

Divine Eternity and the Brevity of Human Life

— A Study of Psalm 90 —

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Imagine a man named Tillman in Hawaii who is a big fan of NFL football. Monday night football is played in the afternoon in Hawaii's time zone, so television broadcasts are delayed until the evening. Tillman sometimes listens to the radio broadcast live, however, and then he watches the game on television at night. Knowing the outcome of the game affects how Tillman watches the game. For example, if he already knows that his favorite team has won, it does not bother him if they fall behind, because he knows they are going to win anyway (*Fresh Illustrations*, 217).

It should be the same with us and God. God is eternal and all powerful. He is going to win, and those who are on his side will share in his victory. There will be struggles along the way including reversals and temporary setbacks, but God's children have nothing to worry about. But rather than looking at the big picture or having a long term view, we often get so concerned about trivial little things that we fret and fuss unnecessarily. We can find peace of mind in Psalm 90, a psalm often used at funerals, where the psalmist speaks eloquently of God's divine eternity and the brevity of human life.

God is eternal. "Lord, you have been our dwelling place throughout all generations. Before the mountains were born or you brought forth the earth and the world, from everlasting to everlasting you are God" (Psa. 90:1-2).

God has always been. He never came into existence, because he is the very ground and source of existence for all others. Mankind has always depended on God "throughout all generations." We not only depend on God for food, shelter and clothing, but also for life itself. God existed before creation when he brought everything else into existence. He is the great "I am" who is from "everlasting to everlasting."

Mankind's life is transient and finite. "You turn men back to dust, saying, 'Return to dust, O sons of men.' For a thousand years in your sight are like a

day that has just gone by, or like a watch in the night. You sweep men away in the sleep of death; they are like the new grass of the morning – though in the morning it springs up new, by evening it is dry and withered" (Psa. 90:3-6).

The thought here is not merely that our life is brief or short in comparison with God's eternity, but that we are weak, finite and powerless compared to God. We are completely under his sovereignty. God made us from the dust of the ground, and he turns us back to dust. The span of our lives is so brief that a millennium seems like an extremely long time to us, but to God, who is eternal, it is next to nothing. It is like a "watch in the night." The Israelites had three watches during the night of about four hours each, so a watch is not very long compared to 1,000 years.

Our lives in this world are transient. We can be "swept away" suddenly at any time. Think of those who have been swept away along with whole houses in a sudden and tragic mudslide or flash flood. Our lives are like the "grass" of much of Palestine. It comes up in spring, but it never builds itself into a turf like we are accustomed to in America. It lasts only a short time, produces seed, is scorched by the summer sun and it is gone.

Mankind is under God's wrath. "We are consumed by your anger and terrified by your indignation. You have set our iniquities before you, our secret sins in the light of your presence. All our days pass away under your wrath; we finish our years with a moan" (Psa. 90:7-9).

Not only is our life brief in comparison with God's eternity, every second counts. All the cards are on the table. To use another metaphor, we are playing for all the marbles. Our life in this world is a test. When we sin, God judges us and we are under his wrath.

Human life is full of misery. "The length of our days is seventy years – or eighty, if we have the strength; yet their span is but trouble and sorrow, for they quickly pass, and we fly away. Who knows the power of your anger? For your wrath is

as great as the fear that is due you. Teach us to number our days aright, that we may gain a heart of wisdom" (Psa. 90:10-12).

Sin brings misery into life. Even if a person has a long life – seventy, eighty or more years – the length of one's life is not very fulfilling without quality of life. Sin brings not only misery but also death. Since our life is brief and since we are under the judgment of God, we must live wisely and rightly.

Submission brings God's favor. "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" (Psa. 90:13-17).

The psalmist sings a beautiful, humble, submissive prayer for wisdom to be able to accept the limitations of human existence and to find joy in the good things of life. The request is that God will "establish the work of our hands for us." Even though we are insignificant, fallible, finite creatures who are here for only a few years, he prays that we might find satisfying work to do and be useful in God's service. Even though we will perish one day, the psalmist asks that God's splendor be shown to the next generation. As John T. Willis put it, "The workers may perish, but their work will continue." If we are doing God's work, we are a part of something bigger than us that is not transitory or insignificant.

Finally, the psalmist begs, "May the favor of the Lord our God rest upon us." It is God's love and favor that makes the difference. As humans we are sinful; we are weak; we are transient. We only spend a short time in this world, but God can make our work worthwhile and full of purpose. Without this spiritual understanding, our lives will be futile.