

# The days and years of our lives

## Psalm 90

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**Introduction:** My passion for the Psalms is not a new thing – they’ve been a staple in my diet for many years. Nor is love for the Psalms a new thing in Christian history – they’ve long been a staple of Jewish piety as well as a source of comfort and depth in Christian growth. But it was actually while pastoring here at IBC, leading men’s prayer breakfasts, where we always spent time with a psalm, that I began to be more conscious of the therapeutic impact of the Psalms on our emotions. What the psalmists did was to process their intense or overwhelming emotions through prayer and poetry, through singing and worship. So as we turn regularly to the psalms with our strong emotions (be they joyful or despairing), we find that God meets us right in the crucible of our feelings and shows us how to draw close to Him and unburden our heart, letting everything flow out, sometimes in praise, other times in anger, often in brokenness and confusion. And someone may ask, “But how could all of that be called God’s Word?” God’s Word to us in those places is that it’s **ok to be real with God**, to pour out before Him all the misery we sometimes carry inside, just as the psalmists often did, and let Him help us sort it out. This is, in fact, fundamental to our learning to pray and worship authentically, and thus fundamental to our discipleship and witness.

Besides that, in this time of year when many are celebrating Thanksgiving, the Psalms are the perfect venue for stopping to focus on the goodness of our Lord, who grants us day after day and year after year of His lovingkindness, in spite of the ways we fall short, and even as we go through adversity and trials, we’re never lacking His faithfulness. Today I want us to focus on perhaps the oldest psalm in the Psalter; it was written by Moses, whom Scripture describes as the humblest man on the face of the earth (Num. 12:3). He spent 40 years as a prince of Egypt, 40 years as a shepherd in the desert, and 40 years as liberator of his people, legislator and judge, true founder of the Israelite community. It’s the only psalm that Moses left us, and it reveals the subjects that occupied his mind continually, as well as the equilibrium and emotional intelligence that characterized him. Take time to read through Psalm 90 slowly, then follow his thoughts as he meditated on the **fleetingness of human life** and the anguished **depths of God’s indignation** toward His rebellious creatures; yet observe also how Moses still dared to plead for **God’s tender mercies** as the true source of hope and joy for His people. Notice how these three emphases are woven throughout the prayer as the Holy Spirit carried Moses through the whole gamut of a well-rounded conversation with God: from praise and confession to repentance, supplication and intercession.

1) Moses had a strong **sense of time and eternity** and of how fleeting is our moment under the sun. We begin by paying attention to all the expressions that indicate something about time: from one generation to another, from everlasting to everlasting (v. 1); day/night, morning/evening (v. 5); **days and years** (Heb. *yom/shanah*) echo through the psalm like the ticking of a huge clock; our sojourn on the earth is compared to the image of a flood washing away everything in its path (v. 5), then likened to the grass, which lives and dies in the same day. Our lifespan of 70-80 years is described as passing quickly, with “trouble and sorrow” being the primary ingredients (v. 10), and then “we fly away.” Think of **Moses** with those children of Israel, wandering around the wilderness for 40 years, probably having multiple funerals every day! It surely felt like “vanity of vanities.” So the culmination of this emphasis comes in the plea that we might learn to number our days aright – days instead of years! (v. 12) – with the hope of gaining a **“heart of wisdom”** (of course, the beginning of wisdom is **“the fear of the Lord”**, Psalm 111:10). So learn to fear God and you’ll have nothing else to fear! This is fundamental to true emotional intelligence.

2) Moses had a strong **sense of God’s wrath**, expressed with very descriptive Hebrew words, and several synonyms in English. Anger is such a strong emotion – how I remember my father’s anger! It inspired much fear and anxiety, and even quite a bit of reactive anger on my part. Unfortunately, it tends to work that way: anger begets more anger on the part of those who are objects of the anger. I’ve had a tough time getting my tendency to anger under control ... as well as figuring out how much of the problem my dad might be responsible for and how much of it I would have to accept the blame for ... tricky!

Moses had witnessed firsthand the wrath of God, especially against the Egyptians who were so abusive toward God’s people. Ten plagues had been poured out on the land, yet their purpose was never to wound or hurt people, but to demonstrate the impotence of the Egyptian gods (they worshiped gods related to the Nile River, the sun, nature, etc.). Later Moses witnessed how Pharaoh and his army were all drowned in the Red Sea. Finally, Moses had also seen God’s wrath against His own people, who showed themselves to be extremely stubborn, hard-headed, stiff-necked, even after having seen all God’s miracles on their behalf!

We have so many misconceptions, however, regarding God’s wrath – as if He were some angry old man ready to strike down and crush anyone who crossed him. What a distorted misrepresentation of our God! His anger, or wrath, simply represents **His total opposition to all evil**. Do you realize the implications of that? Thank God for His wrath! How lost we would be if God stopped opposing evil with all His being! And heaven forbid that we should conceive of the cross as a place where God is pouring out His wrath! The cross is the place where God is pouring out love and forgiveness! Jesus was representing His Father’s heart there (2 Cor. 5:19). This means God’s wrath is actually a part of His love – can you imagine really loving someone without being willing to defend them from harm? What kind of love would that be? So His wrath actually moves us to seek Him, to find our refuge in Him – that’s real emotional intelligence!

3) Moses is also blessed with a strong **sense of God’s mercy**, in Hebrew, *hesed* (grace, favor). Myles Coverdale (1488-1569) was an English ecclesiastical reformer and bishop, who in very troubled times, often working on the foundation laid by William Tyndale, produced the first complete printed translation of the Bible into English (1535). He was

especially known for his translation of the Psalms, so when he came to Psalm 90 and the Hebrew word *hesed*, he realized that no English term could do it justice. So after much prayer and meditation, he invented a whole new word, **“lovingkindness”**, to try to capture this meaning.

From the beginning of the Psalm, Moses was already recognizing that God was like a refuge for the Israelites (a dwelling place, safe lodging). Starting with the final stanza (from v. 14), what Moses emphasizes is God’s mercy or lovingkindness, His deeds on behalf of His people, His splendor, His favor. Very pastoral in tone, Moses continues pleading for clemency and favor on behalf of God’s people, interceding for the very ones who had caused him so much pain and anguish – something like Jesus praying for His enemies. Would we be capable of this?

**“Satisfy us in the morning with your unfailing love”**, Moses pleads. The Hebrew term for “satisfy” (עֲבַד, *saba*) means satiate, saturate, fill, fulfill. So where can we best “saturate our soul” with God’s mercies? Hopefully, what immediately comes to your mind is the cross, that culminating moment when God’s mercy or lovingkindness was incarnated most intensely; that celestial reality was historicized there, fully converted into earthly history. Jesus didn’t die so that God could forgive us; He died because God forgives us! At the cross, divine forgiveness was both declared and acted out personally in the face of the worst, most scandalous human crime ever committed – against God or anybody! Our God came to show us His love, to teach us the way to life, and we (humanity) responded by murdering Him with great violence and brutality – because this was the true state of our heart, where we had rejected His rule over us (from time immemorial). Yet even so, He forgave us, in person, all the way to His death! What an amazing fountain of mercy! I just want to sit at those nail-scarred feet and drink in that kind of grace! I want to put my mind to soak in that lovingkindness! This is true emotional intelligence incarnated by our Savior, beyond anything we could ever imagine. As we learn to focus our lives on Him, He does indeed **“establish the work of our hands”**, as Moses prayed. It’s only **“in the Lord”** that our labor is not in vain! (1 Cor. 15:58).

In these times of cultural revolution, when radicals seek to transform the values and beliefs of our society down to the roots with a total brainwashing (ideological subversion), in the midst of such convulsive and chaotic times, it is so urgent for you and me to grow in emotional intelligence, which the Holy Spirit wants to teach us through Scripture (especially the Psalms), and in the person of Jesus we see it fully personified.