

Israel's Hymnal
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PSALM NINETY

[Pss 90:1] Lord, thou hast been our dwelling-place in all generations.
 [Pss 90:2] Before the mountains were brought forth, Or ever thou hadst formed the earth and the world, Even from everlasting to everlasting, thou art God.
 [Pss 90:3] Thou turnest man to destruction, And sayest, Return, ye children of men.
 [Pss 90:4] For a thousand years in thy sight Are but as yesterday when it is past, And as a watch in the night.
 [Pss 90:5] Thou carriest them away as with a flood; they are as a sleep: In the morning they are like grass which groweth up.
 [Pss 90:6] In the morning it flourisheth, and groweth up; In the evening it is cut down, and withereth.
 [Pss 90:7] For we are consumed in thine anger, And in thy wrath are we troubled.
 [Pss 90:8] Thou hast set our iniquities before thee, Our secret sins in the light of thy countenance.
 [Pss 90:9] For all our days are passed away in thy wrath: We bring our years to an end as a sigh.
 [Pss 90:10] The days of our years are threescore years and ten, Or even by reason of strength fourscore years; Yet is their pride but labor and sorrow; For it is soon gone, and we fly away.
 [Pss 90:11] Who knoweth the power of thine anger, And thy wrath according to the fear that is due unto thee?
 [Pss 90:12] So teach us to number our days, That we may get us a heart of wisdom.
 [Pss 90:13] Return, O Jehovah; how long? And let it repent thee concerning thy servants.
 [Pss 90:14] Oh satisfy us in the morning with thy lovingkindness, That we may rejoice and be glad all our days.
 [Pss 90:15] Make us glad according to the days wherein thou hast afflicted us, And the years wherein we have seen evil.
 [Pss 90:16] Let thy work appear unto thy servants, And thy glory upon their children.
 [Pss 90:17] And let the favor of the Lord our God be upon us; And establish thou the work of our hands upon us; Yea, the work of our hands establish thou it.

Psalm 90 is possibly the oldest one in the Psalter. According to the superscription, Moses was the author. It is one of the sublime odes of the Book of Psalms. It falls naturally into four divisions:

- I. The eternal existence of God in the past (vss. 1,2)
- II. The brevity of the span of life (vss. 3-6)
- III. Israel of Moses' day cut off in the wrath of God (vss. 7-11)
- IV. Israel's penitential prayer for the Lord's return (vss. 12-17)

One must understand the conditions, which existed in the days of Moses in order to evaluate properly this marvelous hymn, especially verses 7-11. Moreover, one must remember that most of the psalms are

poetical versions of some of the prophetic oracles by the men of God. We must keep this thought in mind always as we study the Book of Psalms.

I. The eternal existence of God in the past (vss. 1,2)

1 Lord, thou hast been our dwelling place in all generations.

2 Before the mountains were brought forth, Or ever thou hadst formed the earth and the world; Even from everlasting to everlasting, thou art God.

In verses 1, and 2 Moses, the prophet, looked back from his day and time to the creation of Adam and declared that God had been the dwelling place of mankind in all generations. Of course this is a figurative expression. God is thought of as a house and the human family is pictured as living in that house. This idea is set forth in verse 1.

But in verse 2 Moses lifted up his eyes and looked out to that part of eternity which antedated the creation of the universe and spoke of God's eternal existence in the past. That Moses was speaking of the creation of the world together with the universe is evident from the first part of verse 2: "Before the mountains were brought forth, Or ever thou hadst formed the earth and the world, Even from everlasting to everlasting, thou art God." The temporal clauses, "before the mountains were brought forth, Or ever thou hadst formed the earth and the world," are looking back into eternity prior to the creation of the universe. About this position there can be no question. The independent clause, "Even from everlasting to everlasting, thou art God," is an assertion that God is from everlasting in the past to everlasting in the future. Since the adverbial temporal clauses in the beginning of this sentence are speaking only of that portion of eternity which antedated time, the independent clause, which states that God is from everlasting to everlasting, does not make good sense. I may illustrate this position by the following statement which happens not to be true, but it will set forth the principle involved. Suppose I should say to you, dear reader, that before I was twenty-one I was a very sickly person, even from the cradle to the grave? What would you think if I should make such a statement as that? You could not take me seriously. I am far more than twenty-one and have not reached the grave yet. Thus such a statement does not make sense. Once again, let me make this supposition: What would you think if I should say, "Before I was twenty-one I was a very sickly person--from year to year." You would understand such a statement as that, would you not? Let us remember that Moses, in verse 2 of our psalm, is looking into eternity prior to the creation of the world and is making an assertion regarding God as He existed at that time. Notwithstanding this fact, our translation makes Moses say that God was from everlasting to everlasting back in eternity of the past. This is a contradiction. When one, however, studies the words involved, one comes to the conclusion that a better and more accurate translation of the independent clause of this verse is: "Even from age to age thou wast God." When I accept this rendering and study the sentence, I can comprehend it. Now let us notice it: "before the mountains were brought forth, Or ever thou hast formed the earth and the world, Even from age to age thou wast God." This assertion simply states that God existed from one age to another in all of the eternity in the past--prior to the creation of the world. This, is what Moses by the Spirit of God, said.

It is true that there are certain passages in the Word of God which look into eternity in both directions and which declare His eternal existence; but Psalm 90:2 is simply an assertion of His eternal existence in the past.

II. The brevity of the span of life (vss. 3-6)

3 Thou turnest man to destruction And sayest, Return, ye children of men.

4 For a thousand years in thy sight Are but as yesterday when it is past, And as a watch in the night.

5 Thou carriest them away as with a flood; they are as a sleep:

In the morning they are like grass which groweth up.

6 In the morning it flourisheth, and groweth up; In the evening it is cut down, and withereth.

In verses 3-6, which I trust the reader has studied carefully, we have here contrasted the brevity of the span of life with the eternal past existence of God. God has existed from age to age in the past, as we have just seen. But when man partook of the forbidden fruit, the Lord said that he had been taken out of the dust and that he was to return to it. This pronouncement is echoed in verse 3 of Psalm 90. In thinking upon this sentence of death, Moses explained by saying, "For a thousand years in thy sight Are but as yesterday when it is past, And as a watch in the night." Because of the close connection between the judgment pronounced upon man and the mention of a thousand years, we can see that the necessary inference is that the span of life for man after his expulsion from the Garden of Eden was a thousand years. This position is confirmed by the fact that the antediluvians lived almost a thousand years, Methuselah living nine hundred and sixty-nine years. Since the age limit of man was placed at a thousand years at that time and since God's existence was from age to age in all eternity, the short span of a thousand years for man's life is compared by Moses to yesterday when it is past or to a watch in the night, or three hours.

Let us avoid taking verse 4 out of its connection and using this statement relative to a thousand years as proof for the theory that a day in prophecy foreshadows a thousand years in history. To make such an application of this statement is to do violence to the Word of God. Let us not in this connection misapply and misinterpret Peter's statement "that one day is with the Lord as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day" (II Pet. 3:8). This latter statement is simply an affirmation that God will keep His promise after a thousand years have passed as accurately and faithfully as He will on the day on which He makes one. This interpretation of II Peter 3:8 is demanded by the context in which it appears.

In Psalm 90:5, Moses said that God carried the people away "as with a flood" and that they were "as a sleep." Longevity was the order of the day prior to the Flood; but, when the deluge came, the span of life was cut practically half in two and a little later was lowered very materially. Thus the cutting off of the wicked by the Flood furnished the imagery here for Moses in his speaking of God's bringing judgment upon the people because of their wickedness and sweeping them away out of the land of the living. In speaking of the uncertainty of life, Moses declared that men are like grass, which is alive in the morning but is cut and withered before nightfall. No man has any guaranty on his life under the present regime.

III. Israel of Moses' day cut off in the wrath of God (vss. 7-11)

- 7 For we are consumed in thine anger, And in thy wrath we are troubled.
 8 Thou hast set our iniquities before thee, Our secret sins in the light of thy countenance.
 9 For all our days are past away in thy wrath: We bring our years to an end as a sigh.
 10 The days of our years are threescore years and ten, Or even by reason of strength fourscore years;
 Yet is their pride but labor and sorrow; For it is soon gone, and we fly away.
 11 Who knoweth the power of thine anger, And thy wrath according to the fear that is due unto thee?

In verses 7-11, Moses was speaking about God's displeasure with the generation of Israel during the wilderness wanderings. In order for one to understand these verses properly, one must study the Book of Numbers. Psalm 90 has, unfortunately, been used as the basis for messages at the funeral of many saints of God who have filled out their days and have passed away quietly, falling asleep in the arms of Jesus. These verses cannot apply to the Christian but only to that generation of Israel that was disobedient and that was cut off during the forty years of wilderness wanderings. Moses declared in verse 7 that they were consumed in God's anger and were troubled in His wrath. This cannot be said truly of the consecrated Christian. Moreover Moses said that God had set their iniquities before Him and their secret sins in the light of His countenance. Again these statements cannot be said of saved, consecrated people. When God forgives, He forgets. He never remembers the sins of the born-again one against him again. Furthermore, the message of verse 9 cannot be applied correctly to the Christian today. We are not passing all of our days in God's wrath and bringing our years to an end with a sigh. But this was true with reference to Moses' generation.

By the time of Moses the span of life had been cut down to threescore and ten years or, by reason of health and strength, to fourscore years.

Although God had poured out His wrath upon the generation of Israel during her wilderness wanderings, He had not poured it out in its full strength and power. But that generation did experience His wrath sufficiently so that Moses could say, "who knoweth the power of thine anger, And thy wrath according to the fear that is due unto thee?" Though the Lord has never poured out His wrath in any such degree as here stated, He will do so in the time of the Tribulation. He will then pour out all of His wrath upon that generation. That will be the period known in the scriptures as the "time of Jacob's trouble." At that time the Almighty will accomplish all of His wrath upon Israel and the world.

IV. Israel's penitential prayer for the Lord's return (vss. 12-17)

- 12 So teach us to number our days, That we may get us a heart of wisdom.
 13 Return, O Jehovah; how long? And let it repent thee concerning thy servants.
 14 Oh satisfy us in the morning with thy lovingkindness, That we may rejoice and be glad all our days.
 15 Make us glad according to the days wherein thou hast afflicted us, And the years wherein we have seen evil.
 16 Let thy work appear unto thy servants, And thy glory upon their children.
 17 And let the favor of the Lord our God be upon us; And establish thou the work of our hands upon us; Yea, the work of our hands establish thou it.

In verses 12-17 the Prophet Moses prayed to the Lord. This is one of the most marvelous petitions to be found in the Word of God. In the first place, he petitioned the Lord, according to verse 12, to give them "a heart of wisdom." Moses was thoroughly aware that his brethren of that day and time had acted very unwisely. Moreover, in prophetic vision he saw that they would still continue through the centuries to act in the same unwise manner in departing from God and in stirring up His wrath. He therefore prayed to the Lord to give them a heart of wisdom. No greater petition can one utter today than this one.

The second portion of Moses' petition is contained in verses 13-17. In verse 13 we read: "Return, Oh Jehovah; how long? And let it repent thee concerning thy servants." The key to the understanding of this verse is the word "return." In order to clarify the meaning of this term, "return," let me call attention to the fact that after the war is over the Biblical Research Society hopes to have another Israeli Biblical Institute in order to forward the work of God in giving the truth to Israel. At that time we hope to return to London, Paris, Rome, Athens, Cairo, Jerusalem, and Damascus, but we hope to go to Babylon and Baghdad, Aleppo, and other places also. What do you, kind friend understand from that statement? You undoubtedly would reply to this question by saying that I can only *return* to a place where I have been formerly; hence you would infer that I have been to the places to which I hope to return, but that I have never visited the places to which I *hope to go*. This would be the correct reply. When Israel according to verse 13, prays, "return, Oh Jehovah; how long?," we understand that Israel will know that Jehovah has been upon the earth once but that He has gone away and that He will return when she thus prays. That such a program was outlined for Messiah is quite evident from the prophets. For instance, in Hosea 5:15, we have a prediction by that prophet who, in speaking for Messiah, says, "I will go and return to my place, till they acknowledge their offense; in their affliction they will seek me earnestly." Here is a prediction that Jehovah comes to Israel, that she commits an offense against Him and that He returns to His place (heaven) and remains there until Israel acknowledges her sin and pleads for His return. Then the definite prediction is made that she will make this confession and will plead for Him to return in the time of her affliction, which is the Tribulation Period. On this point also see Matthew 23:37-39.

37 Oh Jerusalem, Jerusalem, that killeth the prophets, and stoneth them that are sent unto her! how often would I have gathered thy children together, even as a hen gathereth her chickens under her wings, and ye would not!

38 Behold, your house is left unto you desolate.

39 For I say unto you, Ye shall not see me henceforth, till ye shall say, Blessed is he that cometh in the name of the Lord.

Moses, then, foresaw the time when Israel having been evangelized and having learned the truth regarding Messiah's first coming and the nations rejection of Him, will pray for Him to leave heaven and come back and deliver her from all her distress.

Since the fundamental principle of Hebrew poetry is what is known as Hebrew "parallelism" and since the psalms are Hebrew poetry, we know that the second line of verse number thirteen is parallel to the first statement. Now look at the passage:

Return, Oh Jehovah; how long?

And let it repent thee concerning thy servants.

Thus the prayer for Jehovah to return is joined with a petition that God will forgive His servants the sin which they committed in connection with His coming the first time. This passage therefore assumes that

the nation of Israel will have been given the truth regarding Messiah's entire redemptive career, will be convicted of the sin of which the nation is guilty in rejecting Him and will penitently plead for His return. That Israel will do this is very evident from a number of passages of Scripture.

According to verse fourteen of our psalm, the nation will plead with God to satisfy it "in the morning" of the great millennial day with His loving-kindness in order that it might rejoice before Him.

Israel will also plead that God will make her glad according to the days wherein He has afflicted her. This is a backward view across the Christian centuries to the time when she was driven out of her land in 70 A.D. She has been literally "kicked from pillar to post"; in fact, she has been the "football" of the nations and has suffered through the centuries as no other nation has endured. Convicted Israel will plead that God will bless her and make her rejoice according to the number of years of her sufferings among the nations. That petition will be granted by the blessed reign of our Lord for a thousand years, during which Israel will be the head of the nations instead of being the tail as she is at the present time.

The people will continue their petition by asking God to allow His work to appear unto His servants and His glory--which will encircle the earth as the waters cover the sea--to come upon their children.

Finally, the petition closes with the request that God will extend His favor to the penitent nation and establish His people in the work to which He has called them; namely, of being the channel of world-blessing. Israel, at the time here foreseen in this petition, will have a new vision of her call in the world and will ask God's special blessing upon herself in order that she might fulfill this divine mission.

Let us, in view of the prediction that Israel must have the truth of the gospel do all that we can for God's chosen people. Let us pray for the peace of Jerusalem daily, giving the Lord no rest and taking no rest until He makes Jerusalem a praise in the earth and her people a joy.