



Coptic Orthodox Diocese of the Southern United States



# The Holy Book of Psalms

Psalm 90

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# Introduction

- The title of this Psalm is *A Prayer of Moses the man of God*
- According to the title this Psalm was written by Moses and all other translation versions ascribe it to him
- Some commentators think this was not the prophet Moses, claiming that the age of man was not then seventy or eighty years, which is here stated in verse 10, to be its almost universal limit
- But the evidence is much stronger for believing that this was indeed the great leader of Israel
- The condition of Israel in the wilderness is so predominantly illustrative of each verse

# Introduction



- The expressions and words are so similar to many in the Pentateuch especially the two songs in the Book of Exodus chapter 15 and the Holy Book of Deuteronomy chapter 32, as well as the blessing of the tribes of Israel in Deuteronomy 33
- So, the internal evidence is stronger than what they claim
- This is the only Psalm that carry Moses' name
- However, some Jewish writers ascribe the ten following Psalms which are without a title to him
- Moses is called *the man of God*, in Deuteronomy 33:1; Joshua 14:6; 1 Chronicles 23:14; 2 Chronicles 30:16; Ezra 3:2



# Introduction

- He well deserved that name; he was faithful to God and was a man of more than ordinary gifts received from the Lord, a prophet and the chief of the prophets, and a type of the Great Prophet
- Psalm 90 is the first Psalm in Fourth Book of the Psalms (Psalms 90-106) and the oldest of the Psalms
- And according to St. Jerome, this Psalm is considered an introduction to this fourth book
- The arrangement of the Psalms into five books goes back at least to the time when the Hebrew Scriptures were translated into Greek (the Septuagint) approximately 200 B.C.



# Introduction

- The theme of this Psalm is the Eternity of God, and man's infirmity and weakness
- The subject of the shortness and vanity of life has occupied reflective minds in all times
- This Psalm refers to the experiences of the Israelites during the Exodus, when God punished them for their unfaithfulness
- And some say it was written specifically upon the occasion of the sentence passed upon Israel in the wilderness for their unbelief, murmuring, and rebellion, that they should fall in the wilderness, and that none of them should enter Canaan, Numbers 14:23



# Introduction

- Though it seems to have been written upon this particular occasion, yet it is very applicable to the weakness of human life in general, and, in singing it, we may easily apply it to the years of our journey through the wilderness of this world
- St. Augustine says, “This Psalm is entitled, ‘The prayer of Moses the man of God,’ through whom, His man, God gave the law to His people, through whom He freed them from the house of slavery and led them forty years through the wilderness. Moses was therefore the Minister of the Old.”



# Introduction

## The Psalm Outline

- The Eternal God and the Frailty of Man 90:1-6
- God's Judgment on their Open and Secret Sins 90:7-12
- Earnest Prayer for the Restoration of Israel 90:13-17

# The Eternal God and the Frailty of Man 90:1-6



- This *prayer of Moses* was almost certainly written during the wilderness years on the way to Canaan
- In all those years Israel lived in constant need of refuge, shelter, and protection
- More than their tents and their armies, Israel had God as their *dwelling place*, their refuge and their protection
- Moses begins his prayer by returning thanks for past favors showing himself grateful for the past
- The word *dwelling place* signifies a house well fortified and secure from all harm of enemies, wild beasts, rain, or winds



# The Eternal God and the Frailty of Man 90:1-6



- He addresses God by the title which designates Him as the Ruler of the world
- He not merely is, but has proved Himself to be, Israel's home, age after age
- Moses understood that the Lord has been Israel's *dwelling place* for all generations, thus reminding God that their relationship is longstanding and deserving of special consideration
- God's help to His people did not begin with the exodus from Egypt but from their pilgrim beginnings under their patriarch Abraham to the days of Moses, God had been their *dwelling place*, their refuge and protection

# The Eternal God and the Frailty of Man 90:1-6



- He proves that the very same God might have been a refuge to those who hoped in Him at all times; for He is always the same, powerful, wise, and kind; and, to show that God existed before all these things, he first names the mountains
- In the wilderness on the way to Canaan, Moses saw *mountains* on the horizon and reflected on the truth that God existed before those *mountains*
- It was God who *formed the earth and the world*
- *Before the mountains*, Named first perhaps because they are the grandest and were regarded as the oldest parts of the earth

# The Eternal God and the Frailty of Man 90:1-6



- For the mountains, being of great altitude and solidity, offer man a refuge in many ways
- Or, perhaps, because the mountains form a noticeable and considerable part of the earth
- *Even from everlasting to everlasting, You are God*, God existed not only before the earth and the mountains, but from eternity He is, and to eternity God is
- Life is temporal and everything has a beginning and an end, but God is eternal
- From eternity to eternity there is no beginning or end to God

# The Eternal God and the Frailty of Man 90:1-6



- Moses does not say, He has been, and will be God, but *You are God*, in order to show the true eternity of God, in which there is no past or future, but one continuity of existence, without any change or variety
- *Even from everlasting to everlasting, You are God*, And so are His love, grace, and mercy towards His people, and His covenant with them
- Then in verse 3 Moses begins speaking of the fragile nature of humanity
- The thought in this verse is not merely that man's life is infinitely brief in contrast to the eternity of God, but that it is absolutely at His disposal

# The Eternal God and the Frailty of Man 90:1-6



- The psalmist plainly refers to Genesis 3:19, “*For dust you are, And to dust you shall return.*” though he chooses different words to emphasize his point; man passes away; God continues ever the same
- When God is, by any afflictions, turning men to *destruction*, He, by this mean, call men to return unto Him, to repent of their sins
- God’s punishment is intended, not to destroy them, but to make them face the consequences of their sins so they will be inclined to return to God
- According to the Targum translation *destruction* means death, so, *Return, O children of men*, may refer to the resurrection of the dead

# The Eternal God and the Frailty of Man 90:1-6



- Which may point to the curse pronounced against Adam for his sin, and the removal of that curse by Christ
- The sentence of death, and the promise of resurrection
- God is our eternal Home, for He unites us to Himself, saying, *Come again*, and that from the *destruction* of sin, to the restoration of penitence and the renewal of the blemished Image of God
- St. Augustine interprets the verse as a prayer that God will not suffer man to turn away from eternal things to base and fleeting desires, but may give him grace to glory in God alone

# The Eternal God and the Frailty of Man 90:1-6



- Having introduced the idea of God's eternal being, with no beginning or end, Moses repeated the idea
- God's eternity is so immense that *a thousand years* with Him are but as part of a day with us
- While everything in our life is dictated and controlled by time, God is not constrained by such concerns
- *Thousands of years* are meaningless to God while to humans *thousands of years* are immense
- The Apostle Peter tried to make the same point to his readers in 2 Peter 3:8

# The Eternal God and the Frailty of Man 90:1-6



- The Jews had three night-watches; the first, mentioned in Lamentations 2:19; the middle, mentioned in Judges 7:19; and the third, mentioned in Exodus 14:24; 1 Samuel 11:11
- In later times - the times referred to in the New Testament - there were four such watches, after the manner of the Romans, Matthew 14:25
- The idea here is not that such a watch in the night would seem to pass quickly, but that *a thousand years* seemed to God not only short as a day when it was past, but even as the parts of a day, or the divisions of a night when it was gone



# The Eternal God and the Frailty of Man 90:1-6



- The point about our temporal nature is clarified in verses 5-6
- Humans are here one day and gone tomorrow
- The images Moses uses to picture this brevity are powerful
- The psalmist compares life to a river, that is hurrying without resistance into the ocean, and unable to stay for an instant in its course
- The *flood* is continually flowing, and they are carried away with it; they are carried away irresistibly, as with *a flood* of waters which sweeps away all before it
- Or as the old world was carried away with Noah's flood

# The Eternal God and the Frailty of Man 90:1-6



- Men are carried away as with a *flood* and yet *they are like a sleep*
- They do not consider their own frailty, nor are aware how near they approach the end
- Human life resembles *a sleep*, because it seems to pass so fast; to accomplish so little; to be so filled with dreams and visions, none of which remain or become permanent
- Time passes unobserved by us, as it does with men *a sleep*; and, when it is over, it is as nothing
- *In the morning they are like grass which grows up*, There is nothing more permanent in man than there is in the grass or in the flowers of the field

# The Eternal God and the Frailty of Man 90:1-6



- We are like new grass that sprouts up, but under the heat quickly dies
- Some understand this of the morning of the resurrection, when there will be a change for the better, a renovation
- To show how dreadful is the life of man, he compares it to grass, that in one day springs up, flowers, withers, and perishes
- Our lives are so short it is like a morning and evening against the eternal nature of God
- Some take the *morning* and *evening* to be youth and old age, or life and death

# The Eternal God and the Frailty of Man 90:1-6



- *In the morning*, in the early part of the day, man will appear in his youth, like the leafy blooming green grass
- And *in the evening*, in another part of the same day, *it is cut down and withers*, he shall fall
- His strength will begin to fail, *grow dry and wither* in his old age, in death, when all his bodily powers shall have been wasted
- Some interpret *cut down and withers* of God's forgiveness of repented sins, so that all the years which have been spent in them shall be utterly blotted out of His records
- According to St. Augustine, "We are *cut down* in death, *dried up* as corpses, *withered* into dust."

# The Eternal God and the Frailty of Man 90:1-6



- And this is more awfully true of those lives which merely *flourish and pass* without ever bringing forth actual fruit
- For after the morning of this world, when the night of judgment will come, they shall be cut down and cast into hell
- Frequently we live our lives as if there is no end in sight; such living is foolishness
- Some take the *grass* to be the Mosaic Law, given in the morning youth of the nation by God on Mount Sinai, and abolished in the evening of time, when Christ came in the flesh



# God's Judgment on their Open and Secret Sins 90:7-12

- Moses goes on to talk about the frailty of humanity in light of our sins and he points out that sins are linked to death
- *For we have* The change to the plural shows that Moses now speaks on behalf of the whole nation of Israel
- We—Israel—have been consumed through Your anger, and through Your wrath we been have distressed
- From the general reflections, and the general consideration of human weakness, which have previously occupied him, the Psalmist proceeds to speak particularly of the weakness and sin of himself and his own people, which have brought upon them the *wrath* of God



# God's Judgment on their Open and Secret Sins 90:7-12

- He teaches them to acknowledge the *wrath* of God to be the cause of all their miseries
- The people of Israel must confess before God and understand that they had brought upon themselves this *wrath* by their sins
- St. Augustine comments on this verse and says, "Making no secret that this fate is a penalty inflicted for sin."
- The rebukes and disciplines of Israel are here referred to
- But their case in the wilderness is the case of mankind in the world, and the same thing is true in them and in us
- The double chastisement of body and soul is here set before us



# God's Judgment on their Open and Secret Sins 90:7-12

- The gradual wasting of our physical body under the harms of disease and age as he said in verse 6, *In the morning it flourishes and grows up; In the evening it is cut down and withers*
- And the mental terrors brought upon us by the thought of God's divine anger against sin, *For we have been consumed by Your anger, And by Your wrath we are terrified*
- Instead of *hiding His face* from their sins He sets them all before Him and brought them all to light
- *in the light of Your countenance*, is used to denote His Presence as a searching light from which nothing can be concealed





# God's Judgment on their Open and Secret Sins 90:7-12

- *Our secret sins*, Is rather the inward sin of the heart unseen by man but known to God
- God is light; what can be hidden from the All-Seeing eye of God?
- God has judged in the case not by external appearances, or by what is seen by the world, but by what He has seen in the heart
- He deals with us according to our real character
- The reference is, indeed, to sin, but sin as concealed, hidden, forgotten; the sin of the heart
- The sin which one tries to hide from the world and the sin which has passed away from one's own recollection



# God's Judgment on their Open and Secret Sins 90:7-12

- *For all our days have passed away in Your wrath, This seems to be the fruit or result of the anger of God*
- Life passes away as rapidly as thought; it is so rapid, so fleeting
- The *days* are past as quickly as a sigh, it is an expression of sorrow and weariness
- This has a particular reference to the people of Israel in the wilderness, when God had sworn in His wrath they should not enter into the land of Canaan, but wander about all their days in the wilderness, and be consumed there; so that their days manifestly passed away under visible marks of the divine displeasure



# God's Judgment on their Open and Secret Sins 90:7-12

- Moses lived 120 years according to Deuteronomy 31:2 and 34:7
- He did not say *seventy years* as either a promise or a limit, but as an insightful estimate of a lifespan
- The emphasis is on the futility of life; even if one should live past the norm of *seventy years* and live *eighty years*, the end of it all is *only labor and sorrow*
- Some of Church fathers focused on the spiritual meaning of this verse rather than the literal meaning
- Some say the word *seventy* denotes active life, as we number our existence here by the seven days of the week



# God's Judgment on their Open and Secret Sins 90:7-12

- While *eighty*, as suggesting the eighth day, the beginning of a new week, typical of a new life
- St. Augustine explaining it, according to his habit, based on the mystical significance of the numbers and says, “seventy and eighty years equal a hundred and fifty; a number which the Psalms clearly imply to be a sacred one. One hundred and fifty have the same relative signification as fifteen, the latter number being composed of seven and eight together: the first of which points to the Old Testament through the observation of the Sabbath; the latter to the New, referring to the resurrection of our Lord.”



# God's Judgment on their Open and Secret Sins 90:7-12

- And some explain it of the lives of the Israelites in the wilderness; all those that were numbered when they came out of Egypt, above twenty years old, were to die within thirty-eight years
- Therefore, they must have all died before eighty years old
- And those that lived to seventy or eighty, their life, was nothing but *labor and sorrow*
- What men celebrate as strength or vitality is really only trouble and toil
- *For it is soon cut off, and we fly away, But soon men's days are gone and they are gone*



# God's Judgment on their Open and Secret Sins 90:7-12

- Moses connected the ideas of a relatively short and frustrating life to the fact of God's righteous judgment
- Who can appropriately estimate the intensity of God's anger against such as have displeased Him?
- Who can possibly conceive the force, power, and effects of God's anger? No one can perfectly comprehend it
- Moses speaks as one afraid of God's anger, and amazed at the greatness of the power of it; who knows how far the power of God's anger can reach and how deeply it can wound
- He especially saw and lived this in the wilderness



# God's Judgment on their Open and Secret Sins 90:7-12

- *the power* of God's anger is expressed in His judgments on men
- As the flood, the burning of Sodom and Gomorrah, the consumption of the Israelites in the wilderness, or in shortening the days of men
- *For as the fear of You, so is Your wrath*, Who knows God's wrath, so as to fear Him?
- Who can fear God as He ought to be feared, and in such fear to measure the extent of His anger?
- The word *fear* would here seem to refer to the reverence due to God



# God's Judgment on their Open and Secret Sins 90:7-12

- Verse 12 may be taken in close connection with the preceding, *as the fear of You*, which is *the beginning of wisdom* requires, make us know how; give us that discernment which we lack
- When Moses considered the frail nature of humanity and the righteous judgment of God, it made him ask God for the wisdom to understand the shortness of life
- He prays to God, that as He was pleased, in His justice, to shorten the life of man, He may now, in His mercy, look down upon and help man in his pilgrimage here below
- *So teach us*, means that this wisdom must be learned





# God's Judgment on their Open and Secret Sins 90:7-12

- True wisdom, not like the wise ones of this world, which puffs up, and does not edify, (1 Corinthians 8:1)
- Learning to *number our days* will give us *a heart of wisdom*
- This is wisdom not only for the mind, but for the *heart* as well
- *number our days*, Not merely to count them, how many they are, there is no need of divine teachings for that
- And not to know how long they shall live, and when they shall die: the Lord does not teach this, nor should we be concerned to know because the number of men days, months, and years, is with the Lord



# God's Judgment on their Open and Secret Sins 90:7-12

- But rather the meaning of the prayer is, that God would teach us to number our days, as if the present one was the last
- Men cannot boast of tomorrow; their souls may be required of them
- But the sense is that God would teach men to meditate on the shortness of their days; that they are but as a shadow, and there is no enduring
- Meditate on their vanity and sinfulness that so men may not desire to live here always
- Jesus' parable of the rich fool in Luke 12 is of great example of this



# Earnest Prayer for the Restoration of Israel 90:13-17

- This Psalm carefully considered the judgment of God, and yet his prayerful response to that consideration was a plea to God for His presence, for His *compassion*, and for His *mercy*
- He does not pray for a prolonged life for himself, like Hezekiah, but for some intervention in relief of the suffering
- He repeats the same prayer saying, “Having been angry with us, because of our sins, You have turned Your face away from us; turn to us and look upon us with an eye of kindness”
- How long shall this continue?
- How long shall Your wrath rage?



# Earnest Prayer for the Restoration of Israel 90:13-17

- This question is often asked in the Psalms
- Moses asked God not to delay in bringing His presence, *compassion*, and *mercy* to His people
- And He gives us a plain answer *“Thus says the LORD of hosts: ‘Return to Me,’ says the LORD of hosts, ‘and I will return to you,’ says the LORD of hosts.”* (Zachariah 1:3)
- Moses understood that true satisfaction was not rooted in money, fame, pleasure, or success
- But with God’s *mercy*, His faithful, covenant goodness to His people



# Earnest Prayer for the Restoration of Israel 90:13-17

- Nothing will satisfy the human heart except God
- The psalmist not only seeks from God to take His wrath away from him but lives all his days exulted in the Lord his beloved
- *Early*, When we are young and flourishing, v. 6
- Or it could mean early in the morning; there is no hour like that of morning prime for fellowship with God
- Moses prays for a new beginning, which the Lord alone can unlock for His people; the beginning of a new season of favor
- Many were the days of their affliction; Moses asked that the days of their gladness would also be many



# Earnest Prayer for the Restoration of Israel 90:13-17

- He hoped the days of gladness would be so long that God's *glory* would be evident even *to their children*
- The psalmist seems to desire an equal number of the one as of the other
- Not that an exact precise number of the one with the other is intended; there is no proper proportion of the one to the other
- According to St. Paul, "*For our light affliction, which is but for a moment, is working for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory,*" (2 Corinthians 4:17)
- Also, "*For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us.*" (Romans 8:18)



# Earnest Prayer for the Restoration of Israel 90:13-17

- *Let Your work appear to Your servants*, Either the work of Providence, in conducting the people of Israel through the wilderness, and bringing them into the land of Canaan; which God had promised to do for them, especially for their posterity, and therefore their *children* are particularly mentioned
- Or the work of salvation; the covenant of grace knows only *one* work, that of Christ
- The especial work of God is the salvation of man, to be wrought out by Christ
- It is a prayer for His coming, His Resurrection and Ascension, the sending of the Holy Spirit, and the foundation of the Church



# Earnest Prayer for the Restoration of Israel 90:13-17

- Or, if we take the words of God's work in the soul, their meaning will be, Work in Your servants by Your grace, that they may do good works, and let Your work be so plain, that others may see their good deeds, and glorify You, their Father in heaven
- God's servants cannot work for Him unless He work in them both to will and to do
- *And let the beauty of the LORD our God be upon us, Earlier in this Psalm Moses spoke of God's people being consumed and terrified*
- He prayed that the gracious God would exchange that misery for His own *beauty*





# Earnest Prayer for the Restoration of Israel 90:13-17

- The final aspect Moses prayed for was for the perpetuity and stability of the *work* of God's people
- Good men are anxious not to work in vain
- They know that without the Lord they can do nothing, and therefore they cry to Him for help in the work and for acceptance of their efforts
- He prays and asks God to do so by overseeing them, makes them to work as they ought, and always to follow that most correct rule, His will and His law
- One cannot ask God to uphold and establish what he is doing in his life if he is living sinful lives



# Earnest Prayer for the Restoration of Israel 90:13-17

- Moses was a great example of putting the interests of God ahead of the interests of himself
- He suffered much for the Lord, he left the riches of Egypt to live in the wilderness, and endured the criticisms of the people
- Moses was established by God because he trusted fully in the Lord through victories and through the difficulties
- St. Augustine says, “establish the work of our hands upon us: that we may do them not for hope of earthly reward: for then they are not straight, but crooked... The meaning of this verse, if we are to expound it, appears to me this, that all our good works are one work of love: for love is the fulfilling of the Law.”



# Discussion

- Who is the author of this Psalm and what is the likely historical situation in which he wrote it?
- What is the theme of this prayer?
- What mercies from God did Moses recall?
- What picture does this Psalm paint about our state before God?



# Discussion

- What imagery is used to highlight humankind's insignificance and God's greatness?
- According to verse 12, what lesson does Moses want God to teach him and why does he want to learn it?
- What lessons does Psalm 90 teach us about numbering our days?
- What insights does Psalm 90 give us about what a heart of wisdom looks like?