

Psalm 90 is one of two Psalms included in the Burial Service dealing with the two great parameters of of existence; life and death. It shows how frail we are and futile our life is apart from the Favour of God.

1 THE FRAILITY OF MAN [v1-6]

This idea is so often expressed as 'Here today. Gone tomorrow'. God is not like that.

[i] God is not frail [v1-2]

He is like a building ["dwelling place"] that lasts for generations; quite a comforting picture for people living in tents or makeshift shelters. He is like a fortress carved into solid rock. He was before the earth [v2]; eternal and sovereign. [v2] "You are God" [present continuous tense]. He is independent of time [v4], so that a millennium is like a day or a sentry's 4 hour watch around an encampment. He was, is now, and ever shall be.

[ii] Man is frail [v3-6]

Here today. Gone tomorrow'. Men and women come and go. Babies are born and adults die, but God our refuge 'is'. We all die, even those "with clean hands and a pure heart". [Psalm 24:4]

Two words are used [v3] for man, one describing our capacity, which is 'frail'. The other describes our origin, which is "dust". [Genesis 3:19] We stand in stark contrast with God who is sovereign and eternal. Verse 5 likens us to flood debris and sleep which pass away so quickly and grass which flowers in the morning and dies by nightfall. Nineteenth Century English Baptist preach C H Spurgeon said: "God resolves and man dissolves". Length of life cannot change this fact. "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." [v10]

Death is not due to accident or fate. God ordains the span of our existence and we are removed like a piece of paper crumpled in the hand and thrown away. The old hymn puts it like this, "Frail children of dust, And feeble as frail." Such knowledge is blessed if it drives us to trust in the Lord. We hear from sportsmen and other celebrities so much about belief in self, but why put your trust in something which is so frail?

2 THE FUTILITY OF LIFE [v7-11]

We are frail because we are dust; unable to rise above our circumstances by our own will or effort. Our lives are futile because we are sinners [rebels] wilfully rejecting God's right to lead us, and such rebellion attracts retribution. Weak Christian witness from believers, and especially preachers, has left unchallenged society's two greatest dilemmas: the social acceptability of daily alcohol dependance and serial de facto relationships instead of permanent marriage commitment.

God's "anger" consumes us and his "indignation" leaves us in terror. [v7]. We "moan" as we pass away under his "wrath" [v9]. The Holy God reacts to our wilful rejection of him because our "iniquities [sins]" are "set before him". [v8] All is open. Nothing is hidden. Though he loves us enough to die for us, he does not cover up our sins like a foolish, doting parent.

3 THE FAVOUR OF GOD [v12-17]

A threefold prayer is available for those who turn to God's Favour as the only answer to their frailty and the futility of life without God's leading.

[i] "Teach us how short our life is" [v12 TEV]

This is for those who want to gain heartfelt [sincere] wisdom in their relationship with the Lord and make each day count for His Glory in His world. Wasted hours, wicked thoughts and hasty words that cut people down all point to our need of such wisdom. Here is recognition that each move may be our last. Embracing such a concept will bring out the best in us.

[ii] Satisfy us with mercy {unfailing love} [v14] As we seek to glorify God in His world, so we long to rejoice in his presence with us at all times. Only his unfailing love expressed in mercy towards us can produce this joy. Driven to the wall by the memory of his adultery and conspiracy to murder, King David cried out to the Lord, “Have mercy on me, O God, according to your unfailing love: according to your great compassion blot out my transgressions. Wash away all my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin.” [Psalm 51:1-2] This is no cheap act of plea bargaining such as we now see in worldly courts. He is not setting the benchmark of forgiveness. God’s unfailing love, backed up by his almighty character is man’s only hope and sure guarantee. We have no bargaining power, but cry out for mercy; not like a mangy fox feeling the pangs of death, but like a wayward child remembering the comfort of a merciful father’s love.

[iii] “Let your beauty be upon us” [v17]

The third request recognises the purpose for our existence is to reflect the goodness and mercy of God in our life. “Establish the work of our hands for us” is not a recipe for worldly success or comfort, but a commitment which sees success as pleasing the Lord. The Revelation of God’s will is reflected in the obedience of his people. [v16]

Human endeavour and achievement are cut short as generations pass, but the work of the Lord prospers in anticipation of the majestic return of His perfect Son Jesus. Imprisoned again, Paul endured in this hope, “I eagerly expect and hope that I will in no way be ashamed, but will have sufficient courage so that now as always Christ will be exalted in my body, whether by life or by death.” [Philippians 1:20]

The Favour of God is the independent and almighty act by which God effectively calls frail people [made in his image] from futile existence into meaningful fellowship with himself forever.