

Reading Through the Bible Week 9: Psalm 90 (Numbers Part 2)

The Omnitemporal God

Overview:

Having completed a survey of the Book of Numbers (Part 1), we go to Part 2 by conducting a survey of Psalm 90. Psalm 90 is associated with the Book of Numbers because it is the only psalm directly attributed to Moses "A Prayer of Moses, the man of God" and reflects on the 40 years of wilderness wandering, divine judgment, and the fragility of human life and acts as a poetic lament of a generation dying in the desert due to divine judgment. Psalm 90 is considered the oldest psalm, likely written around 1500 BC during the Israelites' 40-year wilderness wandering.

Psalm 90 stands out for its ancient, pre-monarchic tone, focusing on mortality and a plea for God to return to His people. It is a prayer reflecting on the brevity of life (v. 10) and the need for wisdom to "number our days" (v. 12). Written before the monarchy or temple, it reflects a nomadic, desert experience and it highlights the wrath of God against sin but also asks for grace and for God to "establish the work of our hands" (v. 17).

Verses 1 and 2 are the perfect confession of faith. Israel may have been homeless and landless, but they had a "dwelling place." Not just a place, but a person – Adonai Ma'on. Moses called God His dwelling place. While Ma'on is used elsewhere in the Old Testament to refer to a physical home, a lion's lair, or the Temple, its use in Psalm 90:1, and later in Deuteronomy 33:27 and Psalm 91:9, defining it as a divine title signifying God as a place of safety and abiding presence.

Theme:

The Psalm contrasts God as an everlasting "dwelling place" (v. 1) with the transience of humans, who are like grass that fades (v. 5-6). Psalm 90 centers on the sharp contrast between the eternal, unchanging nature of God and the fleeting, fragile, and sinful nature of humanity. It highlights human mortality under divine judgment, urging wisdom to "number our days" while pleading for God's mercy, grace, and the establishing of human work.

Narrative Arc of Numbers:

The overarching theme is finding stability in the everlasting God while living within the limitations of a short, frail life.

I. Affirmation of Divine Eternity (vv. 1-2): The psalm begins with a confession of God as the eternal dwelling place, existing before creation.

II. Contrast with Human Frailty (vv. 3-6): Moses contrasts God's eternal nature with the fragility of humanity, noting that a thousand years are like a day to God, while humans are like grass that withers or a fleeting dream.

III. The Reality of Sin and Wrath (vv. 7-11): The tone shifts to lament, as Moses acknowledges that human lifespans (70-80 years) are filled with toil and sorrow due to God's righteous anger against human sin.

IV. Petition for Wisdom and Mercy (vv. 12-17): The psalm concludes with a plea for God to teach them to "number their days" (gain wisdom), restore His favor, and establish the work of their hands, seeking joy to replace their days of sorrow.



Study Points & Commentary

Psalm 90 shares the effect of Moses' reflection on the events of Numbers 20, where Moses faced the deaths of his siblings Miriam and Aaron and was himself barred from the Promised Land. It captures the somber reality of a leader watching an entire generation "melt away" in the desert under judgment.

As the opening of **Book IV** (Psalms 90–106) of the Book of Psalms, it serves as a theological response to the crisis of the future Babylonian exile. By invoking Moses, the leader of the first Exodus offers hope for a "new exodus" and a return to God as the nation's true refuge. And according to historians, this psalm famously inspired Isaac Watts' hymn, "O God, Our Help in Ages Past," and influenced Abraham Lincoln's "four score" imagery in the Gettysburg Address.

Psalm 90, a prayer of Moses, contrasts God's eternal nature with human mortality, framing life's brevity against divine judgment. It opens by praising God as an eternal dwelling place (vv.1-2), laments the fragility of human life under divine wrath (vv.3-11), and pleads for wisdom to "number our days" and restore divine favor (vv.12-17).

Systematic Breakdown of Numbers

I. Theology Assessment: This section establishes a theology of transcendence. God's nature is independent of the universe (Creator/Creature distinction). Because God is eternal, He is the only source of enduring security. Human frailty is emphasized to show that reliance on oneself or the world is futile.

God does not simply live for a long time; He inhabits eternity. He is not subject to the passage of years, nor is He limited by the, now, shortened, seventy-eighty year lifespan of humanity. God's existence is self-existent and uncreated.

1. Aseity and Transcendence: Psalm 90:2 confirms that God is self-existent (aseity) and transcendent (omnitemporal). He is not part of the creation; He is the Creator who holds the "entirety of time in His hand."

2. Temporal Humans: The brevity of life is connected to the wrath of God against sin (v.7-9). Death is not just natural; it is a, now, universal sign of human finitude and divine judgment, yet within the context of God's "Everlasting" nature lies the hope for redemption.

3. Immutability: Because God is *El Olam*, He is unchanging. His character, promises, and mercy do not fade as humans do.

II. Theophany Examination: The Psalm reveals God not merely as a power, but as the eternal "Dwelling Place." This portrays a God who is close, intimate, and protective, despite being transcendent and timeless.

1. The Creator as Refuge: Theophany in this text is not a dramatic, visible appearance (like thunder on Mt. Sinai), but rather a *relational presence* in time. God manifests His presence by acting as a "dwelling place" (v.1) for His people across generations.

2. God the Judge and Sustainer: The text presents a dual theophany: God who brings death (via the flood) and God who is the only source of stability (the refuge).



III. Hermeneutic Lens: The psalm should be interpreted as a wisdom poem written by Moses (the man of God) to bring perspective to suffering. The interpretive key is to view human existence (frailty/sin) through the lens of God's sovereignty (eternity/wrath/mercy). It instructs the reader to stop looking for security in temporary, earthly things and instead anchor their lives in the eternal God.

- 1. Contextual Understanding of *Olam*:** While modern readers often define "everlasting" purely as "endless time," the Hebrew word *olam* refers to a "long, hidden duration" or the "fullness of time". In Psalm 90:2, it means that God is present and active from the most distant past to the most distant future, spanning all ages without interruption.
- 2. Contextual Contrast:** The poem operates on the structural principle of contrast. The more the psalmist emphasizes the brevity of life (v. 3-6), the more brilliant the eternal nature of God (v.2) shines.
- 3. Messianic Connection:** The New Testament brings this passage into perspective by identifying Jesus as this eternal God (Hebrews 13:8; Revelation 1:8). The "Everlasting God" who created the mountains is the same One who became human to redeem human life.

IV. God's Eternity vs. Human Frailty (vv. 1-2)

The Psalm establishes God as the constant, unchanging foundation for His people throughout all generations by opening not with a petition, but with a confession of history: "*Lord, you have been our dwelling place in all generations.*"

1. God as the Eternal Refuge (v.1): For a people like Israel—frequently nomadic, exiled, or wandering—this declaration is revolutionary. It asserts that our true "home" is not a geographic coordinate or a physical structure, but the person of God Himself. Before there was a Promised Land, there was the Promiser. And He continues to exist today as the constant environment in which believers live, move, and have their being.

A. "Lord, You have been our dwelling place in all generations.": Moses, addressing the generation dying in the wilderness, emphasizes that while they lacked a physical, permanent home in the desert, they possessed an eternal "home" in God. He is the constant in a life in fluidity.

- **LORD:** Moses begins by address God as Adonai. It is notable the name Adonai appears over 400 times in the Old Testament, frequently appearing in situations involving God's authority or power. Also, Adonai is the plural of majesty and is used specifically for God. Adon (the singular root of Adonai) is used for human lords and masters
- **The Dwelling Place:** The Hebrew word *ma'on* (dwelling place) suggests a habitation or a lair—a place of absolute safety. Moses writes "*Adonai Ma'om*" as a name of God, reminding Israel that even when they were homeless nomads in the desert, their "home" was not a geographic coordinate, but the person of God Himself.

B. The Generational Anchor: By stating God has been our home "in all generations," the psalmist acknowledges that while human leadership changes and families pass away, the foundational reality of God remains static.



2. Omnitemporal Existence of God & Transience of Human Life (v.2a): Verse 2 pushes the boundaries of the imagination backward into the "pre-creation" void: *"Before the mountains were brought forth, or ever you had formed the earth and the world..."*

By invoking the mountains, Moses is using an ancient symbol of stability and permanence. Yet even these "everlasting hills" are revealed as mere infants in the timeline of the Creator.

God is depicted as the one who "birthed" (*chul*) the earth, a verb often associated with labor pains, suggesting an intentional, intimate birthing of reality. God existed before the creation of the earth and the formation of mountains. Human existence is brief; a thousand years are like a day to God, while humans are like grass that fades quickly.

A. "Before the mountains were brought forth...": God's existence is not dependent on creation. He is the Creator (formed the earth) and exists before the foundations of the world were laid.

B. Theology of Time: God does not simply live for a long time; He inhabits eternity. He is not subject to the passage of years, nor is He limited by the, now, shortened, seventy-eighty-year lifespan of humanity. God's existence is self-existent and uncreated.

3. Everlasting Nature of God (v.2b): From "everlasting to everlasting," He remains God, transcending the limits of time. The phrase *"from everlasting to everlasting"* is a Hebrew idiom for the "vanishing point."

Looking as far back as the mind can travel and as far forward as hope can reach, God is already there. He does not inhabit time; time inhabits Him. This establishes the **Everlasting Nature** of God as the foundational logic for the rest of the Psalm: because He is outside of time, He is the only one capable of redeeming the "shortness" of human life.

A. "From everlasting to everlasting, You are God.": This affirms God's omnitemporal nature. He is not subject to time, the passage of years, or the limitations of a mortal life. This central confession, serves as the pivot point of the entire prayer. The phrase "from everlasting to everlasting" (Hebrew: *me-olam to ad-olam*) is a Hebrew idiom that conveys a "vanishing point" in both directions—looking back before the dawn of creation and forward beyond the horizon of future time.

- **God:** In v.2b, Moses invokes the Hebrew name *El Olam* (אֵל עוֹלָם), that is over simplistically translated as God in English, that is translated as God in English. means "Everlasting God" or "God of Eternity." This is one of several names Moses uses to describe YHWH his growing understanding of God's character and revealing a mature understanding of God as not merely the God of the current covenant, but the unchanging Lord over all history.

- **Theological Logic:** This statement is the foundation for the petition of the rest of the Psalm. Because God is *El Olam* (outside time), He is the only one capable of redeeming the "shortness" and vanity of human life.



V. The Frailty and Brevity of Man (vv.3–6)

Moses uses vivid imagery to illustrate the fleeting nature of human existence compared to God's timelessness. It is a pivotal section against the backdrop of the wilderness wandering, where a whole generation of Israelites died due to disobedience, and Moses reflects deeply on the chasm between the eternal God and fragile humanity.

Moses begins by grounding human existence in its physical origin and inevitable end. This is a direct echo of Genesis 3:19. Moses uses the Hebrew word *dakka* in v.3, translated "dust," providing the imagery of something pulverized or crushed to powder.

Death is not portrayed as a biological accident, but as a divine command. When God speaks, life begins; when He speaks again, life concludes.

1. "You turn man to destruction, and say, 'Return, O children of men.'" (v.3):

- A. Moses contrasts God's eternal nature ("from everlasting to everlasting," v.2) with the temporary existence of humans. The word for "man" here is *Enosh* (frail, mortal man), emphasizing weakness.
- B. Moses connects the death of the Israelites directly to God's authority. He uses the language of Genesis 3:19—"dust you are, and to dust you shall return". This is not merely a natural process of aging; it is a divine decree resulting from sin. The "return" is a humbling reminder that our bodies are made of the ground and must return to it.
- C. It serves to abase human pride. The "sons of men" (or mortal humans) are portrayed as fragile, subject to the sovereign, life-and-death decisions of God.

2. "For a thousand years in Your sight are like yesterday when it is past, and like a watch in the night." (v.4):

The purpose of this verse is not to set a mathematical formula, but to show that God is not bound by time as we are. Therefore, His judgments and promises do not have to happen quickly to be valid.

- A. **The Vanishing Point Concept:** Moses, standing in the wilderness surrounded by death and sand, uses the most permanent objects imaginable—mountains—to show that God existed *before* they were brought forth (v. 2a). The omnitemporal idiom suggests that if you travel as far back as the mind can conceive, God is already there, and as far as hope can reach into the future, God is already waiting.
- B. **God is "everlasting to everlasting," humans are temporary:** The psalm notes that human life is like grass that fades quickly, or a fleeting dream, starkly contrasting with the unshakable, permanent nature of God. A "watch" in ancient Israel was a brief, four-hour period of the night watch. By comparing a thousand years to a mere night watch, Moses emphasizes that human, long-term history is, to God, is as a fleeting moment or a quick nap.
- C. **God's Perspective:** Moses contrasts our human experience of time with God's, who exists outside its constraints. A thousand years—the span of many generations—is reduced to a single, fleeting day to an eternal God. To God, a millennium is not a long, drawn-out epoch, but rather a "yesterday," an event that has already passed, vivid yet complete.



3. Imagery of Transience (vv.5-6): Moses uses three vivid, poetic images to illustrate the fleeting nature of life: human lives are compared to a flood that sweeps things away, a dream, and grass that sprouts in the morning but withers by evening. Moses brings these verses together to create a sobering, humble, and ultimately faithful perspective on life.

A. A Flood (v.5a): "You sweep them away as with a flood..."

This suggests the sudden, irresistible nature of death, like a sudden desert flash flood (or "wadi") in Israel that carries away everything in its path. It represents the rapid end of the rebellious generation in the wilderness.

B. A Sleep/Dream (v.5b): "...they are like a sleep."

Life is often lived in a daze, as if in a dream, where people ignore their mortality until death abruptly wakes them. It highlights the fragile, non-permanent nature of human existence.

C. Withering Grass (v.5c-6): "...in the morning they are like grass which grows up: In the morning it flourishes and grows up; In the evening it is cut down and withers."

In the harsh climate of the Ancient Near East, grass can sprout quickly after rain but wither almost immediately under the scorching afternoon sun. This metaphor implies that at our strongest—our "morning"—we are still fragile and temporary. The cycle from morning to evening is a metaphor for the rapid, sometimes instantaneous, transition from birth to death.

VI. Life Under God's Judgment: The Reality of Human Sin and Divine Wrath (vv.7-11)

This section explains why human life is often characterized by sorrow and is cut short—due to the reality of sin and God's holy response to it. Moses is used by God to present a somber reflection on human existence, viewing it through the lens of divine judgment.

Following the opening contemplation of God's eternal nature and human transitoriness, Moses explains that the sorrowful, brief, and toilsome nature of life is not merely a natural phenomenon, but a direct result of God's holy response to human sin.

1. Judgment on Human Sin (vv.7-8): Humanity is consumed by God's anger because of iniquity and secret sins.

A. "For we have been consumed by Your anger, and by Your wrath we are terrified" (v.7): The passage opens with a stark confession. The word "consumed" suggests a total, overwhelming destruction, reflecting the severity of divine judgment upon human sinfulness.

B. "You have set our iniquities before You, our secret sins in the light of Your countenance." (v.8): The exposure of hidden sin reveals the reason for God's consuming wrath and highlights that no sin is hidden from God. While humans may hide their sins from others, or even from themselves, God brings them into the "light of His countenance"—a light that exposes and burns. The "secret sins" are not just hidden actions, but the hidden motives and depravity of the heart, laid bare before a holy God.



2. The Brevity of Life (vv.9-11): Moses notes that a typical life lasts 70 or 80 years, but even these years are filled with "toil and trouble" before they quickly pass away. Moses provides a stark meditation on the brevity of human life, which creates a fascinating historical and theological tension when compared to the 900-plus-year lifespans of early patriarchs like Noah and Methuselah. Moses' reflection in these verses serves as a "funeral dirge" on the wasted lives of the wilderness generation, whose disobedience caused them to perish. However, the message is universal: Secret Sins Matter, Life is Fragile, The Goal is Reverence.

A. "For all our days pass away under Your fury; we finish our years like a sigh"

(v.9): As a result of this divine wrath, human life is marked by instability. The span of life is likened to a "sigh" or a "moan," indicating how quickly it vanishes.

B. "labor and sorrow" (v.10): Moses defines the typical human lifespan as 70 years, or, by reason of strength, 80 years (v.10). Yet, he notes that even these years are characterized by "toil and trouble" (or "pride," "labor and sorrow"). This reflects the consequence of sin, making life a struggle rather than a pleasure, passing away quickly until we "fly away".

C. "Who knows the power of Your anger? For as the fear of You, so is Your wrath."

(v.11): Moses introduces a profound question. This implies that few truly grasp the intensity of God's judgment.

This verse signifies that God's wrath is directly proportional to the lack of reverence (fear) shown toward His holiness. It indicates a direct correlation: if the "fear of the Lord"—respect and reverence—is lacking, the experience of His wrath becomes intense.

VII. A Prayer for Wisdom and Restoration (vv.12-17)

The transition from a meditation on human frailty and divine eternity in vv.1–11 brings us to a passionate petition for wisdom, mercy, and purpose.. Knowing our lives are fleeting should make us depend on the eternal God for our security. In the final movement of Psalm 90, Moses' prayer shifts from understanding that we are "dust" (v. 3) to becoming "divine partners" (v. 17). Moses teaches that when we recognize our days are numbered (v. 12) and rely on God's mercy (v. 14), our fleeting lives are transformed into purposeful, enduring work that serves the kingdom of God. This is a pivot to asking God to redefine the human experience through His grace.

1. "So teach us to number our days that we may gain a heart of wisdom." (v.12): A

petition to teach us to "number our days" to gain a heart of wisdom. After considering the brevity of life (70-80 years), Moses recognizes that without divine intervention, humans live foolishly, ignoring their mortality.

A. "So, teach": The Hebrew word for "teach" in Psalm 90:12 is *hōwda'*, which is the causative imperative form of the root word *yāda'*, meaning "to know". Therefore, the phrase literally translates to "make us know" or "cause us to know" our days, rather than simply the act of instruction.



B. "numbering our days": This is not a request for mathematical skill to count the remaining days. The phrase implies a pragmatic counting or appreciation of the brevity of life rather than a simple census. The Hebrew phrase for "number" is *lim·nō·wt*, derived from the root *manah* (to count/number). It translates to reckoning, giving the meaning of living with a daily awareness that time is a non-renewable, fast-fleeting commodity.

C. "heart of wisdom": In biblical context, numbering days means recognizing that time is a finite gift from God. This awareness acts as the "beginning of wisdom," preventing us from living as if this life is all there is, causing us to align our limited earthly lives with God's eternal purposes—prioritizing what lasts over what withers.

Thus, knowing that our time is short drives us to prioritize eternal values over "fruitless worldly pursuits". It transforms the way we treat others, encouraging us to "forgive faster" and "invest in what lasts."

2. "Return, O LORD! How long? Have compassion on your servants! Satisfy us in the morning with your steadfast love, that we may rejoice and be glad all our days." (vv. 13-14): A request for God to return to His people and satisfy them with love and joy to counteract years of affliction. Moses asks God to "return" and show pity to His servants.

A. "Return": Moses, likely writing after witnessing the wilderness generation perish, asks God to return in favor rather than in judgment. "Return" is the same Hebrew word used for "turn back" (to dust), but here it implies a reversal of divine wrath.

B. "morning": The mention of "morning" in verse 14 implies that the night of affliction is temporary. God's grace arrives with the "morning," acting as a new beginning that replaces decades of struggle, a dawn of hope after a long night of affliction (i.e., the 40-year wandering).

C. "years of evil": Moses asks to be satisfied with God's *hesed*—His covenant faithfulness and loving devotion. This divine love is the only source of true satisfaction that can overcome the "years of evil."

3. "Make us glad for as many days as you have afflicted us, and for as many years as we have seen evil. Let your work appear to your servants and your glory to their children." (v. 15-16): The background of Psalm 90 is the 40-year wilderness wandering of the Israelites, a generation under divine discipline (Numbers 14:33-34). Moses, having seen thousands of people die daily, writes a lament (The Wilderness Cry) that acknowledges the brevity of life and the intensity of God's anger against sin. The "days of affliction" and "years of seeing evil" represent this period of judgment.

Moses makes a plea for God to establish the work of their hands and show His glory; a plea for God's "unfailing love" to satisfy them in the morning, replacing years of affliction with equal years of gladness. It is a profound and faith-filled petition to end the "sigh" of human life with the "song" of divine joy, asking that God's actions be visible in their lives, thus giving meaning to their suffering and, ultimately, to their work.



A. "Make us glad for as many days as you have afflicted us, and for as many years as we have seen evil." (v.15):

The "days of affliction" and "years of evil" refer to the long, difficult period of wilderness wandering for the Israelites, characterized by rebellion, divine judgment, and the slow passing away of an entire generation. It is an acknowledgment that life is marked by "toil and trouble".

- **"seen evil"**: This refers to witnessing the consequences of rebellion, including the death of their peers and the 40-year wandering.
- **"as many years"**: shows a belief that God keeps track of the time his people have spent in sorrow and can redeem those lost years, a theme similar to the restoration of Job or the promise of a double portion of blessing in Isaiah 61:7.

B. "Let your work appear to Your servants and Your glory to their children." (v.16)

- **"Your work"**: This refers to God's saving, redemptive acts. Moses is asking for visible proof of God's intervention, not just in promises, but in palpable, historical, and miraculous action. It is a desire to see God's power displayed in delivering them into the promised land, rather than just dying in the wilderness.
- **"Your glory"**: This is the splendor and majesty of God. The request to show this to their children is a plea for the legacy of faith, ensuring that the next generation sees the goodness of God and is not forgotten by Him. It connects the present suffering to the future hope of the children.

4. "Let the favor of the Lord our God be upon us, and establish the work of our hands upon us; yes, establish the work of our hands." (v.17): The Psalm concludes with a request for God's favor to "establish the work of our hands," giving eternal significance to human effort and by promising that when we walk in the favor of God, our labor is not in vain, but is made fruitful, lasting, and glorious.

A. "favor of the Lord [Adonai] our God [Eloheinu]": "Adonai Eloheinu" translated as "the LORD our God" appears at the beginning of the verse, where the psalmist asks for God's favor or beauty to rest upon the people. The request for "favor" (or beauty/graciousness) is a plea for God's presence and approval to rest upon the people.

Eloheinu is a specific first-person plural possessive form of Elohim that denotes a personal, communal relationship which highlights the covenant relationship between God and the people of Israel.

B. "establishing the work of our hands": This is a profound plea for longevity and significance. Because human life is like dust, its efforts (work) are temporary, like sandcastles. Combining this portion of v.17 with the first portion of v.17 suggests that human work is only truly "beautiful" when stamped with divine grace.

C. "yea": The repetition of "establish the work of our hands" emphasizes the intense desire for God to give permanence to human endeavors. It is a prayer to connect temporal, fleeting efforts to God's eternal purposes.

