

Experiencing God when Life is Hard

Seek Wisdom

Psalm 90

A few years ago I read a book (*Shop Class as Soulcraft* by Matthew Crawford) in which the author argued rather convincingly that there will always be a need for people who have the types of skills that we learned in high school shop class - working with our hands, knowing how things work, and knowing how to fix things. He makes the memorable line that “you can’t hammer a nail over the internet” (p. 34). Some things can only be done by someone with skills who actually shows up in person.

Something similar is true in our spiritual lives. Some things cannot be done remotely. We need people to show up in person and pray with us, encourage us, correct us, bear our burdens, etc. Those in person relationships are vital. But there is something that nobody else can do for you: seek God. Your mom can’t seek God for you; Faith E Free can’t seek God for you; your life group leader can’t seek God for you. **You** have to show up in person in the presence of God and seek Him. Our 21 Days of Prayer and Fasting provides a simple way for you to seek God along with the rest of the church concerning things that really matter.

The topic that we’ve chosen for this 21 Days of Prayer and Fasting is ***Experiencing God when Life is Hard***. Almost all of us can identify ways in which our lives are hard:

- * A relationship that’s strained or broken. Perhaps you’re experiencing debilitating guilt or shame over your part in that relationship.
- * Disappoint or uncertainty about your career. Other people seem to be cruising along, but you struggle over whether you’re even going to make it.
- * A stronghold or an addiction. Maybe you’ve cried out to God for years for freedom, but you’re still in bondage in some way.

The list could go on and on, but you can probably identify some way in which your life is hard - perhaps in ways nobody else knows about. Sometimes we feel like giving up, don’t we? How do you experience God when life is hard?

We are going to explore this question in these Sunday messages using “Book 4” of the Psalms. The entire book of Psalms is divided into five books; you can see the headings in your bible. Book 4 is Psalm 90-106. This collection of psalms was written to the nation of Israel at a time when their ***life was about as hard as you could imagine***: they were living in exile in Babylon. Because of their rebellion, God had the Babylonians conquer Jerusalem and carry them to Babylon (which was 900 miles to the east). These Psalms are written to people whose security and identity had been stripped away: they had no king of their own, no temple, no Land; it looked as if their God had been defeated by the gods of Babylon.

These psalms urge people living in Exile to ***learn from another time*** in their nation’s history about a thousand years earlier when life was equally hard, the Exodus. When God delivered the children of Israel from slavery in Egypt, they too experienced hardship and loss. These psalms constantly make reference to the the Exodus,

encourage the people in Exile not to repeat their sins so that they can experience God even though their lives were hard.

This morning we will consider *Psalm 90 - A Prayer of Moses, the man of God*. This psalm teaches us that if we are going to experience God when life is hard, we need to seek wisdom. Like our lives depend on it. . . because our lives do depend on the wisdom that only God can give. Moses makes two simple points in this psalm.

Life is short and troubled. (*Psalm 90:1-11*) In some ways this is an obvious point. But, Moses tells us, the obvious implication of this is often ignored. Before talking about our lives, Moses talks about God.

1 Lord, you have been our dwelling place in all generations.

God has always been the true home for people who have needed protection from the dangers of this world. God has been our dwelling place, our refuge, in all generations. As a matter of fact, even before this world was created, God was God.

2 Before the mountains were brought forth,
or ever you had formed the earth and the world,
from everlasting to everlasting you are God.

Mountains are a symbol of permanence. When you take I-70 about 500 miles to the west and you see the Rocky Mountains, you are looking at something immense and permanent. But Moses reminds us that before the mountains were born (and before God gave birth to the world), God was God. He is the definition of permanence. [The theological term for God's eternal, unchanging permanence is *immutability*.]

By contrast, Moses points out in verse 3:

3 You return man to dust
and say, "Return, O children of man!"

This is a reference to Genesis 3:19. After Adam and Eve disobeyed God by eating of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, God told the man that just as he had been formed out of dust (Genesis 2:7), he would become dust once again after he died. Whereas God is more permanent than the mountains, we will all become dust.

And notice why this is the case. It's not simply "the way things are"; it's because God said so. God said, "Return, O children of man [to dust]." This means that if we are going to think rightly about our own impermanence, we're going to have to deal with God; He is the one who pronounced the the death sentence on the human race.

In verses 4, 5, and 6 Moses gives us a series of images which emphasize how fleeting our lives really are.

4 For a thousand years in your sight

are but as yesterday when it is past,
or as a watch in the night.

If we consider a generation to be about 40 years (e.g., the generation of the children of Israel who died in the wilderness), a thousand years is 25 generations. To us, 25 generations represents a long, long time. But God thinks about those 25 generations the way we think about yesterday, or the way we think about “a watch in the night,” which was 4 hours.

5 You sweep them away as with a flood;
they are like a dream,
like grass that is renewed in the morning:
6 in the morning it flourishes and is renewed;
in the evening it fades and withers.

Our lives are as unstable as something swept away by a flood. . . or as fleeting as a dream. . . or as impermanent as grass that is lush in the morning and withered in the evening (as happened in the climate of Canaan). (See Note #1.)

In verses 7 through 11 Moses links the shortness of our lives to God’s wrath/anger. The book of Exodus, which we’re reading together over the next 21 Days, gives the context for understanding the anger of God. In Exodus 34 God reveals himself as One who is “slow to anger and abounding in lovingkindness and truth”; so when we read of his anger, it is his *reluctant* but *just* response to the persistent rebellion of his people. From the perspective of both testaments, God’s anger toward sin is appropriate. The wrath of God is a given.

7 For we are brought to an end by your anger;
by your wrath we are dismayed [i.e., terrified].

As you read Exodus, you will see that Moses and the children of Israel experienced some terrifying things at the hand of God. You will also see that wrath was God’s response to their iniquities/sins, as Moses admits in verse 8.

8 You have set our iniquities before you,
our secret sins in the light of your presence.

Consequently, Moses says:

9 For all our days pass away under your wrath;
we bring our years to an end like a sigh [or moan].
10 The years of our life are seventy,
or even by reason of strength eighty;
yet their span is but toil and trouble;
they are soon gone, and we fly away.

In light of the fact that ***Life is short and troubled***, Moses asks a very profound question in verse 11:

11 Who considers the power of your anger,
and your wrath according to the fear of you?

He's basically asking God, "Who actually ponders and understands the full force of your anger and wrath against sin . . . and responds with the appropriate 'fear of the Lord'?" If you "fear the Lord," you care more about what God thinks about you than anything else. If you fear the Lord, you realize that the worst possible scenario is for the Creator of the universe to be angry with you over the way you've lived your life.

Moses asks, "Who actually lives their life mindful that they are accountable to God?" The implied answer is "nobody, in their natural condition." In our day it's much more common for people to think, "God - if he even exists - accepts me just the way I am. . . He knows I'm not perfect . . . So I'm not really worried about God." In other words, in our natural condition we don't consider the power of God's anger and fear him accordingly. We just live our lives and hope things work out in the end.

But from the perspective of the Bible, that way of thinking and living is very foolish. The Bible teaches that all of us have sinned and invite the wrath of God. The burning question in Scripture is "How can I get rid of our sin and avoid the wrath of God?" The answer is, "It's impossible; Jeremiah (in Jeremiah 13:23) said it's like a leopard trying to change its spots. . . it's impossible.

The message of the gospel is that what we could not do, God did by sending His Son to die for our sins. And the Son, Jesus, willingly went to the cross on our behalf. 1 John 2:2 says that Jesus is the propitiation for our sins, meaning that he satisfied the wrath of God that we deserved. Have you every wondered why Jesus had to die such a humiliating and barbaric death? The brutality of the cross reflects the sinfulness of our sin and the power of God's anger. You cannot look at the cross and conclude that our sin is no big deal.

The good news is that if you place your full confidence in Jesus, your sin is fully forgiven and God feels absolutely no wrath toward you. Jesus becomes your dwelling place, your refuge, your shelter from the storm. If you are "in Christ," you are in the safest, most secure place in the universe.

Therefore, for believers in Jesus, the fear of the Lord isn't a fear of punishment; the punishment we deserved fell upon Jesus. The fear of the Lord is more relational. If I fear the Lord, I have a deep, abiding desire to not grieve the One who is perfect in his love for me passionate about my good.

Since ***Life is short and troubled***, we should cultivate a healthy fear of the Lord that guides our lives. In other words. . .

Seek wisdom. (Psalm 90:12-17) As someone who feared the Lord, Moses prayed:

12 So teach us to number our days
that we may get a heart of wisdom.

The perspective here is: “Lord, I realize that my time on earth is very finite and fleeting - like a dream or a sigh or the grass of the field. Therefore, I don’t want to waste my life. I want to live in a way that takes into account who you are and what you want. Give me a heart of wisdom.” Since we live from the heart, that’s where we need wisdom. If you have wisdom, you are skilled at living your life: you know how to think, speak, and act in ways that are good for you, good for others, and good for the cause of Christ. You become one of those people who can show up and do things in others’ lives.

The brevity of life should make us desperate for wisdom. Our challenge to you during our 21 Day experience is to seek wisdom in at least one specific area of your life. Choose the fear of the Lord (Proverbs 1:29) and seek wisdom. You might think in terms of 1) something foolish you need to **stop** doing (by the grace of God) and 2) some way you need to **start** experiencing God (or experiencing him more fully).

First, what is the stupidest thing you’re doing right now that threatens everything you care about? Some of the hardship we face is the direct result of our own foolishness. Can you think of something that the Scriptures would say is foolish? Chances are that you can identify something easily/quickly: some sin issue that you’ve been tolerating in your life (Proverbs speaks of sexual sins as foolish, dangerous, and death-dealing), holding a grudge (drinking poison and hoping the other person dies), sins of the tongue (saying too much, saying the wrong things [slander or gossip], etc.).

Use the next three weeks to begin seeking wisdom from God on how **stop** doing something foolish in your life. God gives us grace when we fear him and walk in repentance.

Second, what is one way in which you need to **start** experiencing God more fully? The rest of Psalm 90 describes some of the ways that we can experience God when life is hard. Some of these are rather obvious and others might surprise you. In verse 13 Moses prays that God would “pity” (or have compassion on) them:

13 Return, O Lord! How long? Have pity on your servants!

If you’re choosing the fear of the Lord and walking in repentance, don’t hesitate to ask God for pity/compassion/grace. We need God to give us many things that we don’t deserve.

In verses 14 and 15 Moses prays:

14 Satisfy us in the morning with your steadfast love,
that we may rejoice and be glad all our days.
15 Make us glad for as many days as you have afflicted us,
and for as many years as we have seen evil.

Even though life was hard and troubled, Moses didn't believe that God's people should settle for a drab, joyless life. We shouldn't either. "Satisfy us with your love!" "Give us joy and make us glad!" If you are not satisfied with God's love, you will seek to be satisfied with lesser things. Joy and gladness are often undervalued, as if they're "merely emotions" that we can take or leave. No, joy and gladness are our birthright in Jesus Christ. The Spirit himself seeks to fill us with joy - especially when our lives are hard.

16 Let your work be shown to your servants,
and your glorious power to their children.

We shouldn't be satisfied unless we see God work in our lives and in the lives of upcoming generations.

17 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!

"God, even though our lives are short and troubled, we want the work of our hands to count. As we walk by faith, we want you to bear fruit that lasts for eternity!" This is a prayer of faith and a prayer of wisdom.

And so we are inviting you to join the church for 21 Days of Prayer and Fasting. This is an opportunity to **seek wisdom**.

If you sign up/register for this 21 Days experience, you will receive an email with an overview of the entire 21 days, including some information about various ways that you can fast during these three weeks (you can choose something that works for you). And then you will receive a daily email early each morning that includes:

1. A simple guide for reading and studying the passage in Exodus for that day.
2. A simple prayer guide that will give structure to your time of prayer.

If possible, register using the Church Center App (the details are in the bulletin) before 1 this afternoon. If you're not able to use the Church Center App, you can use the Connection Card - just write 21 Days in the comment section and we'll get you registered.

21 Days of Prayer and Fasting is an opportunity for you to seek God together with the rest of the church. **Since life is short and troubled, seek wisdom.**