



MBS184

A MESSIANIC BIBLE STUDY FROM ARIEL MINISTRIES



# PSALM 90: AN EXPOSITION



By Dr. Arnold G. Fruchtenbaum



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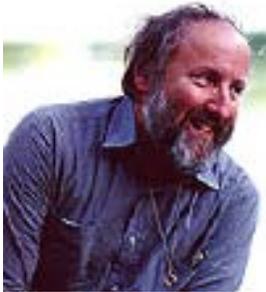
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*And I will pour upon  
the house of David, and  
upon the inhabitants of  
Jerusalem, the spirit of  
grace and of  
supplication, and they  
shall look unto me  
whom they have pierced.  
Zechariah 12:10*

## INTRODUCTION

By way of introduction, it should be noted that the superscription beneath the psalm number introducing Psalm 90 reads: *A Prayer of Moses the man of God.*

### A. The Uniqueness of the Psalm

Psalm 90 is a very unique psalm. For example, no statement in this psalm is taken from any other psalm. As a study of the Book of Psalms will show, the psalms repeat themselves; certain thoughts found in one psalm are found, almost word-for-word, in other psalms. Furthermore, it has no affinity with any of the other psalms, meaning that it does not cover any similar circumstances.

It does have, however, similarity and affinity with one chapter that Moses wrote elsewhere: Deuteronomy 33, another poetic song. If you compare Deuteronomy 33 with Psalm 90, you will find several elements of comparison, similarity, and affinity. For example, Deuteronomy 33:1 begins with the phrase: *Moses the man of God.* This is the same as the beginning of the superscription here in Psalm 90. Moses is the author of this one psalm as well as the five books of Moses. Because he is the writer of this psalm, we know that this is the oldest of the one hundred fifty psalms. The others were written by men who lived much later than Moses.

### B. The Timing and Historical Background

As the context shows, Moses wrote this psalm at the end of the forty years of Wilderness Wanderings. By the time, he wrote this psalm, the Exodus Generation had passed away; the judgment of the sin at Kadesh Barnea had run its course; and the Wilderness Generation is soon to enter the Land. So this psalm is written from the background of the sin of Kadesh Barnea.

“What was the sin at Kadesh Barnea?” The details are given in the Book of Numbers. In chapters 13-14 of that book, the Jewish people had finally arrived at the oasis of Kadesh Barnea, which was right on the border of the Promised Land. In other words, once they walked past Kadesh, they would be in the Promised Land. From that spot, Moses sent twelve men *to spy out the land*. When they came back forty days later, they all agreed on one issue: the Land was everything that God said it was; it was *a land which flows with milk and honey*. Then, there was a crucial point of disagreement: ten of the spies said the inhabitants of the Land were so numerically and militarily strong that under no circumstances could they possibly capture the Land. Only two spies, Joshua and Caleb, told the people that they believed God was with His people, and thus would enable them to take the Land. In Numbers 13:30, they said: *We are well able to overcome it*.

As so many often do today, the people assumed that the majority had to be right. There was a massive rebellion against the authority of Moses and Aaron, with the two men almost losing their lives in a mob scene until God intervened and saved them. At that point, God pronounced a special judgment on the Exodus Generation. The judgment was that all those who came out of Egypt would have to continue wandering in the wilderness until a forty year period was completed, forty years for the forty days the spies were in the Land. During those forty years, everyone who came out of Egypt would die, except for Joshua and Caleb, the two good spies, and those under the age of twenty. So, the Exodus Generation lost the privilege of entering the Land of Israel. It would be the next generation, the Wilderness Generation, that was allowed to enter the Land under Joshua.

The Exodus Generation, then, was under a sentence of physical death in the wilderness, meaning they would die outside the Land. Based upon the population numbers given in the Book of Numbers, this means that Moses saw the death of about 1,200,000 people in a period of thirty-eight years. This would be the entire adult population that left Egypt, from the age of twenty upward. The wilderness, which was intended to be simply a place of passing through to a new land, had become a huge cemetery. “What does it mean to have 1,200,000 people die in a period of thirty-eight years?” It means that 31,580 people died per year. More specifically, it means that eighty-seven people died every single day, eighty-seven funerals per day, all because of the sin at Kadesh Barnea.

Having witnessed this tremendous death toll, Moses reflects and writes Psalm 90. In order to understand Psalm 90, this background must be understood: that Moses wrote it at the end of the forty years of Wilderness Wanderings and at the end of seeing an entire generation die away in the wilderness, including members of his own family, Aaron and Miriam among them.

### C. The Three Segments of the Psalm

This psalm has three main segments. The first segment, comprising verses 1-6, deals with the transitory nature of man in contrast to the eternal nature of God. The second segment, comprising verses 7-12, attributes the reason for mankind's transitoriness to human sin. And in the third segment, comprising verses 13-17, Moses prays to God to visit His servants and to build upon His eternity through their mortality.

## I. THE ETERNITY OF GOD AND THE TRANSITORINESS OF MAN: PSALM 90:1-6

### A. The Eternity of God: Psalm 90:1-2

As Moses begins to discuss the eternity of God and the transitoriness of man, he begins with the divine side of the equation, the eternal God. Here, Moses makes two statements about God.

#### 1. God, the Dwelling Place: Psalm 90:1

*Lord, you have been our dwelling-place, In all generations.*

First, God is the *dwelling-place*. God has been Israel's *dwelling-place*, not just sporadically, but in all generations. The word *dwelling place* means “a protective shelter.” God has been Israel's protective shelter *in all generations* from the time of Abraham, the father of the Jewish people. This is one affinity with Deuteronomy 33. Deuteronomy 33:27 states: *The eternal God is your dwelling-place, And underneath are the everlasting arms.* This shows the Mosaic authorship of both passages. In these verses, Moses is saying that, although God is indeed lofty, He is not inaccessible. He is reachable; he is always there for those willing to approach Him on His basis: the basis of faith.

#### 2. God, the Eternal One: Psalm 90:2

*Before the mountains were brought forth, Or ever you had formed the earth and the world, Even from everlasting to everlasting, you are God.*

The second thing about God that Moses deals with is God as the Eternal One, and he uses three descriptive terms to emphasize this. The first phrase states: *Before the mountains were brought forth*. The *mountains* are the long-existing witnesses of God's covenant with Israel. In fact, here is another affinity with Deuteronomy 33, where verse 15 indicates that the *ancient mountains* are the witnesses to God's covenantal relationship with the Jewish people. Secondly, God is even older than the mountains, as the second phrase states: *Or ever you had formed the earth and the world*. In other words, God not only pre-existed the mountains, He even pre-existed Genesis 1:1; for He had *formed the earth and the world*. In this verse, the Hebrew word for *earth* means “the world in general” and the Hebrew word for world means “the productive part of the world inhabited by man.” Moses' third descriptive phrase of God's eternity is: *from everlasting to everlasting*, meaning from eternity past to eternity future. From before time was, until time shall be no more, he concludes: *you are God*. This is the eternity of God, which he will now proceed to contrast with the transitoriness of man.

**B. The Transitoriness of Man: Psalm 90:3-6****1. The Frailty of Man: Psalm 90:3**

*You turn man to destruction, And say, Return, ye children of men.*

Moses begins dealing with the frailty of man by stating: *You turn man to destruction*. The Hebrew word used here for *man* emphasizes his human frailty, his weakness. The Hebrew word for *destruction* is a very strong word; it means, “to be pulverized like dust.” It is also a unique word, used only here in the Hebrew Old Testament. The point Moses is making is that man's fate is to return to pulverized dust. This is in contrast to God's deathlessness. Man is destined to return to that from which he came; he was made from dust, he is destined to return to pulverized dust. The future of man is the same as his origin-dust.

Moses then points out that God says: *Return, ye children of men*. This is a call to repentance, because the purpose of divine judgment is always to bring one to repentance. So, while God is threatening judgment, which shows the frailty of man, He also calls for repentance, which will avert the divine decree.

**2. The Timelessness of God: Psalm 90:4**

*For a thousand years in your sight Are but as yesterday when it is past, And as a watch in the night.*

Moses again focuses on God's timelessness. His point is that time has absolutely no meaning with God. To illustrate that point rather graphically, he states: *For a thousand years in your sight Are but as yesterday when it is past*. Moses uses two phrases to describe what a thousand years is in God's sight. The first phrase is: *but as yesterday when it is past*. In other words, a thousand years with God is like only a night in the life of man. It is not even a full twenty-four-hour day, only a twelve-hour night. The first comparison he makes, then, is that a thousand years, a very long period from man's perspective, is merely about twelve hours to God.

Moses then points out that twelve hours is even a bit too long. The second phrase he uses to make his point is: *as a watch in the night*. In Moses' time, the night was divided into three four-hour watches. In comparison to God's eternity, man's life is only one watch out of three, only a part of the night. Thus, the thousand years of God is reduced to only four hours of human life. “What is a thousand years in God's sight?” Merely four-hours of human life.

However, Moses goes further, emphasizing that this is not four hours of the day but four hours of the night. It is four hours of the night of which the sleeper takes no reckoning; four hours that have vanished upon the sleeper's awakening. While he is fast asleep, there is, in fact, no awareness of the passing of minutes and hours.

**3. The Certainty of Death: Psalm 90:5a**

*You carried them away as with a flood; they are as a sleep.*

To emphasize the certainty of death, Moses states that death will

eventually take all away. Furthermore: *they are as a sleep*. The word used for *sleep* here is the “sleep of death.” After pointing out the shortness of human life compared to God's eternity in verse 4, Moses emphasizes the certainty of death.

#### 4. The Shortness of the Beauty of Life: Psalm 90:5b-6

*In the morning they are like grass which grows up. In the morning it flourishes, and grows up; In the evening it is cut down, and withers.*

To make it even a bit more pessimistic, Moses then writes that the beauty of life is shorter than life itself and points out three things. First, the whole thing is based upon the fact that the flowers of Israel have a very short life span. Flowers in the Land sprout from the ground in mid-March, but they are dry and dead by mid-April. In other words, the beauty of man's life is also very short-lived.

Secondly, the four hours of the life of man are still not the length of his productivity. No matter how long a man lives, not all of those years can be fully productive. The first few years must be spent in developing: one is born; one must suckle the breast; one must slowly learn to walk; one must gradually learn to think, make decisions, learn to read, learn to write, learn to live in the real world. In this way, the early years are spent developing. In later years, there is a sapping of physical strength and mental acuteness. Coming to a state of maturity does not necessarily mean we can be thoroughly productive for the rest of our lives. There are those who remain sharp in mind and physical abilities to the end of life, but we often see people who begin to fail. The ability to produce is impaired by the development of physical weaknesses or mental problems, such as forgetfulness, Alzheimer's Disease, and other ailments. People are generally not aware of the shortness of human life until they get older. Ordinarily, a teenager has no consciousness of how short life really is. He knows he will die someday, but that day, in his mind, is very, very far away. An older, wiser person comes to that consciousness, but probably not before much of his physical and mental strength is spent. All that is left, then, are those middle years of productivity, a middle period of our lives during which we can be truly productive for the Lord. Notice, then, that the four hours of man have been reduced even further, down to merely two or three hours of productivity.

Thirdly, human life is frail and brief compared to God's eternity. Because human life is so brief, we must make it count for the Lord. Moses will move into that issue in the next segment, although he does make the application here: it is important that we carefully plan our lives to make them most productive for the Lord.

## II. THE SOURCE OF THE PROBLEM: HUMAN SIN: PSALM 90:7-12

Moses next deals with the reason behind human transitoriness. The

source of the problem is human sin. There are three subdivisions in this particular segment. The first subdivision, comprising verses 7-9, deals with the death of man. The second subdivision, comprising verses 10-11, discusses the life span of man and the wrath of God. The third subdivision, comprising verse 12, gives the application.

### A. The Death of Man: Psalm 90:7-9

This subdivision describes the essence of the death of man, beginning with its untimeliness.

#### 1. The Reason for Man's Untimely Death: Psalm 90:7

*For we are consumed in your anger, And in your wrath are we troubled.*

The word *For* is an explanatory term to explain why death is coming upon them? The reason is: *we are consumed in your anger, And in your wrath are we troubled*. The term *troubled* means “to be hurried away in untimely death.” This is Moses' recognition of the results of the sin at Kadesh Barnea: that many of these people could have lived a lot longer, but by God's judgment, 1,200,000 had to die during a period of thirty-eight years. Many died simply of natural causes, but the wilderness accounts of Exodus, Leviticus, and Numbers also reveal that people often died by direct, divine judgment because of sin. So Moses states: *in your wrath are we troubled*, hurried away in untimely death. This is Moses' own conclusion of his observations of the sin of Kadesh Barnea.

#### 2. The Reason for Man's Judgment: Psalm 90:8

*You have set our iniquities before you, Our secret sins in the light of your countenance.*

Moses discusses the reason for the judgment, which was sin; he pictures the sins of man as being set before God to be judged. Then he states: *Our secret sins in the light of your countenance*. In other words, these *secret sins* might be hid from man, but they are not hid from God's sight, and He does bring them to *light* for the purpose of punishment.

#### 3. Man's Whole Life is Under God's Wrath: Psalm 90:9

*For all our days are passed away in your wrath: We bring our years to an end as a sigh.*

Moses points out that the whole life of man is under the *wrath* of God, to the extent that *all our days are passed away*. The point is that the hours of sunlight seem to get shorter because of the darkness caused by the *wrath* of God.

Then comes the termination: *We bring our years to an end as a sigh*. This describes the exhaling of the last breath, showing a feeling of weariness, but, ultimately, the exhaling of the last breath of death. Such is the death of man: untimely, a judgment caused by sin. And a judgment that comes finally to bring *an end* to lives that have been passed under the *wrath* of God.

### B. The Life Span of Man and the Wrath of God: Psalm 90:10-11

In the second subdivision, Moses discusses the life span of man and

the wrath of God, focusing on the years of man.

NOTES

### 1. The Years of Man: Psalm 90:10

*The days of our years are three score years and ten, Or even by reason of strength fourscore years; Yet is their pride but labor and sorrow; For it is soon gone, and we fly away.*

“What is man's life span?” In answer to this question, Moses states: *The days of our years are three score years and ten* [seventy]. That is a basic minimum, although many people live less than that. Then he states: *Or even by reason of strength fourscore* [eighty] *years*. That is a basic maximum, although some live longer. In other words, Moses gives us an average span of life between seventy and eighty years. Most people can expect to live until seventy, although some live less than that. Others can expect to live up to eighty, but some do live longer than that.

Whether one goes the basic minimum or the basic maximum, whether one live less or more, the writer says, regardless, it is all vanity. The vanity of it all is described as *labor and sorrow*. All these years are often spent in travail and vanity: *For it is soon gone, and we fly away*. In other words, what initially appears long to people, at the end is actually short, and life flies away like a fleeting bird. Young people see their eventual death as very far off, having no sense of their mortality; older people look back and say, “Where have the years gone?” Young people view time as moving slowly, with one year of high school or college seeming to take forever; older people cannot understand how the years have passed so quickly. This is the difference between looking at it from the beginning and viewing it from the end. The point of this verse is that what initially appears long to us, at the end appears short, for life flies away like a fleeting bird.

### 2. The Wrath of God: Psalm 90:11

*Who knows the power of your anger, And your wrath according to the fear that is due unto you?*

“Why does this happen?” This verse attributes it to the wrath of God. Here, Moses asks two questions: First: *Who knows the power of your anger?* Secondly: *And your wrath according to the fear that is due unto you?* The lessons that Moses wants to bring home to believers include: first, that there are only a few who truly appreciate the intensity of the divine wrath aroused by sinfulness. Few people understand and appreciate that much of their sufferings are due to the wrath of God. Secondly, in very few people does the wrath of God induce a sense of fear to turn away from sin. Even when tragedy hits, although a minority will turn to God in faith, the vast majority always fail to make the shift to faith in Him.

### C. The Application: Psalm 90:12

In the third subdivision, Moses gives the application of the lesson of Kadesh Barnea: *So teach us to number our days, That we may get us a heart of wisdom.*

The lesson he wants to teach us is *to number our days*. We need to realize how few *our days* really are and that, again, not all of *our days* will be productive for God. We need to count the days that we have with a full understanding of the consequences of unworthy days.

An interesting exercise I did for myself and one that I would encourage you to do is to figure that you have the minimum total amount to live, about seventy years or 25,600 days. From the day you were born, that is approximately how many days you have to live. No matter what age you are at the present time, count the number of days you have left until your seventieth birthday. This is not suggesting you do this on an ongoing, daily basis, just for a couple of weeks, and I think it will change your life just as it did mine upon realizing the brief length of one's life and the nature of one's responsibility. So, count the number of days you have left until your seventieth birthday, and then every morning subtract one day.

Again, you might live less than seventy years or you might live more than seventy years. But in the days you have left, your productivity level may not always be the same. What you do have left, make it count for eternity, not just for the killing of time. Keep in mind that the result of Kadesh Barnea was the killing of time for thirty-eight years with nothing positive accomplished. It was the same monotonous thing every day: get up in the morning; have some manna; wait for the cloud or the pillar of fire to move or not to move. If the monotony was broken, it was generally broken only for instantaneous judgment in which many would die. So, I strongly recommend that you try numbering your days for only a couple of weeks. To keep going indefinitely may leave you thinking somewhat morbidly, "Oh, I have only a couple of thousand days to live!" Simply, for merely a short season, count up how many days you have left to live. Every morning, subtract one day, and realize how much time you have left to be truly productive for God. Then make it count for eternity, because the purpose of counting our days, as Moses says, is *to get us a heart of wisdom*. The Hebrew word for *wisdom* means "to gain skill in living." We are to gain skill in living our daily lives for God in righteousness and godly deeds. Godly deeds done with godly *wisdom* will continue into eternity. Moses wanted to make sure the new generation would not waste time like the old generation.

### III. PRAYER FOR THE RETURN OF GOD'S FAVOR: PSALM 90:13-17

The third main segment contains a prayer to God to visit His servants to build upon His eternality through their mortality. There are four subdivisions in this segment. The first subdivision, verse 13, is a prayer for the turning away of God's wrath. The second subdivision, verse 14, is a prayer for God to remember His covenant with Israel. The third subdivision, verse 15, is a prayer for proportionate restoration.

And the fourth subdivision, verses 16-17, is a contrast between the work of God and the work of man.

NOTES

### A. Prayer for the Turning Away of God's Wrath: Psalm 90:13

*Return, O Jehovah; how long? And let it repent you concerning your servants.*

Moses issues a prayer for the turning away of God's wrath. His request: *Return, O Jehovah* means “turn away Your wrath.” The question: *how long?* means, “How long will You be angry?” Then Moses states: *let it repent you concerning your servants*. The word *repent* means “to change your mind.” Not that God needs repentance for sin, obviously, but Moses' plea is that God's program would be different for the Wilderness Generation than it was for the Exodus Generation. In other words, “Do not let the wrath on the Exodus Generation extend to the Wilderness Generation. Change Your mind, and don't let the wrath continue on the present-day *servants*.” The word for *servants* here refers to Israel. In other words, Moses is asking God to turn sorrow into joy.

### B. Prayer to Remember God's Covenant Love: Psalm 90:14

*Oh satisfy us in the morning with your lovingkindness, That we may rejoice and be glad all our days.*

Moses asks God to remember His covenant love, requesting: *Oh satisfy us in the morning with your lovingkindness*. The phrase *in the morning* means that he wants it to be done speedily; *the morning* after the troubles of the night. He is now looking forward to a new era of joy for Israel. The word he uses for *lovingkindness* is the word *chesed*, which means “covenant faithfulness.” Moses is asking God to restore favor now on the basis of His covenant with Israel, specifically, the Abrahamic Covenant.

The reason and the result is: *That we may rejoice and be glad all our days*.

The Hebrew word for *rejoice* means “to sing in ringing tones,” and emphasizes external joy. The Hebrew word for *be glad* emphasizes internal joy. In other words, he wants Israel to experience both internal and external joy *all* [their] *days*. The prayer is that they may enjoy life abundantly rather than continue passing it in sorrow. The whole point is to beseech God that what He has done to the Exodus Generation, He would avoid doing to the Wilderness Generation. Moses is asking for a new era of joy, salvation, and peace on behalf of this new generation.

### C. Prayer for Proportionate Restoration: Psalm 90:15

*Make us glad according to the days wherein you have afflicted us, And the years wherein we have seen evil.*

In this verse, Moses makes a comparison. The point is that after the restoration of God's favor, may the enjoyment of abundant life be proportionate to the period Israel suffered while the wrath of God burned against them. The wrath burned against them for forty years, and now may His favor be restored for forty years. Moses is asking for proportionate restoration.

### D. The Contrast Between the Work of God and the Work of Man: Psalm 90:16-17

As Moses concludes this psalm, he makes a contrast between the work of God and the work of man.

#### 1. The Work of God: Psalm 90:16

*Let your work appear unto your servants, And your glory upon their children.*

This verse states two things that emphasize the work of God. First: *Let your work appear unto your servants*. In other words, the *work* of God's providence is to be made evident in His work with the new generation, the Wilderness Generation. Likewise, the *work* of God's providence is to remain evident in His dealings with believers' own lives. Secondly, Moses states: *And your glory upon their children*. The word *glory* is not the usual Hebrew word for *glory*, but is another Hebrew word that means "beauty." It emphasizes the beauty of the Lord. In other words, let Israel have a demonstration of the beauty of the Lord by seeing the divine splendor, as revealed in God's saving power. Let them see the beauty of the Lord in that, just as God is able to punish, He is also able to bless. When He says: *upon their children*, he is asking not only for the present day Wilderness Generation, but also for subsequent generations to be able to experience the beauty of the Lord. For such is the *work* of God.

#### 2. The Work of Man: Psalm 90:17

*And let the favor of the Lord our God be upon us; And establish you the work of our hands upon us; Yea, the work of our hands establish you it.*

Moses discusses the work of man, beginning with a request: *And let the favor of the Lord our God be upon us*. The Hebrew word for *favor* means "the pleasantness of God." He is not only asking God to display His beauty, he is also asking Him to display His pleasantness to Israel. Let Israel now enjoy the beauty and pleasantness of God in contrast to the wrath and judgment of God. More specifically, let Israel experience Your beauty in place of Your wrath, Your pleasantness in place of Your judgment. The request is, therefore: *let the favor of the Lord our God be upon us*.

Moses then concludes by emphasizing the means by which *the favor of the Lord our God be upon us*. He makes two statements that are repetitious, but emphatic. The first statement is: *And establish you the work of our hands upon us*. The phrase *the work of our hands* refers to our daily tasks, done in obedience and according to the will of God to glorify Him. In other words, the work of God's providence, described in verse 16, is done through the work of man. Believers need to learn to work skillfully, having wisdom or skillfulness in living daily for the work of the Lord. Then, Moses' second statement is: *Yea, the work of our hands establish you it*. This is repetition for emphasis. The work of God is to be accomplished through His servants, and they will thus enjoy success in their labors, even though life is short.

The whole point of this psalm, in application to believers today, is fourfold. First, we need to recognize that no matter how long we live that, from a divine perspective, life is very short. Secondly, no matter how long we live, not all of our years, and only, in fact, those middle years, are productive; even in those middle years, we can be sidelined through tragedy, illness, and sickness, thus becoming less productive. Thirdly, we must be very conscious of how much time we have left in this world. And fourthly, we must plan our lives in such a way to be most productive for the Lord, doing His work.

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the following quote is a beautiful summary of this entire psalm: When God rebukes one for his sin, he feels most frail and transitory; but when he is blessed by God's favor, he feels most worthwhile. He shares in the work of the everlasting God. Weakened by God's discipline, one is acutely aware of his mortality. Abiding in God's love and compassion, he is aware of being crowned with glory and honor (*Bible Knowledge Commentary*, p. 860).

We believers often use many sayings and clichés, including some that are not even biblically valid, such as “Let go, Let God.” However, based upon this particular psalm, there is one cliché that is truly biblical, and we should make its message real in our lives:

Only one life twill soon be passed,  
Only what is done for Christ will last. ☆

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