

The Inevitability of Death

Psalm 90: 10-17

Introduction

These are just a few thoughts on Psalm 90 – and in particular the final 8 verses. They were provoked by a sermon given by Alistair Begg¹.

These verses respond to the fact that most, if not all, do not consider their own mortality – indeed, for most, they believe they will live for ever. My wife tells me of many who even in their dying last days believe they will continue to live – what a sad sorry state of affairs. And certainly no teenage believes he or she will die. But how can it be; this fact is not understood until God brings it to our attention.

That all men will die is inevitable.

Verse 10 defines the length of life a person could expect – three score and ten, in the old language or 70 years in the modern. But a word of caution here; this is an expectation, not a fact – some will die sooner, some later. The purpose of the statement is to stop people bragging they will accomplish anything with an extra 10 years – most will certainly not. Hezekiah had his life lengthen 15 years – but in his pride he boasted to his enemies about his richness, with the consequence that all was taken from his family; his extra life was futile (2 Kings 20, Isaiah 39).

The message of this psalmist says that unless a person considers their position before God any extra years will be futile.

And if by reason of strength they are eighty years, Yet their boast is only labour and sorrow; For it is soon cut off, and we fly away.

This issue, Alistair Begg contends, arises because people these days live in the here and now – they have no concern about the future. Indeed it is as if they have no capacity to consider the future. Yet Scripture from the very beginning has shown the correspondence between our sin and our mortality.

In the sweat of your face you shall eat bread Till you return to the ground, For out of it you were taken; For dust you are, And to dust you shall return." (Genesis 3:19)

The fact is inescapable – man will die and his or her body will return to dust. Sin separates us from God and thus God's righteous anger must deal with the sinner – from whence we get the doctrine that the wages of sin is death followed by judgement (e.g. Romans 2:16). It is this thought the Psalmist ponders. On death our soul will be judged and all sinners will be cast into hell, unless the punishment is paid in full.

¹ Alistair Begg (31 December 2017) *Lord in Your Mercy, Hear Our Prayer* < <https://www.truthforlife.org/resources/sermon/prayer-end-year/> > (Accessed 7 January 2018)

The final 7 verses commences with a question in verse 11: “Who knows the power of Your anger?” This is a fact that is totally lost to the world today. God’s holiness demands His anger be directed at those that sin. This consequently prevents communion between Himself and ourselves. One that accepts that God will end our life in death and separation will fear the Lord, which is the beginning of wisdom (Job 28:28). A man or women who fears the Lord will have a desire to find a solution to the inevitability of death and judgement. But the world sees not the end, thus sees not the need for a saviour!

And as it is appointed for men to die once, but after this the judgment, Hebrews 9:21

From this tenet, the Psalmist goes on and makes six requests.

Six Requests

1. So teach us to number our days, That we may gain a heart of wisdom. (Vs 12)

It is not a matter of innate behaviour we are aware of our own mortality – just watch any teenage in their car! We are very much tied to the immediate and transient – immediate gratification is the requisite of modern life. However, in the reality that death await us all, we require the Lord to raise this awareness, and more to the point, raise the awareness that judgement follows death, for only in this can one realise that salvation is required. Wisdom is knowing the “fear of the Lord” – acknowledging that our days are numbered, and salvation is required.

2. Return, O LORD! How long? And have compassion on Your servants. (Vs 13)

Here the “Return!” is the cry of the Children of Israel in the wilderness after they rejected the path of God to the Promised Land. ‘Return’ is probably better translated – ‘restore us to our former place’ – see also Psalm 80. It is a cry of one who finds they are lost – headed for death. Alistair Begg reminded parishioners that it is a paradox that it is our doing when our backs are to the Lord, but it is His doing when we turn to him. We go from saying: “I am king and ruler of my own life” as we sully ourselves with the fifth of the world – to crying out; “Return to me, O Lord, have pity on me, a sinner”. It is the Lord that provides the means of doing this.

3. Oh, satisfy us early with Your mercy, That we may rejoice and be glad all our days! (Vs 14)

The Lord leads us to restoration. It is at this point He can satisfy us with his mercy. It is by His mercy we are saved. We can only be satisfied at the foot of cross where God poured out his wrath (c.f. v 11) upon His only Son in righteous indignation, because God the Father loved us so (Ephesians 5:2 etc.). The purpose of our salvation is that we may have joy and be glad – and thus praise the Lord God Most High. The salvation of the Lord is what gets up a Christian every day in joy, rather than depression.

4. *Make us glad according to the days in which You have afflicted us, The years in which we have seen evil. (Vs 15)*

Salvation should provide the fulness of joy to a saved sinner because we are in Christ from that point onward (Ephesians 2:4-7). It is the source of eternal glory in Christ that provides our joy. We move from the darkness of our former life and move into the sunshine of a life with Christ (Ephesians 5:8). The saved soul rejoices because God will remember his sins no more (Hebrews 10:17, also Hebrews 8:12) or indeed be conscious of guilt of our sin is done away with (Hebrews 10:2). We are in a state of gladness because He bore the sin of me, and made intercession for my transgressions (c.f. Isaiah 53:12). But most importantly, we rejoice because we can have communion with God Our Father.

5. *Let Your work appear to Your servants, And Your glory to their children. (Vs 16)*

The work of God's providence enters our life. Bad things still happen, but in gladness we accept the instruction and encouragement of our Lord as we walk through the shadows of death: our life is short here we look forward to eternity with Christ. Rather than futility, our life is one of fruitfulness. We want our children to see how God has worked in our lives – the psalmist's prayer is that his children see the work of God in his life, and thus praise God for it. This is only achievable if we allow God to direct our hands in work that glorifies Him – for this is fruitfulness. That our children see the love, grace, and mercy of God in our lives as we walk according to His precepts (Psalm 119), and as they observe His presence in our daily life's struggles along with our communion with the Father, they desire to praise Him.

6. *And let the beauty of the LORD our God be upon us, And establish the work of our hands for us; Yes, establish the work of our hands. (Vs 17)*

Our life needs to be directed by the Lord. As is the futility of extra years to the non-believer, so would a life that is undirected by the Lord for a Christian be futile. We are saved for good works, which God has prepared beforehand (Ephesians 2:10) – not to futility. Thus in Psalm 90:10 we have lives that are “cut-off” and remembered no-more, but the life that is restored (saved) is a life useful to our Lord. We lose the desire to manage our own affairs (Ephesians 2:2), and allow the work to be established by God (vs 17). Indeed this is the very essence of this Psalm with the thought repeated twice – “Yes, establish the work of our hands.”

Final remark

That death is inevitable needs to be assimilated in every body's consciousness. Only then will that person be brought to reason their judgement before God. Believing in the Lord Jesus Christ should provide immeasurable joy. This needs to be coupled with the desire and contentment to be God directed. Will the consequence of your action merely be like blade of grass that withers in the midday sun, or will it be a work that God has orchestrated, everlasting?

Rejoice in the Lord always. Again I will say, rejoice! (Philippians 4:4)