

Psalm 90 Time is not on our side

Tim Anderson 5/6/22

Your great grandmother on your mother's side.

Your mum's mum's mum.

What can you tell me about her?

Do you even know her name?

I think my great grandmother might have been Louise.

But I'd have to check with my Mum.

I'm not totally sure.

The point of the question

is to underline just how quickly humans get forgotten.

My great grandmother would have been born about 130 years ago
and died about 50 years ago.

And already

even those who have the most reason to know something about her,
most of us can't even be sure about her name.

I certainly can't tell you anything else about her like what she did for a job,
how many other children she had apart from my grandmother,
whether she was affected by the first world war - she was that era.

Friends, I hate to break it to you,
but we are a vapour.

Here today, gone tomorrow.

And for the vast bulk of us,
forgotten very soon after we are gone.

Well the point of bringing this up
is not to make you feel small or insignificant.

It's to cause us to reflect on the big difference between us and God.

You see, God is more than timeless.

He's outside of time.

You might have watched the movie of

The Lord of the Rings.

In it, the elf Arwen who is 2700 years old marries Aragorn a man with a lifespan of 70 years or eighty if his strength endures.

That's quite an age gap!

And it messes with my head thinking about what it even means for someone who has seen maybe 100 generations of human beings to marry one of them.

Of course it's a work of fiction.

But the difference between Arwen and Aragorn is nothing compared to the difference between us and God.

Scientists have discovered that time as we know it is part of creation.

We feel like time passing is something unchangeable.

But scientists are capable of demonstrating that it can be slowed down and sped up.

But God is the creator.

He created the universe and when he did that, he made time.

God sits outside of time.

It's part of his creation.

God is eternal,

he has always been there.

He will continue forever

even after this creation gets wound up.

Now that is not the conception of God

that was popular in the ancient world.

The ancients believed in gods who were part of creation.

The reason this view of God seems obvious to us

is because the Jewish and Christian understanding of God has shaped our culture.

But that understanding of God was radical in the ancient world.

But you can see it very clearly in our Psalm for today.

90:1-2) "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."

This speaks of God's existence as completely separate to creation.
Before the mountains were born.

Well Moses who wrote this psalm was not a geologist.

But geologists will tell you
that mountains came into being hundreds of millions of years ago.
The older mountains came to being in the Paleozoic era,
and the more modern mountains
that only date from a couple of hundred million years ago
come from the Mesozoic era.

Moses had no idea about that.

He just looked at the mountains and said,

"That's been there an awfully long time.

But whenever it was made,

God was the one who made it.

And he has always been there."

Why does it matter to us that God has always been there?

Well I guess it helps us not get too big for our boots
in our dealings with God.

Sometimes you hear people getting too big for their boots
as they talk about God.

"Y'know any God worth worshipping
wouldn't let innocent children get cancer."

Now I have a lot of sympathy for kids who get cancer
and those who feel outraged by it.

One of the bridesmaids from our wedding has a daughter Orielle's age

who has a very nasty cancer.
It's a terrible thing.
But reacting to it by telling God he doesn't know how to do his job
is not a helpful response.
It's one thing to cry out to God in anguish.
The psalmist is doing that all the time.
That's fine.
But it's another thing to address God in an arrogant way.
"If you want me to believe in you, God,
then this is how you need to run the world."
As if we are doing God a privilege by believing in him.
Clearly we're not doing him a favour.
It's a privilege for us to call him Father and know his ways.
Some reflection on God's eternal nature would do us good.

The psalmist continues by contrasting God's eternal nature
with our fleeting nature.

90:3-6 "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 of the night.

Yet you sweep people away to 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."

When I was a child,
life seemed to stretch out in front of me like an endless vista.
Even the summer holidays from school lasted what seemed like forever.
Now as I approach 50,
life is rushing past.
I've nearly spent the same amount of time I spent at high school

as minister of this church.

High school seemed like an eternity at the time.

The last five years has slipped away.

But the psalmist says that a thousand years are like a day in God's sight.

I can't even conceive of a thousand years.

A thousand years ago was before the battle of Hastings.

Before the invention of the printing press.

Before Portugal became an independent country.

Before the crusades.

Those things are like yesterday to God.

But we are here today and gone tomorrow.

In a hundred years, let alone a thousand years,

pretty much all of us will be forgotten

by everyone who is alive at the time.

I sometimes think it would be rather cool
to be like one of the hymn writers.

Someone like John Newton is still having his hymns sung
nearly three hundred years after his birth.

It's a piece of immortality.

But even there when you think about it,
aside from the resurrection of the dead,
is there really much point in it for Newton?

We love singing 'Amazing Grace',
but what good does that do him?

Well in his case he can take joy in it in the resurrection.

But for someone without faith in Jesus,
it doesn't actually help them at all.

The people who knew them personally die out.

Everything bar one achievement is forgotten.

And even the remembrance of that one achievement
grants them no pleasure.

Does it do Leonardo da Vinci any good
that one of his paintings sold for \$450M?
Nope. He doesn't get the money
and he couldn't spend it if he did.

The psalmist says we are like new grass in the morning.
By evening it is dry and withered.
With the hardy perennial grasses we have in our lawns,
it's probably hard for us to get the metaphor.
But it's not unusual for wild grasses to have a lifespan of one day.
Green tender shoots in the morning.
Dried out by nightfall.
And that is what we are like in God's sight.
God for whom a thousand years ago is like yesterday.

Well it's sobering to think like that.
We desperately want to believe that we matter.
And yet it seems that we're like specials at Aldi.
Here today, gone tomorrow.
And the psalmist hasn't finished with us yet.
His next picture is even more confronting.
90:7-11 "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.
If only we knew the power of your anger!

Your wrath is as great as the fear you are due."

Wow! That's heavy stuff.

All that talk about anger, indignation and wrath is hard to hear.

You could at a first glance think that it's saying
that we're all such terrible sinners

that God is going to punish us dreadfully.

But that's actually not quite it.

The message is that our lives are so short and full of trouble

that the wrath of God must be upon us,

otherwise we wouldn't be enduring such trouble.

Moses' starting point is that human existence is difficult and painful.

What could possibly be the cause of all our difficulties?

Well God made and runs the world

so the only conclusion you can draw is that we are under his wrath.

Bear in mind that in 1300BC when Moses was writing,

life was a lot more tough than it is now.

There was no panadol when you got a headache.

You couldn't turn on a heater when the weather was freezing.

Lots of sicknesses resulted in early and painful death.

Lots of women died in childbirth.

Lots of times you got hungry and there was no food.

It was a difficult thing to be a human being.

So is Moses conclusion right?

Well that's what the story of Adam and Eve tells us.

People sinned and then pain and suffering came into the world.

That is the human story.

It's not Moses pointing the finger at us

and telling us we are all rotten sinners.

It's just an honest look at the human condition

and the ultimate source of our problems.

The human condition is bleak.

As Moses says, we finish our years with a moan.
It's not a comforting thought,
but neither is visiting people
who you used to know as vibrant active switched on friends
when they are in a nursing home.
We do indeed finish our years with a moan.

So what's the point of this honest but depressing look
at the state of humanity?
Moses must have a reason for rubbing our noses in our frailty and finitude.
The point is in verse 12.
90:12 "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."
You see, when we live in the fools' paradise
that we all lived in when we were young,
you remember it,
"life goes on forever,
my current good health will last forever,
and I can relax about the future,"
then you are likely to fritter away your time on frivolous pursuits.
But an honest look at the human condition gives us wisdom.
I have currently used up about 18000 of the days God has allotted for me.
I have no idea how many are left.
But I can be pretty sure it's not another 18000.
Every time I get up in the morning,
that's one more ticked off
that I never get back again.
It kind of focuses your mind, doesn't it?
It makes me think I need to make every day count.
And that would be a heart of wisdom.

Make every day count.

What does that mean?

I think different things for different people.

There are a variety of ways to serve and honour God.

Some will make their days count

by serving in the ministries of their local church.

Others will make their days count

by calling people's attention to God's Word.

Others will make their days count by simple lives of love,
being mindful to show love to those who can't repay them.

You will be able to think through

what numbering your days means for you.

What this psalm is telling you

is that by reflecting on how short and difficult the days of a human are

you will be better able to number your days and gain a heart of wisdom.

But the psalmist doesn't finish with wisdom.

He finishes with a plea.

90:13-17 "Relent, Lord! How long will it be?

Have compassion on your servants.

¹⁴ Satisfy us in the morning with your unfailing love,
that we may sing for joy and be glad all our days.

¹⁵ Make us glad for as many days as you have afflicted us,
for as many years as we have seen trouble.

¹⁶ May your deeds be shown to your servants,
your splendour to their children.

¹⁷ May the favour of the Lord our God rest on us;
establish the work of our hands for us—
yes, establish the work of our hands."

Basically, Lord, life is tough.

Please be kind to us.

Give us glad hearts.

Moses knows that God is gracious and compassionate.
God is kind.
Yes life is short and tough.
But God is kind.
Both things are true.
How do we hold them together?
Well there are two time frames,
this life and eternity.
In this life,
the tough things can be broken up by moments of great joy and gladness.
It doesn't even have to be big things
like the birth of a child or a wedding or something.
Yesterday I caught up with a friend
who I hadn't seen since before the pandemic.
That put some gladness in my heart.
On Friday, I went for my first ride since I had covid.
That put some gladness in my heart as well as soreness in my legs.
On Thursday night Elimelech pulled off
one of the best swindles I have ever seen in a tournament chess game.
Basically he was losing really badly
and snatched victory from the jaws of defeat.
And the seasoned tournament players at the club were like
shaking their heads, "How did he do that?"
Yep. That's my son.
It's great when it does it to someone apart from me.
The important thing is to see those moments of gladness
as the compassion of God.
Life is short, life is tough.
But along the way
there are moments when we can enjoy the compassion of God.
You've got to make the most of those.
That's the perspective of this life.

But even more is the perspective of eternity.
And this is something we can see more easily than Moses.
We have the understanding of God's plans taught to us by the Lord Jesus.
Moses didn't have that.
So Moses pleads with God,
"Make us glad for as many days as you have afflicted us,
for as many years as we have seen trouble."
Maybe Moses was meaning,
"We had 400 years in slavery in Egypt.
Could we please have 400 years of good times in the promised land,
Lord?"
But for us, Moses hasn't quite lifted his sights high enough.
How many years is God going to make us glad for?
When we finish our years with a moan,
we have an eternity of gladness extending before us.
Then our view on time will be like God's view.
And thousand years will be like a day that has just gone by.
There won't be any need to number our days.
The days will be unnumbered.
There won't be calendars in heaven.
Because there just is no point in counting something that goes on forever.

Moses pleads with God,
¹⁴ Satisfy us in the morning with your unfailing love,
that we may sing for joy and be glad all our days.
Heaven will be like the sun rising on God's unfailing love.
And there we will sing for joy and be glad every day.

If you thought the psalm was a bit depressing
because it takes an honest look at our human frailty,
then use the psalm to lift your eyes to the joys of heaven.
There's nothing like heaven to keep the frailty of this life in perspective.

And there's nothing like the trouble and sorrow of this life
to give us a reason to raise our eyes heavenwards.
So let's praise God that he answered Moses' plea
more generously than Moses could ever have imagined.
As we set our hearts on the joy and gladness to come.