

Psalm 90 – The Purpose of Life

Story of “Burro” Schmidt. Who is to say what people do is waste of their life?

Are you ever overwhelmed with the futility of life? You can put your hopes and dreams in so many things, only to see them swept away in death.

We avoid thinking about death in our culture. We’re uncomfortable talking about it. We can’t brush it aside for too long, because we and everyone we know will die. All of us must wrestle with the question, “How can my fleeting life have purpose or value?” “What makes life significant and worthwhile?”

There seems to be only two possible answers: Live as if nothing matters or realize that we must be linked to God if our life is to have meaning and significance.

Moses was a man surrounded by death. He watched 1.2 million people die in the 40-year wilderness wandering as a result of Israel’s disobedience. (Book of Numbers) This caused him to reflect deeply upon the question, “How can this fleeting life have meaning and value?” Moses, being a man of God, was driven to worship and prayer. The result is Psalm 90.

Moses’ inspired answer to the question of how this ephemeral (lasting only a short while) life can have value is, *our fleeting lives can have value only if we live wisely before the eternal God.*

The psalm falls into four stanzas:

1. (90:1-2) --The eternal nature of God.
2. (90:3-6) --The ephemeral nature of man.
3. (90:7-11) --God’s wrath over man’s sin as the cause of man’s ephemerality.
4. (90:12-17) --A prayer for God’s mercy and grace despite man’s sin.

I. Life is futile apart from God because of its shortness and uncertainty and because of God’s wrath on our sin.

A. Life’s shortness and uncertainty make it futile apart from God (90:3-6).

When Moses talks of God bringing man back to the dust, he goes back to the fall and the curse which God imposed (Gen 2:17; 3:17-19). When he refers to “a thousand years,” he may be recalling the life span of those before the flood, who lived almost that long. He is saying, “Even if a person lives to be a thousand years old, it is nothing to God. It’s like a day to Him, or like a watch in the night, which passes by almost instantly while we sleep.”

Moses describes our helplessness in the face of death as being swept away by a flash flood that suddenly bursts upon us and takes everything in its path (90:5a). We’re like the grass of the field (90:5b-6), which sprouts in the morning and looks promising. After a day in the blistering desert sun, however, it lies withered. How soon the promise of youth is gone and life fades away! None of us knows how long we must live. I want you to feel the anxiety Moses intends us to feel by his words. Life is short and uncertain. Apart from being rightly related to God, it is futile.

B. God’s wrath on our sin makes life futile apart from God (90:7-11).

Moses is making the point that death is the result of God’s wrath on our sin. People say that death is just a natural part of the life cycle, that all living things die, so we should just accept it as normal. That, however, is a humanistic lie that minimizes the horror of death and disregards the clear teaching of the Bible, that death entered this world as God’s direct judgment on the sin of humanity (Gen. 2:17; 3:19). The reality of death ought to make people face the reality of their sin and the fact that they will shortly stand before a holy God.

In our day we tend to minimize the horror of God’s wrath. It embarrasses us in our sophisticated, scientific day to suggest that diseases, viruses, and the like could be God’s wrath on the immorality of our land. We’d rather see it as a medical problem which science will solve in a few years. But as Moses contemplated the plagues which God had brought about on Israel, he exclaims (90:11), “Who understands the power of Your anger, and Your fury, according to the fear that is due to You?”

If you struggle with how a good and loving God can also be a God of wrath and hell, perhaps you think too lowly of God and too highly of us, and thus you look upon God as having little right to do as He pleases, and upon ourselves as having great rights.

Moses’ point is that the fact of death, should make us aware that the wrath of the eternal God is upon the sinful human race. If we do not truly know this eternal God as our personal dwelling place, life is futile.

If you have put your trust in Jesus Christ, then He has saved you from the wrath of God (1 Thess. 1:10). Though we will die physically (unless Christ returns in our lifetime), we will not face the second death, which is to be forever separated from God in hell (Rev. 20:14-15). But if you are apart from Christ, you are under God's condemnation and life is futile. Thus, in stanzas two and three, Moses shows that apart from God, life is futile because of its shortness and uncertainty and because of God's wrath on our sin, as seen in the fact of death.

II. Life has meaning and value if we have a relationship with the eternal God and if we have God's blessing upon our life and work.

A. A relationship with the eternal God gives life meaning and value (90:1-2).

Moses paints a picture of the eternity of God. He works his way back from the previous generations to the formation of the mountains, to the creation of the earth, and to eternity past ("from everlasting") and then moves swiftly forward to eternity future ("to everlasting"). Verse two might better be translated, "Even from everlasting to everlasting, you are, O God." The point is, God is eternal.

Moses makes it clear that it is possible (and was, in fact, the case) that we, the finite creature, can have a relationship with this eternal God. The personal pronoun "our" occurs in relation to God both in verses 1 and 17. The eternal God is *our* God. He is our dwelling place. We live in Him through Christ!

Nothing that can give meaning and value to life like the reality of a personal relationship with the eternal God of the universe. To know that despite our finiteness and sin, we can know the infinite holy God in a personal way provides a sense of stability and substance to life that cannot be found in any earthly thing or relationship.

B. God's blessing upon our life and work gives life meaning and value (90:12-17).

Here, Moses prays for a reversal of what has gone before. Whereas God has said to man, "Return" (to dust, v. 3), now Moses says to God, "Return" (to forgive and bless, vv. 13 ff.). God's "repentance" (90:13), a frequent phrase in Scripture, looks at God from the human perspective: He appears to us to change. Moses prays, "May the favor (delightfulness, pleasantness, beauty) of the Lord our God be upon us" (90:17). The blessings of the world are so fleeting and fickle! You can gain fame and fortune, but in the end, they never satisfy. God's blessings do satisfy. A person who has known God's joy and peace is a satisfied person! Not only does Moses pray that God's blessing would be upon His people, but also that God would confirm the work of their hands (90:17). He doesn't just mean "spiritual" work, such as the priests did, but all the work that they did--farming, business, and family life (see Deut. 14:29; 16:15; 24:19; 28:12; 30:9). When you have the eternal God as your dwelling place, all of life becomes sacred. So, whatever your work, you can do it all to the glory of God! Even the mundane takes on significance when you belong to the Lord.

Application

Live considering eternity. Moses prays (90:12), "So teach us to number our days, that we may present to You a heart of wisdom." One day you will present something to God. He has entrusted certain gifts and abilities to you, and you are to manage them for Him in such a way as to make a profit for His kingdom. The Hebrew verb in verse 12 is the same word used in Genesis 4:3-4 to refer to the offerings of Cain and Abel. What will you offer to God when He calls for an account? Remember, it was the fellow with only one talent who buried it and was upbraided by his master. Not having the greatest abilities is no excuse for not using them.

Labor for the lasting, not the passing. There is so much that we work for that doesn't remain! Never forget that "the world is passing away, and also its lusts; but the one who does the will of God abides forever" (1 John 2:17). The only things God is going to reclaim off this planet are His Word and people. And yet so often we value things above God's Word and above our relationships with people. Remember what Paul wrote considering the truth of the resurrection: "Therefore, my beloved brethren, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that your toil is not in vain in the Lord" (1 Cor. 15:58). The work of the Lord involves His Word and people. Put your efforts there and you will not be disappointed.

Avoid the waste that comes from sinful living. Israel was consumed by God's anger (90:7-10) because of their disobedience. Sinful, self-willed living always results in waste. While those who are in Christ need not fear God's condemnation (Rom. 8:1), we do need to fear the Lord and avoid sinning. The law of sowing and reaping (Gal. 6:7-8) applies even under grace. Don't be deceived: Sin always has adverse consequences in your life. Obedience always results in God's blessing. Israel's experience in the wilderness was written for our instruction, so that we don't repeat their mistakes.