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ETERNAL GOD, EPHEMERAL MAN

Psalm 90

By

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Lesson 17: Psalms

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In the barren Mojave desert of California rests a monument to futility. A single man, "Burro" Schmidt, spent over 40 years digging a tunnel more than 2,000 feet long through solid granite, using only hand tools. Schmidt was a gold prospector who had settled on the north side of Copper Mountain. Gold had been discovered on the south side. Thinking that he might strike it rich and that he would need a route for sending his ore to the other side, he began his tunnel.

In 1910, with his tunnel half finished, the Southern Pacific Railroad completed a line through the area which rendered Schmidt's tunnel useless. But by then the tunnel had become his obsession. He kept digging for another 28 years until he broke through into daylight. He operated the tunnel as a tourist attraction until his death in 1954. Over 40 years to build a useless tunnel through a barren, out-of-the-way desert mountain--what a waste!

But who is to say that Schmidt's tunnel was a waste of his life? A person might conquer the world, only to die in his thirties, like Alexander the Great. So what? A person might become a famous doctor, discovering the cure for cancer. So he helps people survive a few more years, only to die of something else. He, too, will soon go to his grave. So what?

Are you ever overwhelmed with the feeling that life is futile? You can amass a great fortune, only to be cut down in the prime of life. You can't take it with you. You can work all your life looking forward to retirement, only to die and never enjoy it. Almost anything you choose to put your hopes and your efforts in can suddenly be brought to nothing through that great common leveler: death. As George Bernard Shaw wryly observed, "The statistics on death are quite impressive: One out of one people die."

We avoid thinking about death in our culture. We're uncomfortable talking about it. We would rather just brush it aside with a nervous laugh and change the subject. But we can't brush it aside

for too long, because we and everyone we know will die. As you think about death, whether it be the death of others or your own death, you have to wrestle with the question, "How can my fleeting life have purpose or value?" "What makes life significant and worthwhile?"

It seems to me that there are only two possible answers. One is the philosophy of the hedonist, "Eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow we die." That view is flawed if there is a resurrection of the dead. The other view, which takes this fact into account, is the view of the Bible, that we must be linked vitally to the eternal God if we want our fleeting lives to have significance.

Moses was a man surrounded by death. He led Israel out of bondage in Egypt to take them to the promised land. But because of their disobedience, God determined that that generation should not enter the land, but die in the wilderness. Even Moses died; only Joshua and Caleb lived to enter the promised land. If God's judgment applied to everyone 20 and older when they came out of Egypt, over 1.2 million men and women died during the 40 years in the wilderness (Num. 1:45-46). There were a lot of graves in the desert!

As Moses saw these people whom he knew and had worked with over the years dropping like flies, he reflected deeply upon the question, "How can this fleeting life have meaning and value?" Instead of being driven to despair and cynicism, as many are who reflect on this question, Moses, being a man of God, was driven to worship and prayer. The result is the majestic Psalm 90, the oldest of the psalms, the only one in the psalter known to have been written by Moses. (He wrote other poetry; see, "The Song of Moses," Deut. 32:1-43.) Moses' inspired answer to the question of how this ephemeral (= lasting only a short while) life can have value is,

Our fleeting lives can have value only
if we live wisely before the eternal God.

The psalm falls into four stanzas:

1. (90:1-2)--The eternal nature of God.
2. (90:3-6)--The ephemeral nature of man.

3. (90:7-11)--God's wrath over man's sin as the cause of man's ephemerality.
4. (90:12-17)--A prayer for God's mercy and grace in spite of man's sin.

First I want to look at the second and third stanzas, which reveal two things which make life futile apart from God; then we will look at the first and fourth stanzas, which show how life can have meaning and value; then, I'll conclude with some practical lessons.

1. Life is futile apart from God because of its shortness and uncertainty and because of God's wrath on our sin.
 - A. Life's shortness and uncertainty make it futile apart from God (90:3-6).

When he talks of God bringing man back to the dust, Moses goes back to the fall and the curse which God imposed (Gen 2:17; 3:17-19). When he refers to "a thousand years," he may be recalling the life span of those before the flood, who lived almost that long. He is saying, "Even if a person lives to be a thousand years old, it is nothing to God. It's like a day to Him, or like a watch in the night, which passes by almost instantly while we sleep."

Think of that! Think of all of the history that has occurred in the past 1,000 years! America is a mere babe of 217. Columbus discovered America 501 years ago, just half way to 1,000! A 1,000-year-old man would have been half way through life when the Renaissance and Reformation came on the scene! To God, that's only a little blip on the horizon of time. We average 70 or 80 years, some a few more, some less, and we think we're so great! But none of us has the certainty of waking up tomorrow.

Moses describes our helplessness in the face of death as being swept away by a flash flood that suddenly bursts upon us and takes everything in its path (90:5a). We're like the grass of the field (90:5b-6), which sprouts in the morning and looks promising. But after a day in the blistering desert sun, it lies withered. How soon the promise of youth is gone and life fades away!

It may be uncomfortable to think about, but it's true. Think of how short and uncertain our feeble life is. A number of years ago, I mentioned in a sermon the fact that we are not guaranteed tomor-

row. That very day, a dear couple who had moved from our town, but who were back for a visit that Sunday, were driving home when a man high on drugs crossed the center line and hit them head on. The wife was killed instantly; the husband was crippled.

It just isn't all that difficult to die! We heard of a man who went with his wife for a weekend away in Palm Springs. As he was getting out of the jacuzzi, he felt dizzy, lost his balance, and hit his head as he fell. He died a few days later. Who would have thought that climbing into a jacuzzi would lead to death! I once did the funeral for an 11-year-old girl who had a headache, went and lay down and died, of a brain aneurysm. None of us knows how long we have to live. I want you to feel the anxiety Moses intends us to feel by his words. Life is short and uncertain. Apart from being rightly related to God, it is futile.

B. God's wrath on our sin makes life futile apart from God (90:7-11).

Moses had "exhibit A" before his eyes: People were dying like crazy. For 1.2 million people to die in 40 years, 30,000 were dying every year (if evenly spaced). That's about 82 per day! It didn't happen that way, because on some days thousands were killed because of their rebellion and sin (Num. 16:49; 25:9). But Moses saw a lot of corpses!

He is making the point that death is the result of God's wrath on our sin. People say that death is just a natural part of the life cycle, that all living things die, so we should just accept it as normal. But that's a humanistic lie that minimizes the horror of death and disregards the clear teaching of the Bible, that death entered this world as God's direct judgment on the sin of the human race (Gen. 2:17; 3:19). The reality of death ought to make people face the reality of their sin and the fact that they will shortly stand before a holy God.

In our day we tend to minimize the horror of God's wrath. It embarrasses us in our sophisticated, scientific day to suggest that the AIDS epidemic could be God's wrath on the immorality of our land. We'd rather see it as a medical problem which science will solve in a few years. But as Moses contemplated the plagues which God had brought about on Israel, he exclaims (90:11), "Who un-

derstands the power of Your anger, and Your fury, according to the fear that is due to You?"

I first read Jonathan Edwards' famous sermon, "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God," for a college philosophy class years ago. The professor castigated Edwards as a cruel sadist who took great pleasure in scaring ignorant people with the supposed horrors of hell. But I rather think that Spurgeon was correct when he said that no poet or prophet could ever go too far in describing the terrors of hell. Rather, he said, "The wrath to come has its horrors rather diminished than enhanced in description by the dark lines of human fancy; it baffles words, it leaves imagination far behind" (*The Treasury of David* [Baker], IV:203).

If you struggle with how a good and loving God can also be a God of wrath, I suggest that you read Edwards' sermon, "The Justice of God in the Damnation of Sinners" (*The Works of Jonathan Edwards* [Banner of Truth], 1:668-679). He shows that our problem with hell stems from the fact that we think too lowly of God and too highly of ourselves, and thus we look upon God as having little right to do as He pleases, and upon ourselves as having great rights (p. 679). Edwards exonerates God and leaves you lying in the dust, examining your heart to make sure that you are not under God's condemnation!

Moses' point is that the fact of death, which we see all around us (remember, "one out of one people dies"!) should make us aware that the wrath of the eternal God is upon the sinful human race. If we do not truly know this eternal God as our personal dwelling place, life is futile.

If you have put your trust in Jesus Christ, then He has saved you from the wrath of God (1 Thess. 1:10). Though we will die physically (unless Christ returns in our lifetime), we will not face the second death, which is to be forever separated from God in hell (Rev. 20:14-15). But if you are apart from Christ, you are under God's condemnation and life is futile. Thus in stanzas two and three, Moses shows that apart from God, life is futile because of its shortness and uncertainty and because of God's wrath on our sin, as seen in the fact of death.

But the psalm does not leave us in despair. The first and fourth stanzas show how our fleeting lives can have meaning and value:

2. Life has meaning and value if we have a relationship with the eternal God and if we have God's blessing upon our life and work.
 - A. A relationship with the eternal God gives life meaning and value (90:1-2).

Moses, in a few deft strokes, paints a picture of the eternity of God. He works his way back, from the previous generations, to the formation of the mountains, to the creation of the earth, and to eternity past ("from everlasting") and then moves swiftly forward to eternity future ("to everlasting"). Verse two might better be translated, "Even from everlasting to everlasting, you are, O God." The point is, God is eternal.

In and of itself, that truth can be rather unsettling and awesome. But Moses makes it clear that it is altogether possible (and was, in fact, the case) that we, the finite creature, can have a relationship with this eternal God. The personal pronoun "our" occurs in relation to God both in verses 1 and 17. The eternal God is *our* God. He is our dwelling place. We live in Him through Christ!

There is nothing that can give meaning and value to life like the reality of a personal relationship with the eternal God of the universe. As Augustine put it, "Thou hast created us for Thyself, O God, and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in Thee." To know that in spite of our finiteness and sin, we can know the infinite holy God in a personal way provides a sense of stability and substance to life that cannot be found in any earthly thing or relationship. But, also,

- B. God's blessing upon our life and work gives life meaning and value (90:12-17).

In the last stanza of the psalm, Moses prays for a reversal of what has gone before. Whereas God has said to man, "Return" (to dust, v. 3), now Moses says to God, "Return" (to forgive and bless, vv. 13 ff.). God's "repentance" (90:13), a frequent phrase in Scripture, looks at God from the human perspective: He appears to us

to change. Moses prays, "May the favor (delightfulness, pleasantness, beauty) of the Lord our God be upon us" (90:17).

The blessings of the world are so fleeting and fickle! You can gain fame and fortune, but you can't take them with you and in the end, they never satisfy. Witness the unhappiness and emptiness of so many famous and wealthy people, especially in Hollywood. But God's blessings do satisfy. There has never been a person who has walked with God who has reached old age and looked back on life, no matter how filled with trials, and said, "I wish I hadn't lived this way. I've wasted my life!" Impossible! A person who has known God's joy and peace is a satisfied person!

Not only does Moses pray that God's blessing would be upon His people, but also that God would confirm the work of their hands (90:17). He doesn't just mean "spiritual" work, such as the priests did, but all the work that they did--farming, business, and family life (see Deut. 14:29; 16:15; 24:19; 28:12; 30:9). When you have the eternal God as your dwelling place, all of life becomes sacred. So whether your work is to be a pastor or missionary or garbage truck driver, you can do it all to the glory of God!

Chuck Swindoll tells of ministering at a family camp where the entire week was spent emphasizing the importance of God's hand in every calling and profession. He encouraged each Christian to realize that his or her vocation was ordained of God. At the end of the week, a man came up to share how much the week had meant to him and his family. The camp director asked him what he did for a living. He answered, "My work? I'm an ordained plumber!"

If God is your dwelling place and His hand of blessing is on your life, then whatever you do you can do to His glory. Even the mundane takes on significance when you belong to the Lord. Our fleeting lives can have value if we live wisely before the eternal God.

Conclusion

I conclude with three practical lessons from this psalm:

1. *Live in light of eternity.* Moses prays (90:12), "So teach us to number our days, that we may present to You a heart of wisdom." One day you will present something to God. He has entrusted certain gifts and abilities to you and you are to manage them for

Him in such a way as to make a profit for His kingdom. The Hebrew verb in verse 12 is the same word used in Genesis 4:3-4 to refer to the offerings of Cain and Abel. What will you offer to God when He calls for an account? Remember, it was the fellow with only one talent who buried it and was upbraided by his master. Not having the greatest abilities is no excuse for not using them.

I read an interview with Jerry Falwell a number of years ago when he was the head of Moral Majority, the president of Liberty University, and the pastor of a church with over 15,000 members and a national TV audience. The interviewer asked him what he wanted to be remembered for. His stock went up in my ratings when he answered, "A godly husband, father, and pastor, in that order." He wasn't carried away with worldly acclaim. He was living in light of standing before Christ some day. I try to conduct everything I do in my life and ministry in light of the goal of one day hearing Jesus say to me, "Well done, good and faithful servant."

2. *Labor for the lasting, not the passing.* There is so much that we work for that doesn't remain! I know, we need a certain amount of worldly things to live comfortably and to function efficiently in our modern world. But never forget that "the world is passing away, and also its lusts; but the one who does the will of God abides forever" (1 John 2:17).

The only things God is going to reclaim off this planet are His Word and people. And yet so often we value things above God's Word and above our relationships with people. Remember what Paul wrote in light of the truth of the resurrection: "Therefore, my beloved brethren, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that your toil is not in vain in the Lord" (1 Cor. 15:58). The work of the Lord involves His Word and people. Put your efforts there and you will not be disappointed.

3. *Avoid the waste that comes from sinful living.* This was our theme from Psalm 81, but it bears repeating. Israel was consumed by God's anger (90:7-10) because of their disobedience. Sinful, self-willed living always results in waste. While those who are in Christ need not fear God's condemnation (Rom. 8:1), we do need to fear the Lord and avoid sinning. The law of sowing and reaping (Gal. 6:7-8) applies even under grace. Don't be deceived: Sin always has adverse consequences in your life. Obedience always results in

God's blessing. Israel's experience in the wilderness was written for our instruction, so that we don't repeat their mistakes.

I read of a young man who, in 1981, was flown into the remote Alaskan wilderness to photograph the natural beauty of the tundra. He had photo equipment, 500 rolls of film, several firearms, and 1,400 pounds of provisions. As the months passed, the entries in his diary, which at first detailed the wonder and fascination with the wildlife around him, turned into a pathetic record of a nightmare. In August he wrote, "I think I should have used more foresight about arranging my departure. I'll soon find out."

He waited and waited, but no one came to his rescue. In November he died in a nameless valley, by a nameless lake, 225 miles northeast of Fairbanks. An investigation revealed that he had carefully mapped out his venture, but he had made no provision to be flown out of the area.

That was a bit shortsighted of him, wasn't it? And yet, how many people live their lives without making any plans for their departure to face eternity? You know you will be departing (the statistics on death are quite impressive!). The only way for your fleeting life to have value is to live it wisely before the eternal God and to avoid His wrath against your sin by taking refuge in the mercy He offers in the cross of Jesus Christ.

Discussion Questions

1. Do you think we give proper biblical emphasis to hell and its horrors? How can we do this in our secular culture?
2. Should we use the shortness of life and hell in witnessing? How? Biblically, which receives more emphasis in evangelism: Fear of judgment or the love of God?
3. How can we think profitably about the shortness of life without becoming morbid and depressed?
4. Does God get angry with Christians or is His wrath limited to unbelievers? Give biblical evidence.

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