
From everlasting you are God, to endless years the same.

"A thousand ages in thy sight are like an evening gone,  
Short as the watch that ends the night before the rising sun."

That phrase, "a thousand years are like a day," is in the New Testament, too. We usually know it as it is used in 2 Peter 3:8: "With the Lord one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day." This is what Psalm 90:4 says also. Another line from this Psalm that many people are familiar with is verse 12: "Teach us to number our days that we may get a heart of wisdom."

The hymn, "O God, Our Help in Ages Past," is a hymn of confidence, hope, even of triumph. The tune is easy to follow, the words are stirring; the problem is that the hymn takes us in a different direction than the Psalm. For example, the hymn's second verse says: "Under the shadow of your throne, your saints have dwelt secure; sufficient is your arm alone, and our defense is sure." There's a different dynamic here than in the Psalm. Taken as a whole, it has that sense of not getting at what salvation is really about.

What does the Psalm say? As we have seen, Psalm 90 starts out: "Lord, thou hast been our dwelling place." In small print it says "our refuge." It seems to be that God is the one who does not change, but we in our lives change and pass away. This is the sense which is found in "O God, Our Help in Ages Past," as we can see in verses 3 and 4:

"Before the hills in order stood or earth received its frame,  
From everlasting you are God. To endless years the same.

"A thousand ages in thy sight are like an evening gone,  
Short as the watch that ends the night before the rising sun."

To be sure, this theme is found throughout Scripture. We can look, for example, at Isaiah 40:12: "Who has measured the waters in the hollow of his hand?" Or Job 38:4: "Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth?"

That also reminds us of Romans 11:33-35: "How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways! 'For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who has been his counselor?' 'Who has given a gift to him that he might be repaid?'"

There is then the great Lord, unchangeable. Over against that is the theme of changeability. We're just passing through. We pass away. Everything goes and disappears. Psalm 90:4-5:

<sup>4</sup>"For a thousand years are in thy sight are but as yesterday when it is past, or as a watch in the night. <sup>5</sup>Thou does sweep men away; they are like a dream, like grass which is renewed in the morning: in the morning it flourishes and is renewed; in the evening it fades and withers."

In the next couple of verses, it says (paraphrase): Our days are soon gone and we fade away. Everything changes. Where is there anything to hang on to and is permanent? It mentions the grass, all that which comes and goes. What do we have that lasts?

That is brought out again in Isaiah 40:6-7: "All flesh is like grass and all its beauty is like the flower of the field. The grass withers, the flower fades, when the breath of the Lord blows upon it; surely the people is grass." Recall Matt 6:30 (paraphrase): "The grass is alive today and then tomorrow is thrown into the oven." What is life? It comes, it goes.

This is a theme outside of Christianity, too. There is a little poem by Shelley which talks about a big statue in the sands of where Iraq is today. The statue is fallen over flat on its face. The statue bears the name of the ancient emperor Ozymandias (1279-1213 BC), and there is this inscription: "Look on my works, ye Mighty and despair!" (See how great I am!) And there he is, fallen on his face.

We see this in a curious way in Ecclesiastes. There in Ecclesiastes 8:15 it says: "Eat, drink, and enjoy, for this will go as well." Or Isaiah 22:13: "Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die." Where does it all go? What do we have to hang on to?

Over against this comes the central theme of Psalm 90. It says in verses 7-8: "For we are consumed by thy anger; by thy wrath we are overwhelmed. Thou hast set our iniquities before thee, our secret sins in the light of thy countenance." Verses 7-11 speak of God's wrath, a wrath because of our sins against the Lord, our iniquities.

The reason for everything passing away, for everything being vanity, for everything being finite and of no account, is because of the Lord's wrath against our sin. Psalm 90:3: "Thou turnest man back to the dust." Or in verse 5: "Thou does sweep men away. They are like a dream." It is the Lord who is doing this because we have turned away from him. It is not because it is in the nature of things, and we just have to endure it.

Then comes the turn in 90:13: "Return, O Lord! How long! Have pity on thy servants." This means: "Lord you face has been turned against us. Turn back so that we are again in your favor." That is found in Isaiah 63:3: "I trod them in my anger and trampled them in my wrath." And then it turns: "I will recount the steadfast love of the Lord" (Isaiah 6:7).

That is the same turn or shift we have in Psalm 90. The Lord is called upon to return, and we can depend upon that. Psalm 90:14: "Satisfy us in the morning with the steadfast love." Remember Psalm 103 is about his steadfast love, again and again. And Psalm 130:7, his steadfast love. This is the basis. It's like in Romans 8:33: "Who shall bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies; who is to condemn? Is it Jesus Christ who died, yes, who was raised from the dead, who is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us?"

Basically, this is what we depend on, what we have our hope in. It goes on then in Psalm 90:16-17: "Let thy work be manifest to thy servants, and thy glorious power to their children. Let the favor of the Lord our God be upon us." That makes all the difference. That's why life is not transitory, of no account, "like a dream" (vs 5), which passes away.

Finally, this brings us to the end of the Psalm: <sup>17</sup>"Establish thou the work of our hands upon us, establish thou it." There are three things to say:

First, when the Old Testament talks about the law, the Torah, not only the Ten Commandments, but also the first five books of the Bible, it is describing a way to live in the community so that everything works. It's "the way of the Lord" in living with each other. It isn't saying: "We have so many good works and count them up."

Second, ". . . establish thou the work of our hands upon us, yea, the work of our hands establish thou it" means without him as our Lord and our God, if it is not on his foundation, it all fades away and is worthless. That's what it's about. It's not saying that we need to gather points by doing good works, as we might think.

Third, the main thing is stated here and elsewhere, for example, Psalm 103, using the image of the grass: "As for man, his days are like grass; he flourishes like a flower of the field; for the wind passes over it, and it is gone, and its place knows it no more. But the

steadfast love of the Lord is from everlasting to everlasting" (Psalm 103:15-16). And in Isaiah 40:8: "The grass withers, the flower fades; but the word of our God will stand forever."

**His** word of promise, **his** steadfast love, is the basis for all good things. Amen.