

## "How to View Life and Death Like a Christian" Psalm 90

### Introduction

- **7:59:** American Airlines Flight 11 takes off from Boston Logan International Airport bound for Los Angeles, California.
- **8:14:** United Airlines Flight 175, another fully-fueled Boeing 767, carrying 56 passengers and nine crew members, departs from Boston Logan airport, also bound for Los Angeles.
- **8:20:** American Airlines Flight 77, a Boeing 757 with 58 passengers and six crew, departs from Washington Dulles International Airport for Los Angeles.
- **8:42:** United Airlines Flight 93, a Boeing 757, takes off with 37 passengers and seven crew members from Newark International Airport, bound for San Francisco International Airport. And then the unimaginable.
- **8:46:** Flight 11, traveling at 490 mph, crashes into the north side of the north tower of the World Trade Center, between floors 94 and 98. It plows to the building core, severing all three gypsum-encased stairwells, dragging combustibles with it. A massive shock wave travels down to the ground and up again. The combustibles and the remnants of the aircraft are ignited by the burning fuel.
- **8:49:** The first news and radio organizations report an explosion or incident at the World Trade Center. I'll never forget—I happened to be in my car driving to campus for a 9:00 class when I first heard the news on the radio.
- **8:55:** Announcements are made over the building-wide PA system by officials in the still-undamaged south tower of the World Trade Center that the building is 'secure', and that people may return to their offices. Some do not hear it; others ignore it and evacuate anyway; others congregate in common areas like the 78th floor sky lobby.
- **9:03:** Eight minutes after these announcements Flight 175 crashes at about 590 mph into the south side of the south tower between floors 78 and 84.
- **9:28:** Hijackers storm the cockpit on Flight 93 and take over the flight.
- **9:37:** Flight 77 crashes into the western side of the Pentagon.
- **9:59:** The south tower of the World Trade Center collapses, 55 minutes 51 seconds after the impact of Flight 175. As the roar of the collapse goes silent, tremendous gray-white clouds of pulverized concrete and gypsum rush through the streets.
- **10:03:** United Airlines Flight 93 crashes southeast of Pittsburgh in Somerset County, Pennsylvania.
- **10:28:** The north tower of the World Trade Center collapses.
- In the days and weeks following 9-11 we were reminded of life's fragility. We hang by a thread to this thing called life—a thread that can be severed without notice. Life is ephemeral. We are vapors, we're mists. In the words of [Longfellow](#), "...Time is fleeting,

And our hearts, though stout and brave, Still, like muffled drums, are beating Funeral marches to the grave."<sup>1</sup> 9-11 reminded us that our own mortality is imminent.

- But, being that we're Americans, part of our cultural identity is to deny our own mortality. And so our insatiable lust for the things of youth and the things that preserve our youth quickly returned. For most of us, normalcy returned by October. The nationwide twenty-five percent spike in church attendance had evaporated by then.<sup>2</sup> And now, five years removed from 9-11, life in America churns on unabated.

### Transition

I know it's difficult to think about our mortality. I'm not trying to make you squirm. There is wisdom in thinking about life in light of one's death. In fact, I think God's word for us this morning is clear...

### Proposition

- **Life is lived best with one's end in mind**

### Transition

- This morning, we continue our series through the Psalms called *The Songs of Life*. The Psalms teach us how to emote, how to feel emotion in a god-glorifying way. The psalm that we are going to look at this morning, Psalm 90, is a reflection on the brevity of life. It teaches how we should feel as we think about our lives in light of our mortality. You see, most of us walk through life backwards. We face our youth and fight the slide toward the grave. We ignore and deny death's reality. We don't want to feel anything related to death. And so even in the act of death itself we want to be unfeeling. To quote [Aldous Huxley](#), "we squirt ourselves full of morphine and shuffle off in a coma."<sup>3</sup> This morning, as we take a closer look at Psalm 90, I want to suggest to you an alternative. **Life is lived best with one's end in mind**. If you haven't done so yet, please open your bibles to Psalm 90.

### Background

- This psalm contains two sections. The first, verses 1-12, reminds us that life is short. The second, verses 13-17, focuses on how we should live in light of the brevity of life.

### Transition

Let's begin by looking at section one, verses 1-12.

### Main Points

- Listen again. *Lord, you have been our dwelling place throughout all generations. 2 Before the mountains were born or you brought forth the earth and the world, from everlasting to everlasting you are God. 3 You turn men back to dust, saying, "Return to dust, O sons of men." 4 For a thousand years in your sight are like a day that has just gone by, or like a watch in the night. 5 You sweep men away in the sleep of death; they are like the new grass*

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<sup>1</sup> Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, *A Psalm of Life*.

<sup>2</sup> © The Barna Group, Ltd, 2006.

<sup>3</sup> Aldous Huxley (1894–1963), British author. Bruno Rontini, in *Time Must Have a Stop*, ch. 26 (1944). *The Columbia Dictionary of Quotations* is licensed from Columbia University Press. Copyright © 1993, 1995 by Columbia University Press. All rights reserved.

*of the morning-- 6 though in the morning it springs up new, by evening it is dry and withered. 7 We are consumed by your anger and terrified by your indignation. 8 You have set our iniquities before you, our secret sins in the light of your presence. 9 All our days pass away under your wrath; we finish our years with a moan. 10 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. 11 Who knows the power of your anger? For your wrath is as great as the fear that is due you. 12 Teach us to number our days aright, that we may gain a heart of wisdom.*

- I want you to notice a few things about this first section. Psalm 90 begins describing God's eternity. He outlasts man.<sup>4</sup> Juxtaposed against this picture of Yahweh who has always existed, from *everlasting to everlasting*, as [verse 2](#) says, is this picture of frail, finite, fragile mankind whose years are maybe seventy or eighty, if we're lucky. Mankind is likened to grass in [verses 5 and 6](#) that parches easily and dies in a day. In other words, man's time on earth is so short you hardly notice. Life is short. Whereas for God, a thousand years are like a brief four hour watch in the night. They are nothing. God is not burdened by the passing of time like we are. He has and will always exist while we are swept away—brushed aside in the sleep of death.
- The psalmist's point in reminding us of this is that God is fundamentally different than we are. And it's not some minuscule difference. [Wayne Grudem](#) describes the difference this way. "The difference between the creature and the Creator is an immensely vast difference. It is not just that we exist and God has always existed; it is also that God *necessarily* exists in an infinitely better, stronger, more excellent way. The difference between God's being and ours is more than the difference between the sun and candle, more than the difference between the ocean and a raindrop, more than that difference between the arctic ice cap and a snowflake, more than the difference between the universe and the room we are sitting in. No limitation or imperfection in creation should be projected onto our thought of God. He is the Creator; all else is creaturely. All else can pass away in an instant; he *necessarily exists* forever."<sup>5</sup>
- And it's because of this fundamental difference between the Creator and the creature that we become painfully aware of the cause of our finiteness. Sin. Look at [verse 7](#). *We are consumed by your anger and terrified by your indignation. 8 You have set our iniquities before you, our secret sins in the light of your presence. 9 All our days pass away under your wrath; we finish our years with a moan.* The reason we are not like God, the reason we melt away into death is because of sin. In the light of his perfection even our most hidden secret flaws are revealed. And because he judges us according to the standard of his own character we are destined for punishment. *All our days pass away under your wrath. The wages of sin is death.*<sup>6</sup> This is not good news; this news calls for groaning. *We finish our years with a moan.*

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<sup>4</sup> Constable, p. 161.

<sup>5</sup> Grudem, p. 162.

<sup>6</sup> Romans 6:23.

- Do you realize we are in a pickle here in the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century? As a culture, we no longer have the ability to distinguish between right and wrong. It is impossible to make moral judgments about any situation—even the terrorist attacks of 9-11. Gay marriage becomes okay. It becomes okay to cultivate stem cells from frozen embryos. And the major reason the distinctions between right and wrong are now blurred is because we have blurred the distinction between creator and creature. Whenever this separation between creator and creature is diminished, whether that be in a culture, or in a church or individually, the sensitivity to what is morally right or wrong is diminished with it. It's the Romans 1 phenomenon that Paul describes. *For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities--his eternal power and divine nature--have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse. 21 For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened. 22 Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools. 28 Furthermore, since they did not think it worthwhile to retain the knowledge of God, he gave them over to a depraved mind, to do what ought not to be done.*<sup>7</sup> The recipe for futile, foolish, darkened thinking and decision making, thinking void of right and wrong—where everything and anything goes—is to forget that there is a creator God.
- What does all this have to do with how we view life and death? It has everything to do with it. Don't you see? When God the creator is forgotten the significance of death disappears. Without God, death becomes a natural process like birth or puberty. Euthanizing the elderly and the sick becomes an act of mercy because it is believed they are being helped through a natural process like giving an epidural to a laboring mother. The problem with this is that death, all death, any death is not natural. There is no such thing as natural death. Death is the physical result of a spiritual problem—the problem of sin.
- How do you view death as a Christian? The psalmist's answer is given in verse 12. *Teach us to number our days aright, that we may gain a heart of wisdom. Life is lived best with one's end in mind.* In other words, "make us know how few our days are."<sup>8</sup> God help us to recognize the vast difference between your eternal limitless and our numbered finiteness. That is wise thinking. That's how to view death as a Christian.

### Transition

Now up through verse 12 we get the first half of the story. The other half, how to view life, comes in verses 13-17.

- Listen to verses 13-17 again. *Relent, O LORD! How long will it be? Have compassion on your servants. 14 Satisfy us in the morning with your unfailing love, that we may sing for joy and be glad all our days. 15 Make us glad for as many days as you have afflicted us, for as many years as we have seen trouble. 16 May your deeds be shown to your servants, your*

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<sup>7</sup> Romans 1:20-22, 28

<sup>8</sup> Davidson, p. 302.

*splendor to their children. 17 May the favor of the Lord our God rest upon us; establish the work of our hands for us-- yes, establish the work of our hands.*

- The picture of life presented by the psalmist in these verses is the exact opposite of the one in the first twelve verses. It's a picture of singing for joy and gladness and the favor of God. If verses 1-12 are true, if it's true that our lives are but vapors, if it's true that we are here today and gone tomorrow, you've got to ask yourself how in the world can there be this extreme switch from groaning over our mortality to singing and gladness and favor? The answer is God's unfailing love. In light of our human condition, in spite of our sin that makes us mortal, the only thing that can satisfy, as it says in [verse 14](#), is God's *unfailing love*. God's love for us is what gives meaning to life. How do you view life as a Christian? You view all of life from the perspective of God's eternal, loyal, unfailing, never-ending love.
- And if life is viewed this way, if this is what it means to be wise, to view life not as a random act born out of chaos ending in a naturally selecting process called death, but as a search for God's love, then one is naturally led to the cross. Because while the psalmist longed for God's unfailing love he only experienced it in part. The fullest expression of God's unfailing love, the love the psalmist hoped for, is the cross of Jesus Christ. *The wages of sin may indeed be death. But God showed his great love for us by sending Christ to die for us while we were still sinners.* And God has promised, through his unfailing love for us through Christ's sacrifice, to undo the consequences of sin and destroy death. *It has now been revealed through the appearing of our Savior, Christ Jesus, who has destroyed death and has brought life and immortality to light through the gospel.*<sup>9</sup> For those who receive this gospel, this good news, death itself is swept away and is superseded by a gift. Eternal life. *The free gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.* But you've got to receive it.

## Conclusion

- Did you know that psychologists now believe that we are hardwired to cleanse ourselves from sin? In the September 8<sup>th</sup> issue of *Science* there is an article that scientifically shows that people really do feel the need to wash away their sins. They call it the "Macbeth effect" after Shakespeare's character Lady Macbeth who vainly tried to scrub imaginary blood from her hands after an imaginary murder.
- Researcher Katie Liljenquist of Northwestern University and her colleague Chen-Bo Zhong of the University of Toronto "asked undergraduate student volunteers to focus on ethical or unethical deeds from their past. The volunteers were more likely to interpret the word fragments "W \_\_ H" as "wash" and "S \_\_ P" as "soap" if they had been thinking of an unethical deed, and to choose an antiseptic wipe instead of a pencil as free gift.
- The investigators also asked volunteers to hand-copy a short story written in the first person about either helping or sabotaging a coworker. [They] found the students who copied the unethical story were more likely to then rate cleansing products such as toothpaste and

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<sup>9</sup> 2 Timothy 1:10

detergent as more desirable than noncleansing products such as batteries and candy bars in what the participants thought was an unrelated marketing study.

- In their last set of experiments, the researchers asked volunteers to first remember an unethical deed and then either gave them the chance to wash their hands or not. When the students were afterward asked whether they would volunteer without pay for another research study to help out a desperate graduate student, 74 percent of those who had not washed their hands offered to help, while only 41 percent of the participants who had a chance to wash their hands did. This suggested volunteers who did not get the chance to clean themselves felt a need "to absolve their consciences," Liljenquist said."<sup>10</sup>
- There is only one thing that can cleanse a guilty conscience. The blood of Christ. This morning, as we celebrate communion, we remember God's unfailing love for us through the shedding of Christ's blood and we take to heart the words of Hebrews 10:22. *Let us draw near to God with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience and having our bodies washed with pure water.*

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<sup>10</sup> © 2006 MSNBC.com. Charles Q. Choi, *People really do wash away their sins: Scientists find psychological basis to 'Macbeth effect'*, LiveScience.com, 2006.