

In this first worship service of 2021, I thought it would be good to think of entering a new year in the light of Psalm 90. The title of the sermon is “Living Under God’s Wrath.” That is not a very cheery title, but it comes right out of Psalm 90. The first part of verse 9 says, “For all our days pass away under your wrath.” We will have to explore exactly what that means. This Psalm is about living with that reality. And the Psalm as a whole gives us comfort and hope in the light of living under the wrath of God. The first part of the Psalm and the last part of the Psalm give us comfort and hope and the middle part of the Psalm deal with the hard reality of suffering and death that are the result of the wrath of God against sin.

Now one of the things that we must understand about the Psalms is that most of them deal with different experiences that God’s people go through, but most of them are not intended to deal with all of life all of the time. Psalm 90 deals with the sadness of life because of the reality of suffering and death and it gives hope and comfort in the light of that sadness. That is part of life. It is not all of life. Other Psalms deal with other subjects. Psalm 23:6 says, “Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life....” Psalm 32:11 says, “Be glad in the LORD, and rejoice, O righteous, and shout for joy, all you upright in heart.” The Psalms as a whole do not say that life is nothing but sadness and suffering. There is a lot of joy in life for God’s people. And many of the Psalms celebrate that.

But there is also a lot of sadness and suffering in life and the Psalms deal with that part of life as well. There is a great deal of help in the Psalms in the struggles and pain of life. And Psalm 90 helps us to deal with the sad fact that life is short and we all die. It does not leave us in despair. It helps us to deal with the real sadness that is part of every life because of the reality of death.

Verse 12 asks God, “So teach us to number our days that we may get a heart of wisdom.” Our days are numbered and passing from one year to the next is a reminder of that. It’s a good time to think about the fact that our days are numbered. It’s wise to think about the fact that our days are numbered – because that is the reality. But the point of the Psalm is not that we should live gloomy lives of despair. The beginning and the end of the Psalm give us a number of reasons to live full and satisfying lives even though they are short and there is a lot of hardship and suffering.

Verses 3-6 are about the sad reality of death. Psalm 90:3–6, “<sup>3</sup>You return man to dust and say, “Return, O children of man!” <sup>4</sup>For a thousand years in your sight are but as yesterday when it is past, or as a watch in the night. <sup>5</sup>You sweep them away as with a flood; they are like a dream, like grass that is renewed in the morning: <sup>6</sup>in the morning it flourishes and is renewed; in the evening it fades and withers.”

Death is a fact of life. That is the sad reality. Life is precious, but it does not last. People are precious, but they do not last. Our relationships are precious, but they do not last. And that taints all of life with sadness. We do not experience that sadness every moment, but we are regularly reminded of the inevitability of death – our own and the people we hold dear. We return to dust. Our precious bodies decay and end up as dirt. We are

swept away as with a flood. "Time, like an ever-rolling stream, Bears all its sons away." During every year that passes a certain percentage of the human race dies. And that happens every year.

Our lives are like a dream – there for a time and then gone. Or like grass – here today and gone tomorrow.

Not very pleasant to think about, but necessary. Psalm 90 reminds us of the reality of death. And it says that this is because of God's wrath. Verses 7-11, "<sup>7</sup>For we are brought to an end by your anger; by your wrath we are dismayed. <sup>8</sup>You have set our iniquities before you, our secret sins in the light of your presence. <sup>9</sup>For all our days pass away under your wrath; we bring our years to an end like a sigh. <sup>10</sup>The years of our life are seventy, or even by reason of strength eighty; yet their span is but toil and trouble; they are soon gone, and we fly away. <sup>11</sup>Who considers the power of your anger, and your wrath according to the fear of you?"

Here we have the idea of living under God's wrath. We die because God's wrath. We suffer because of God's wrath. In the verses that mention God's wrath we are reminded that the span of our lives is toil and trouble. Our lives are toil and trouble because of God's wrath.

Now we need to understand what that means and what that doesn't mean. The wrath that Psalm 90 is talking about is upon both the righteous and the wicked. This is a general wrath that is upon all of mankind. The Bible speaks about the wrath of God in different ways in different places. Here it has to do with living in a fallen world as sinful people. The whole creation is under God's curse because of sin. That is why there is death. That is why there is suffering.

Genesis 3:16-19 tells us of God's curse because of the original sin of Adam and Eve. God told Adam that the ground was cursed because of his sin and in pain he would eat of it all the days of his life. Life would be hard. The earth would bring forth thorns and thistles. He would have to sweat to make a living. And in the end he would return to the ground ... for, God said, "out of it you were taken; for you are dust and to dust you shall return."

This is what Psalm 90 is speaking about when it says, "all our days pass away under your wrath." But it is not only the original sin that is the reason for God's wrath. Verse 8 speaks of our ongoing sins. "You have set our iniquities before you, our secret sins in the light of your presence." The world is under the curse because of the original sin of Adam and Eve, but there is also our ongoing sins. We suffer and die because of God's curse upon sin – the original sin of Adam and Eve, but also our own sins. "For we are brought to an end by your anger; by your wrath we are dismayed. You have set our iniquities before you, our secret sins in the light of your presence."

Now you will be wondering how this fits with being God's people. How does this fit with salvation – with the forgiveness of sins. The OT saints had the sacrifices pointing to the sacrifice of Christ. We who believe are made righteous in Christ and are no longer under condemnation. How does this language of God's wrath here fit with that?

We need to understand that the Bible speaks of the wrath of God in a number of different ways. It is always related to sin, but there are many different nuances. There is John 3:36 that says, "Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life; whoever does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God remains on him." Romans 5:9 says, "Since, therefore, we have been justified with God, much more shall we be saved by him from the wrath of God." There is the word "propitiation" which is used 4 times in the NT. It means that Jesus by his death appeased the wrath of God. 1 John 4:10 says that God "sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins." What this means is that if we are trusting in Jesus we are no longer under the wrath of God. Jesus has paid the penalty for our sins and God's favor rests upon us for Jesus' sake. But those who are not followers of Jesus – the wrath of God remains on them.

So in this sense the wrath of God is no longer on God's people, but it remains on those who continue to live in rebellion against God.

There is also references in the Psalms that refer to God's wrath upon his people which is anger because of their sins but something much different than his wrath upon his enemies. In Psalm 6:1 the Psalmist prays, "O LORD, rebuke me not in your anger, nor discipline me in your wrath." Psalm 88:7 says, "Your wrath lies heavy upon me, and you overwhelm me with all your waves." So there is a kind of wrath that can come upon God's people which is chastisement or discipline. That kind of wrath is consistent with God's love for his people. Proverbs 3:11 says that "the LORD reproves him whom he loves."

And then we have the wrath of Psalm 90. This is God's wrath upon his whole creation which is the result of the fall of Adam and Eve and the ongoing sin of both God's people and God's enemies. This is a more general wrath that results in suffering and death for all people including God's people. We live in a fallen world. We live in a world that is under God's curse. And it is because of God's wrath in this sense that we all suffer and die. That is what Moses is speaking about in Psalm 90. He is speaking as a child of God. The whole Psalm is a prayer to God. By praying to God in this way Moses is expressing faithfulness to God. And yet he says, "For all our days pass away under your wrath."

And this is part of our experience as God's people. We live under God's wrath because we are sinful people living in a world that is under the curse that God pronounced at the time of creation. If we are believers in Jesus, we are no longer under condemnation, but we do remain under God's wrath in this very specific sense of being subject to death and suffering. These are expressions of God's wrath against sin. That is what Moses is saying in this Psalm.

So we think of the year that has passed and we think of the year that is to come. There has been suffering and death in the year that is passed. There will be suffering and death in the year that is to come. This is not the whole picture. There has been much to be thankful for and there will be much to be thankful for. But this is part of the picture. "All our days pass away under your wrath." "The years of our life are seventy, or even by reason of strength eighty; yet their span is but toil and trouble."

Acknowledging this is part of a godly response to God as we face the trials and struggles of life and the sadness because of the reality of death. There is in Moses' words here a sorrowful submission. These words of Moses are a lament because of the sadness of suffering and dying, but they are also an acknowledgement that we experience these hardships and sorrows because of our sins. Our lives are lived in the shadow of death because we are sinners. This Psalm models for us an attitude of sorrowful submission that acknowledges that we suffer and die because of the wrath of God against our sins.

But that is not the whole message of the Psalm. Psalm 90 deals with the sorrowful reality of living under the wrath of God, but the purpose of the Psalm is to help us deal with that sad reality.

First there are the first two verses, "Lord, you have been our dwelling place in all generations. Before the mountains were brought forth or ever you had formed the earth and the world, from everlasting to everlasting you are God." There is great comfort in the fact that God has been the dwelling place of his people in all generations – that he is God "from everlasting to everlasting." This same truth is expressed in Deuteronomy 33:27. "The eternal God is your dwelling place, and underneath are the everlasting arms." And this is expressly said of Jesus in Hebrews 13:8, "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever."

So we are haunted by the fact that our years "are soon gone and we fly away." It suggests that we and our lives are meaningless – that we and our lives do not matter. This is what led the author of Ecclesiastes to write, "Vanity of vanities, says the Preacher, vanity of vanities! All is vanity.... A generations goes, and a generation comes, but the earth remains forever." But the fact that God has been our dwelling place in all generations and that he is from everlasting to everlasting means that all is not vanity or meaningless. The eternal God gives meaning to our short and painful lives.

Our lives are part of a much larger story that is rooted in the God who is from everlasting to everlasting. God existed before the creation. Then he created the world. Then came the fall and history is the unfolding of God's plan of salvation. Then comes the life and ministry of Jesus. Then comes the new creation which is eternal. And behind that whole story is the eternal God – who was and who is and who is to come. Our short and painful lives are live as part of a story that gives them meaning in relation to the eternal God who gives meaning to the whole story.

And that God is not simply there. He is our dwelling place in all generations. That means he is our eternal home. Over against the short time that we live on this earth Moses takes comfort in the fact that God himself is our eternal home. Moses looks back through time and sees that God himself has been the home of his people right from the beginning. He does not say that God has always **provided** a dwelling place for his people but that he has always **been** the dwelling place of his people. And if that has always been the case in the past, it will always be the case in the future. "From everlasting to everlasting you are God."

What does it mean to say that God is our dwelling place in all generations? In some profound way God's people dwell in him. We have a permanent place to dwell in him. We do not have a permanent place to dwell on earth. But we do have a permanent place to dwell in God. The contrast here is between the shortness of our lives and the eternity of God and the point is that we dwell in this eternal God even though we do not dwell very long on this earth.

There is a hint here of eternal life. It is not yet the full-blown teaching of eternal life in Jesus that we find in the NT, but the fact that God is our eternal dwelling place leads to the reality of eternal life. We have a permanence in God that we do not have on earth.

So we look ahead to the year that is before us. This year will also bear many sons away. There will be toil and trouble. We head into a year that will bring us some trouble. We head into a year that may bring us to the end of our lives. We have passed from one year and entered into another. Each day we come closer to the end of our lives. But God has been our dwelling place in the past and he will continue to be so in the future – to all generations. This God is our eternal home. This short and painful life is not all that there is because the eternal God is our dwelling place.

Now in verses 12-17 we have we have six petitions. Six requests to God in the light of the sad reality of the brevity of life and the comforting reality of the eternity of God. First, "Teach us to number our days that we may get a heart of wisdom." We need God to teach us to number our days because we tend not to do it. When all is well, we tend to feel secure in life and forget that our days are numbered and we are moving through them quickly. We need to ask God to teach us to number our days – to make us willing to ponder the fact that our lives are like a dream – like grass that is renewed in the morning and in the evening it fades and withers. God teaches that in his word – in passages like this one. He teaches us that by working in our hearts to make us willing to face the truth about life. He teaches it through the experience of life – through sickness – through the death of people around us – through aging. It is wise to live in the light of the fact that our days are numbered.

Second request – verse 13: "Return, O LORD! How long? Have pity on your servants!" This is a request for the suffering to end. It is a request for God to have pity on his people as they live under his wrath. Behind this prayer is hope – hope for relief from the pain of the reality of death. The hope of the OT saints for the future was dim, but it was there. They were always looking forward to the fulfillment of God's promises – promises of life and blessing with God. Those promises were fulfilled in Jesus and his victory over sin and death.

This prayer for us is a prayer for the return of Christ. It is a prayer for the resurrection of our bodies. It is a prayer for the end of death and suffering and the fulfillment of the plan of God in Christ for the renewal of all things.

The third request – verse 14: “Satisfy us in the morning with your steadfast love, that we may rejoice and be glad all our days.” We’ve been thinking about the sadness of life because of suffering and death. But here we are told how we can have joy in the midst of the suffering and sadness. During this life with all of its loss and grief and sadness, we can have satisfaction and joy. Moses teaches us to pray that we may be satisfied and rejoice in the steadfast love of God. This is how we are to pray as we think of how short our lives are and how soon they are over. We can be satisfied in the steadfast love of God. We can rejoice and be glad all our days because of God’s steadfast love. Steadfast love is covenant love. It is the love of a God who has committed himself to love his people. It leads to the giving of his Son. It leads to salvation in Jesus Christ. It leads to eternal life in Christ. As we think of the reality of the fact that our days are numbered and that life is short and hard, this should be our prayer: “Satisfy us in the morning with your steadfast love, that we may rejoice and be glad all our days.”

The fourth request – verse 15: “Make us glad for as many days as you have afflicted us, and for as many years as we have seen evil.” This is a very conservative prayer in the light of what unfolds in the Scriptures. Moses asks for as many glad days as he has experienced sad days at the hand of God. God’s answer to this prayer is everlasting joy. Isaiah 35:10 promises, “And the ransomed of the LORD shall return and come to Zion with singing; everlasting joy shall be upon their heads; they shall obtain gladness and joy, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.”

The fifth request – verse 16, “Let your work be shown to your servants and your glorious power to their children.” This is a prayer for the coming of God’s kingdom. God’s work is about the fulfillment of his purposes. God’s work is about the overthrow of evil and the expansion of his kingdom. God work is fulfilled in Jesus and the coming of God’s kingdom in him.

As we look ahead to a year in which there will be suffering and death, let us pray for God to work in a mighty way bringing his kingdom and building his church. The mission of God through Jesus is to overthrow the curse that is over our lives because of sin. As we look towards the future, we know that there will be suffering and death, but we also know that the Lord Jesus is on the throne – he is building his church – he is overcoming evil with good – he is bringing his kingdom. The Bible is very clear about the difficulties of this life, but it is also about hope in what God is doing and what he is working towards. We need to be realistic about the suffering, but positive and joyful about the salvation that has begun and will be brought to its culmination at the return of our Lord Jesus Christ.

The sixth request – verse 17 – “Let the favor of the Lord our God be upon us....” We see how this prayer is fulfilled in the beginning and ending of most of Paul’s letters – such as Galatians 1:3: “Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ....” And 2 Corinthians 13:14, “The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.” As believers in Jesus the favor of God is resting upon us. And we head into an uncertain future in that confidence.

The seventh request – verse 17b – “And establish the work of our hands upon us, yes, establish the work of our hands!”

This is a prayer that God may enable us to accomplish worthwhile things during our short and painful lives. When we think of how short this life is and how we will be forgotten soon after we die, there is a longing that our lives might be worthwhile – of lasting significance. That is what this final prayer is about – establish the work of our hands. May what we do be of enduring value. This prayer is answered in 1 Corinthians 15:58. “Therefore [because of the victory that Christ has won over death], my beloved brothers, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labor is not in vain.”

The work of our hands is established when we abound in the work of the Lord. We are assured that in the Lord our labor is not in vain. As we head into a new year our prayer should be that the Lord will establish the work of our hands – that is that he will enable us to abound in the work of the Lord – doing whatever we do to please God and we know that such work will not be in vain. It will matter beyond this life. God will say, “Well done good and faithful servant.”

Psalms 90 deals realistically about the sadness of life that has lots of hardship and ends with death. We need to think about that in the light of our own lives and as we consider the year that is before us. But in spite of that sad reality, there is much reason for hope and positive expectation for the new year. Our dwelling place is the eternal God. And he has sent his Son that we might live in his favor and for his glory and because of that we can expectantly pray that along with whatever difficulties we may have to face, there will be satisfaction and joy because of God’s steadfast love and his favor upon us because of Jesus Christ our Saviour.