

# Psalms, Hymns, and Spiritual Songs: The Master Musician's Melodies

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## Psalm 90 — A Heart of Wisdom

### 1.0 Introducing Psalm 90

- Psalm 90 is the first psalm in the Psalter's fourth book (Psalms 90–106), a book characterized by anonymous psalms (except Pss 90, 101, 103).
  - ✓ Psalms 90–92 form a prelude to Psalms 93–100, which celebrate the LORD as king.
- As a poem written by Moses, it is the oldest psalm in the Psalter.
  - ✓ Moses also penned the Song of the Sea (Exod 15:1-18).
  - ✓ His final poem is known as the “Song of Moses” (Deut 32:1-43). Common vocabulary and phraseology between Psalm 90 and Deuteronomy 32–33 confirm Mosaic authorship of the psalm.
- The events of Numbers 20 are probably the historical background for Psalm 90.
  - ✓ Moses' sister Miriam died (Num 20:1).
  - ✓ Moses sinned against God by striking the rock (Num 20:2-13).
  - ✓ Moses' brother Aaron died (Num 20:22-29).
- Twenty-four times in these seventeen verses words for time set the theme.

### 2.0 Reading Psalm 90 (NAU)

**90:1** A Prayer of Moses, the man of God.

**90:2** Lord, You have been our dwelling place in all generations.  
Before the mountains were born  
Or You gave birth to the earth and the world,  
Even from everlasting to everlasting, **You** are God.

**90:3** You turn man back into dust  
And say, “Return, O children of men.”

**90:4** For a thousand years in Your sight  
Are like yesterday when it passes by,

- Or *as* a watch in the night.
- 90:5** You have swept them away like a flood, they fall asleep;  
In the morning they are like grass which sprouts anew.
- 90:6** In the morning it flourishes and sprouts anew;  
Toward evening it fades and withers away.
- A 90:7** For we have been consumed  
**B** by Your anger  
**B'** And by Your wrath  
**A'** we have been dismayed.
- 90:8** You have placed our iniquities before You,  
Our secret *sins* in the light of Your presence.
- 90:9** For **all our days** have declined in Your fury;  
We have finished our years like a sigh.
- 90:10** As for the **days of our life**, they contain seventy years,  
Or if due to strength, eighty years,  
Yet their pride is *but* labor and sorrow;  
For soon it is gone and we fly away.
- 90:11** Who understands the power of Your anger  
And Your fury, according to the fear that is due You?
- 90:12** So teach us to number **our days**,  
That we may present to You a heart of wisdom.
- 90:13** Do return, O LORD; how long *will it be*?
- A** And be sorry for Your servants.
- 90:14** O satisfy us in the morning with Your lovingkindness,  
**B** That we may sing for joy and be glad **all our days**.
- B'** **90:15** Make us glad according to **the days** You have afflicted us,  
*And* the years we have seen evil.
- A' 90:16** Let Your work appear to Your servants  
And Your majesty to their children.
- 90:17** Let the favor of the Lord our God be upon us;  
And confirm for us the work of our hands;  
Yes, confirm the work of our hands.

### 3.0 Understanding Psalm 90

#### 3.1 Outline

- I. The Majesty of God (vv. 1-2)
- II. The Mortality of Man (vv. 3-6)
- III. The Morality of Man (vv. 7-12)
- IV. The Mercy of God (vv. 13-17)



### 3.2 Notes



- v. 1 “A prayer of Moses, the man of God”
  - Psalms 17 and 86 are also called “a prayer.”
  - Moses was called “the man of God” in Deuteronomy 33:1; Joshua 14:6; 1 Chronicles 23:14; 2 Chronicles 30:16; Ezra 3:2.
    - ✓ Elijah (1 Kgs 17:18; 2 Kgs 4:7) and Elisha (2 Kgs 5:8; 8:4) were also called “the man of God.”
    - ✓ David is likewise called “the man of God” (2 Chron 8:14; Neh 12:24, 36).
    - ✓ Compare 1 Timothy 6:11 and 2 Timothy 3:17.
- v. 1 “dwelling place”—Deuteronomy 33:27
  - It is used in the very next psalm as well (Ps 91:9).
- v. 2 “were born . . . gave birth”—Deuteronomy 32:18
- v. 2 “from everlasting to everlasting”
  - “This opening of the psalm corresponds to the close, in that God is seen here as *our* God, whose eternity is the answer, not simply the antithesis, to our homelessness and our brevity of life.”—Derek Kidner, *Psalms 73–150*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (London: Inter-Varsity Press, 1975), 328.
  - See 1 Timothy 1:17.
- v. 3 “You turn man back into dust . . . ‘Return, . . .’”
  - Compare Genesis 3:19.
  - Commentators propose a variety of interpretations:
    - ✓ Dual statement about the death of human beings (Tate).
    - ✓ Replacing an older generation with a newer (Delitzsch).
- v. 4 “a thousand years”
  - A thousand years in God’s sight is not only as brief as a day, but as brief as “a watch in the night” (1/3 or 1/4 of a night).
  - Whether the 969 years of Methuselah (almost 1000) or the 120 years of Moses, all are like but 3 or 4 hours to the eternal God.
  - See 2 Peter 3:8.
- v. 5 “like grass”
  - “Here is the history of the grass—sown, grown, blown, mown, gone; and the history of man is not much more.”—C. H. Spurgeon, *The Treasury of David*, 3 vols. (reprinted; Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, n.d.), 2/2:62.
  - See Isaiah 40:6-7.
- v. 7 “Your anger . . . Your wrath”
  - This a case in which the English translation of the verse is able to preserve the order of the Hebrew.

- Note the chiasmic arrangement (**ABB'A'**) of the verse, placing emphasis upon the wrath of God.
- **v. 10** “days of our life”
  - Literally, “days of our years.”
    - ✓ See the same phraseology in Genesis 25:7 (“the years of Abraham’s life” = “the days of the years of the life of Abraham”); 47:8 (“How many years have you lived?” = “How many are the days of the years of your life?”), 9 (3x).
  - Note the repetition of these two terms from the preceding verse.
- **v. 10** “soon it is gone and we fly away”
  - “Soon” = “swiftly”—compare Job 7:6 (“My days are swifter than a weaver’s shuttle, And come to an end without hope”—“hope” [*tiqwah*] is a homonym of “thread,” producing a striking pun).
  - Compare Zophar’s description of the ephemeral existence of the wicked in Job 20:5-9.
- **v. 12** “a heart of wisdom”—Deuteronomy 32:29
  - “To number our days” = to understand and evaluate the brevity of our life and to invest the time we have in the light of eternity.
  - See Ephesians 5:15-16 and Colossians 4:5.
- **vv. 13-16** Structural Chiasm
  - Note the outside pairing of “Your servants” in verses 13 and 16 and the inside pairing of “glad . . . days” in verses 14 and 15.
  - Therefore, the focus is on gladness throughout life.
- **v. 13** “be sorry for Your servants”—Deuteronomy 32:36 (Hebrew)
- **v. 16** “Your work . . . Your majesty”—Deuteronomy 32:4
  - Moses employs another chiasm here to highlight the reference to God’s work.
    - A Let appear
    - B to Your servants
    - C Your work
    - C' And Your majesty
    - B' to their children
    - A' [*Let appear*]
  - Compare Psalm 19:1 in which a chiasm also focuses on “the work of His hands” and “the glory of God.”
- **v. 17** “the favor of the Lord”
  - The psalm ends as it began with “Lord” (*'adonai*).
  - “Favor” (*n'm*) in Hebrew uses the same three letters as “dwelling place” (*m'n*) in verse 1, but in reverse order.





#### 4.0 Singing Psalm 90

##### Our God Our Help in Ages Past

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| <p><b>1</b> Our God, our help in ages past,<br/>Our hope for years to come,<br/>Our shelter from the stormy blast,<br/>And our eternal home.</p> <p><b>3</b> Before the hills in order stood,<br/>Or earth received her frame,<br/>From everlasting Thou art God,<br/>To endless years the same.</p> <p><b>5</b> A thousand ages in Thy sight<br/>Are like an evening gone;<br/>Short as the watch that ends the night<br/>Before the rising sun.</p> <p><b>7</b> Time, like an ever rolling stream,<br/>Bears all its sons away;<br/>They fly, forgotten, as a dream<br/>Dies at the opening day.</p> <p><b>9</b> Our God, our help in ages past,<br/>Our hope for years to come,<br/>Be Thou our guard while troubles last,<br/>And our eternal home.</p> | <p><b>2</b> Under the shadow of Thy throne<br/>Thy saints have dwelt secure;<br/>Sufficient is Thine arm alone,<br/>And our defense is sure.</p> <p><b>4</b> Thy Word commands our flesh to dust,<br/>“Return, ye sons of men:”<br/>All nations rose from earth at first,<br/>And turn to earth again.</p> <p><b>6</b> The busy tribes of flesh and blood,<br/>With all their lives and cares,<br/>Are carried downwards by the flood,<br/>And lost in following years.</p> <p><b>8</b> Like flowery fields the nations stand<br/>Pleased with the morning light;<br/>The flowers beneath the mower’s hand<br/>Lie withering ere ‘tis night.</p> |
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- Isaac Watts

“While the hymn catches something of the strong sense of confidence that pulsates through the psalm, it fails to give recognition to the element of lament that features in verses 13-17. It has no place for the questioning that goes hand in hand with the confidence.”

— Robert Davidson, *The Vitality of Worship: A Commentary on the Book of Psalms*  
(Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1998), 303.

#### 5.0 Praying Psalm 90

- Lord, teach me to number my days. [v. 12]
- Satisfy me with Your steadfast, loyal love. [v. 14]
- O God, make me glad even in the midst of life’s afflictions. [v. 15]
- Establish the work of my hands, Father. [v. 17]
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#### 6.0 Applying Psalm 90

- The eternal God is the only source of hope for an ephemeral man.
- We must learn how employ our brief time on earth wisely.
- With God’s gracious and loyal love a productive life is possible.