

Psalm 90

The Dwelling Place

“Lord, you have been our dwelling place throughout all generations.”

Thus the beginning of the 90th Psalm. The psalm is a prayer in three parts. First the acknowledgment of God’s greatness, we live our lives in God’s care, which is our dwelling place. I am reminded of Paul’s speech in Acts where Paul speaks of “that in which we live and move and have our being.”

Next a lament about the shortness of life and the punishment for sin which is that life under God is characterized by anger and wrath, “All our days pass away under your wrath and we finish our days with a moan.”

Then a blessed prayer for mercy and compassion, “that we may sing for joy and be glad all our days.”

Luther

Today is the last Sunday in October. On Tuesday, which is the Eve of All Saint’s Day, Christendom commemorates the 500th anniversary of the Protestant Reformation. On that day in 1517, Martin Luther posted his 95 Theses for Discussion on the door of the church in Wittenberg in Germany and got the whole thing started.

In honor of the Reformation to which we as Baptists are heirs, let us listen to Luther’s thoughts about the 90th Psalm.

“It often happened to me when I was a monk, that when reading this psalm I had to lay it aside. For I did not know at the time that these frightening truths were not intended by Moses for a terrified soul.”

It turned out that after Luther had an experience of grace, the “frightening truths” of this psalm ceased to be a terror and became a comfort. “God’s wrath,” he wrote, “is a wrath of compassion.”

Lament

I do not know why, and I admit that in Philippians Paul instructed his readers to do “everything without complaining,” which seems like a useless piece of advice, given our nature, but in the psalms we are given a language to complain to God. It is as if we are a team practicing, and the hardships and the questioning are a part of our improvement.

It is a language that is straightforward and pulls no punches. And when we exercise this biblical practice of “lament,” to address God in these straightforward ways, it helps us, makes us better, heals us a little, straightens out our thinking; it keeps us from self-pity and forces us to face the truth of our sinfulness and weakness, to accept the responsibility for our

predicament, and then it leads us to pray our most honest prayers.

This psalm comes with a reference, “A prayer of Moses the man of God.” It has been suggested that the immediate circumstance is the wilderness journey, especially the experience of those who had been told they would not enter the homeland. That was their situation.

The psalm is universal in its message and speaks to our times as well. We live in an untransformed world with many problems that seem unsolvable, or at least, given our inability to agree and work together are practically unsolvable.

Quite frankly, even if we do find workable solutions to some of the problems, we still stagger before sin and death, which we are powerless to overcome.

This psalm recognizes life’s shortness and attributes the human situation to divine anger. But it complains in the context of God’s sovereignty and care, not apart from it, in the house, not away from it. And it complains in hope that God’s anger will lead to our transformation and salvation, and thus it leads directly to a blessed prayer, one boldly and confidently prayed.

Isaac Watts

One of the great hymn writers of what history has called, “The First Great Awakening,” was Isaac Watts, who composed many hymns and some that are still familiar to us all:

“When I survey the wondrous cross
On which the Prince of glory died
My richest gain I count but loss
And pour contempt on all my pride

or

Alas, and did my savior bleed
And did my sovereign die
Would he devote that sacred head
For sinners such as I

And then there is what some have referred to as a “2nd national anthem,” for Great Britain; “O God, Our Help in Ages Past,” which is a paraphrase of the 90th psalm. In its original version there were nine verses, but it is most common, to read six of them, and in our hymnal there are only five:

O God our help in ages past
Our hope for years to come
Our shelter from the stormy blast
And our eternal home

Under the shadow of Thy throne
Still may we dwell secure
Sufficient in Thine arm alone
And our defense is sure

Before the hills in order stood
Or earth received her frame
From everlasting, Thou art God
To endless years the same

A thousand ages in they sight
Are like an evening gone
Short as the watch that ends the night
Before the rising sun

O God our help in ages past
Our hope for years to come
Be then our guide while life shall last
And our eternal home

The Blessed Prayer

I believe most would agree that the world is in need of another awakening. It will come, and when it does there will be an honest reckoning among people like what is found in this psalm.

There will be a soul-searching; a reaching out for the Transcendent, the Eternal, the source of life and peace, resulting from a deep longing for the good. People like you and me will and can be re-acquainted

with the greatness of God and our own littleness; a littleness exemplified by mortality, the short span of time we are in this body; and also by our weakness, our lack of power to repair the human heart and renew the mind, so that we search for a prayer like the one in Psalm 90.

Whether we find ourselves in one of the insecure times when life's circumstances shake our foundations, or one of the better times when God's grace seems nearer, all our prayers and all our efforts are covered because God is our everlasting dwelling place. May the prayer at the end be also our prayer, and let it be our final words today:

Relent, O Lord! How long will it be?
Have compassion on your servants,
Satisfy us in the morning with your unfailing love
That we may sing for joy and be glad all our days

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

May your deeds be shown to your servants
Your splendor to their children

May the favor of the Lord our God rest upon us
Establish the work of our hands for us
Yes, establish the work of our hands

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