

Today we gather together, by being isolated from one another – following the governmental order of November 19th - suspending *all in-person* religious gatherings and worship services - but allowing religious gatherings and worship services to continue by using remote or virtual attendance. This all began for us when an acute, contagious respiratory disease raised its ugly head in Wuhan, China in December 2019 - and over the past twelve months COVID 19 has made its way around the entire planet we live on. As of yesterday the virus had infected 65 million people and killed about 2 million.

Now those are pretty nasty numbers. No one can just blow off that mass of pain, suffering and death. Yet, there is a great deal of conflict about how we should be responding to all of this. The argument is “These numbers are nothing compared to the numbers who get the flu every year, and even more so compared to the numbers of pandemics of the past.” Research tells us that globally, for the 2019-2020 influenza season, there have been about 39-56 million flu illnesses, and an estimated 24,000-62,000 flu deaths. History tells us in that in the 14th century, the Black Death is estimated to have killed as many as 200 million people - approximately 20 percent of the world's population. In recent history recently, the Spanish Flu of 1918-1920 is estimated to have killed between 20 to 50 million.

The numbers do reveal to us how much more exponentially the suffering and death of pandemics were in the past. But that does not remove the reality of those who are suffering and dying in their present battle with COVID 19. The truth is there is no such thing as a scale of measurement of all the bad things that could actually happen to you and me. We are fallen, broken creatures who live in a fallen, broken world. The original sin in the garden has cast a deep, dark shadow of pain, suffering and death across the world and into our hearts and lives. That will be with us until Jesus comes back to take us back home to be with God forever. That’s our rock-solid hope in times of suffering and death. This is God’s purpose in times suffering and death. The apostle speaks of this in Romans 8:18-25.

*For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us. For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God. For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of him who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to corruption and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. For we know that the whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now. And not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies. For in this hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what he sees? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.* Romans 8:17-25

God’s Word is telling us here that all of the pain, suffering death in our world are for the purposes of God. Our most sovereign God subjects His creation to the futility of the bondage of corruption; so that He might then be glorified when true followers of Jesus are revealed; when they are saved and set free from the bondage of corruption and obtain the freedom of the glory of the crucified and resurrected Christ – which is the redemption of our bodies and eternal adoption into God’s family. We are living in times of pain, suffering and death. God’s creation is groaning. We are in the bondage of corruption: spiritually, physically, culturally, and emotionally. Such is the way that God works with all His people. When God redeems us in Christ, He is just beginning to fashion us for His purposes. Just as a newborn baby cannot fathom what his or her life will amount to, neither can we when we are newborn in Christ. Ephesians 2:10 says “*We are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.*” In other words, our lives are not decided by our isolated wills. Everyone who is made alive in Christ, is made alive for God’s purposes. This is what God is doing today. God is making us alive in Christ. His purpose is to shape us by this pandemic.

And so what does that mean for us? What does *walking* in God's "workmanship" look like? In these days of masks and social distancing and washing hands and government orders and mandated isolation - *we need to learn from those who have walked the path of isolation and walked it well.* How we walk for God's purpose will largely determine if this pandemic crushes us or conforms into the image of Christ. And seeking the latter, we would do well to learn from Moses and his forty years of exile.

"*A Prayer of Moses, the man of God.*" This heading of Psalm 90 tells us this was written by Moses. This would make by it far the oldest Psalm in the Bible. Moses wrote this psalm, this prayer during a very bleak time in Hebrew history. The Bible tells us that Moses was commissioned by God to lead the Hebrew people out of the bondage of slavery that they had been experiencing under the Egyptians. And Moses did by a miraculous escape through the Red Sea, and then he led the nation of Israel toward the Promised Land. They stop at a beautiful oasis at Kadesh-Barnea and Moses sends twelve spies to check out the land. Ten spies return shaking with fear and report that the people were too big and too strong for the Israelites. But the two others, Joshua and Caleb, encouraged the people of God to attack - in believing they could overcome whatever obstacle stood before them - because God had promised them the land and He promised He would be with them - and He promised they could trust Him to help them do what He had told them to do. But the people of Israel did not trust God. They did not attack nor take the land. And so as a result of their lack of trust in God, He allowed them to wander the desert for next 40 years - and over those years, over one million people died in the desert.

If you do the math, that comes to over 70 funerals a day. Now that is nothing if you compare that to the 1000 daily deaths from COVID 19 in the U.S. It's more in line with Canada with 100 per day. Again, we stray into nebulous territory when we compare numbers. For God's people, the nation of Israel, this was a disaster on a national scale. Hundreds of thousands of deaths within four decades, all over the age of 20. Only Joshua and Caleb of the entire generation survived. All because they would not trust and obey God. Such a realization of the brevity of life must have caused the people of Israel to wonder about the meaning of life itself. The deep pain of suffering and death is often the impetus that causes us to look for some sort of significance in life. Surrounded by death and despair, Moses sat down and wrote out the words of this prayer to God, which we know as Psalm 90 - which speaks of seeking God's purpose of life in a fallen, broken world where life is painful and short. Psalm 90 is a prayer for how we can surrender our lives to the purpose of God, so we can live our lives in a way that reflects our future glory. Moses tells us how we can live every day for eternity.

We don't know exactly when Moses wrote this prayer. Most believe he was about seventy or eighty years old because in verse 10 of our text he said, "*The years of our life are seventy, or even by reason of strength eighty.*" If that is correct, Psalm 90 was written at a time when Moses was contemplating his own death. In his own words, God has granted people a lifespan of seventy years, maybe eighty if they are stronger. This obviously is a general principle, not a rule of law or science. But this verse invites us to consider what was going on in Moses's mind on the backside of the desert. The Bible clearly tells us that Moses's life had three sections, forty years in each. For his first forty years, he grew up as a mighty man in Egypt. For the next forty years, as he traded out the wisdom of Egypt for a greater wisdom of God, and Moses became a man God could use. Finally, in his last forty years, God used Moses in incredible ways to deliver his people - *after forty years of isolation in the desert.* If anyone is able to speak to us a word of wisdom in time of pain, suffering and isolation, it is Moses.

First, Moses begins his prayer by praising and worshipping God, (vv. 1-6). Then, he humbly confesses his desperate need for God (vv. 7-11). And then, Moses petitions God to help him to do what God has called him to do (vv. 12-17). In Psalm 90 Moses gives us a prayer that gives us God's perspective and God's wisdom, as to how we can fulfill God's purpose to live every day for eternity in time of pains, suffering and isolation - no matter what the circumstances we are facing.

*Lord, you have been our dwelling place in all generations. Before the mountains were brought forth, or ever you had formed the earth and the world, from everlasting to everlasting you are God. You return man to dust and say, "Return, O children of man!" For a thousand years in your sight are but as yesterday when it is past, or as a watch in the night. You sweep them away as with a flood; they are like a dream, like grass that is renewed in the morning: in the morning it flourishes and is renewed; in the evening it fades and withers.* Psalm 90:1–6

Moses begins his prayer by praising God for His sovereign character and actions that brought the world into existence. *"Lord, you have been our dwelling place in all generations. Before the mountains were brought forth, or ever you had formed the earth and the world, from everlasting to everlasting you are God."* Here Moses praises God as our Everlasting Creator. He begins with declaring a truth that is comforting to any and every exile - "refuge" is not a place that we can run to or fashion for ourselves. God is *"our dwelling place"* no matter our circumstances. While Moses would receive a vision on Sinai of God's heavenly dwelling place, and he would be the one to translate that to the earthly tabernacle, this verse rightly directs us to find refuge *in God himself*. The tabernacle and later temple were not the ultimate hope of finding God - they were a temporary means until God came and dwelt with us in the person of Jesus Christ. John 1:14 says: *"The Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth."*

Verse 2 recalls the formation of the earth. While God is eternal, his world is not. It came into being when he spoke the world into existence: *"Before the mountains were brought forth, or ever you had formed the earth and the world, from everlasting to everlasting you are God."* Then we read of the fall of mankind. In Genesis 3 God issues his judgment on Adam's sin - and in verse 19, we find these words, *"By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread, till you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; for you are dust, and to dust you shall return."* In Psalm 90, Moses describes the same event in verse 3: *"You return man to dust and say, "Return, O children of man."* Then in verse 4, Moses says,

*"For a thousand years in your sight are but as yesterday when it is past, or as a watch in the night. You sweep them away as with a flood; they are like a dream, like grass that is renewed in the morning: in the morning it flourishes and is renewed; in the evening it fades and withers."* Here Moses reflects on the age of the patriarchs in Genesis 5. Before the flood, the great men of God lived to nearly 1000 years. Moses then recalls the flood of God's judgment that sweep away sinful humanity and then he speaks of the new creation that came on the other side of the flood. In this section of his prayer, Moses is telling us that when we look for refuge, we should remember the power of God to create and sustain the world. Such reflection on God's goodness in creation should bolster our confidence that God can take care of us. But we also we need to remember the opening pages of history that recalls God's judgment on humanity.

*For we are brought to an end by your anger; by your wrath we are dismayed. You have set our iniquities before you, our secret sins in the light of your presence. For all our days pass away under your wrath; we bring our years to an end like a sigh. 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. Who considers the power of your anger, and your wrath according to the fear of you?* Psalm 90:7-11

In this section of his prayer, Moses confesses he and we and everyone desperately need God – because we are all naturally born sinners. In Psalm 51:5 King David declared: *"Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin did my mother conceive me."* Here Moses reflects on his current condition under the wrath of God. This condition is one he shares with all humanity. Personally; Moses may be thinking in these verses of his own transgression against God in killing the Egyptian. Is this the *"secret sin"* disclosed by God's light (verse 8)? It seems likely, especially if these verses are written at a time when Moses is seventy or eighty years old (verse 10).

In context, these five verses begin and end with the wrath of God (verses 7 and 11). Wrath is also mentioned in the middle (verse 9). And even before these verses, the mention of the flood is an image based upon the historical example of God's judgment on sin. All in all, Moses's reflection on wrath is long and detailed. He looks deeply into this reality, and by it he gains a heart of wisdom. In this section Moses affirms that God is the Righteous Judge and righteous judgement means we will die. Death is not a benign certainty or a natural part of the world. Death is the judgment of God. Our sins, even when hidden, demand God's righteous response. And since Adam ate the forbidden fruit, death has been God's righteous judgment and all of God's created humanity live all their days before the wrath of God. This does not mean, that God does not extend incredible patience and mercy to mankind. Even vessels of wrath, whose sins are storing up God's judgment, receive much goodness from God. But the truth is - we enter the world as God's enemies and unless He intervenes and grants us life from above, we will continue to provoke Him to anger. Mankind does not go to the grave in strength. God requires from us the breath that he granted to us. Our lives are fragile and brief.

*"Who considers the power of your anger, and your wrath according to the fear of you?"* This question tells us that sober reflection about death produces God's wisdom. When our lives brush up against death, we often find new light to consider our lives. God's wrath, while frightful, should produce holy fear in us and holy fear is the beginning of wisdom. By contrast, our greatest stupidity comes from thinking we are invincible. Foolishness grows best in our minds when we trust in ourselves. Yet those who know and meditate on their own mortality, find God's wisdom. God's wisdom grows best in our hearts, when we know and embrace our weakness. It took 40 years of chasing sheep in the wilderness before Moses came to know his weakness. Crushed by decades of obscurity, Moses, the man mighty in word and mighty in deed, ultimately became the most humble man on earth. God's wrath, our weakness, obscurity, pain, suffering and death of the world are for the purposes of God.

In Isaiah 45:7-8 God declares: *"I form light and create darkness; I make well-being and create calamity; I am the LORD, who does all these things. Shower, O heavens, from above, and let the clouds rain down righteousness; let the earth open, that salvation and righteousness may bear fruit; let the earth cause them both to sprout; I the LORD have created it."*

Joseph Bayly and his wife lost three of their children – one at eighteen days (after surgery); another at five years (leukemia); a third at eighteen years (haemophilia after a sledding accident). In each case they prayed for God's intervention – and in each case each wave of death was followed by a giant wave of grief that pounded the shore of their lives. Yet Bayly and his wife remained steadfast in believing in God's goodness. Joseph knew that unlike today the attitude of New Testament Christians toward impending death was acceptance, not praying for deliverance. He wrote: "Yes, we are to pray for healing – but if such praying obscures the reality of heaven and its joyful prospect for the person who is ill, making it appear that only in prolongation of life on earth may satisfaction be found, it is less than Christian. . . . Our faith is to be in God, not in healing. Whether we live or die does not affect our bedrock faith in Jesus Christ. Remember that death, not healing, is what delivers us from pain and suffering. Healing is only temporary; heaven is forever." Pain, suffering and death of the world are for God purposes. It is the means by which we can learn to live every day for eternity.

*So teach us to number our days that we may get a heart of wisdom. Return, O LORD! How long? Have pity on your servants! Satisfy us in the morning with your steadfast love, that we may rejoice and be glad all our days. 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 be shown to your servants, and your glorious power to their children. Let the favour of the Lord our God be upon us, and establish the work of our hands upon us; yes, establish the work of our hands!* Psalms 90:12-17

Finally, after meditating on God as creator and judge, Moses's prayer comes to a time of petition in verses 12–17. Note here that Moses does not begin his prayer in Psalm 30 with petitions and requests for God. Rather, Moses first ponders who God truly is. Only after rooting his thoughts in God as creator and judge is he ready to seek God for His wisdom and mercy. This is what Moses does beginning in verse 12: *“So teach us to number our days that we may get a heart of wisdom.”* As natural born wanderers, we need God to *“teach us”* how make good use of our time here on earth. *“To number our days”* is not about time management; this is about *life* management - a *“heart of wisdom”* to live for God rather than ourselves. To *“number our days”* means seeing and using each day as a precious gift. If you only have \$100 to live on in the next month, you're careful about how you spend it. The same is true for our days on earth. How many days do we have? I checked two different websites that estimate the date of your death, and I got two different answers: March 18, 2059 and August 1, 2040. Well, none of us knows, but God knows. We are to live every day for eternity.

*“Satisfy us in the morning with your steadfast love, that we may rejoice and be glad all our days. Make us glad for as many days as you have afflicted us, and for as many years as we have seen evil.”* The *“steadfast love”* here is the same Hebrew word *khesed* – which is God's faithful, loyal love according to His covenantal promise. This is the unconditional love of God that does not change – in spite of what we think, say or do. This is the *“steadfast love”* of God that joyfully satisfies and then leads to the ultimate conviction that God is good, in spite of what happens - knowing God is continually correcting and restoring what was lost: *“glad for as many days as you have afflicted us.”*

*“Let your work be shown to your servants, and your glorious power to their children. Let the favour of the Lord our God be upon us, and establish the work of our hands upon us; yes, establish the work of our hands!”* Moses prays for God's work to be done through God's people and that *“their children”* would know the *“glorious power”* of God in the future. He also prays that God would bless the work of God's people – always acknowledging all good work comes from God. The prayer Moses is writing down here is a prayer to God asking that our work for God, our efforts for God – and would be beautiful, attractive and impressive as well as meaningful, enduring and *eternally significant*.

Pain, suffering and death are for God purposes. It is the means by which we can learn to live every day for eternity. When we surrender our lives to God, we will then receive the life of God – even in death! One of my favourite writers is N.D. Wilson. He speaks of this when he writes: *“We have been born into a grand story, a narrative written by God – and we have been given the freedom to live for God until the last page of the final chapter . . . There was a time when men and women understood death more fully, when mortality was never ignored. Men and women executed their endings better then. Some even planned for it – letters from the grave, long-winded last words like characters from Dickens. Those men, good and bad, heroes and villains, knew their final scenes would come, and they knew they would be *scenes*. They, like Solomon, knew that we are but a vapour, that we are here for but a little while. We must exit the stage, down through traps, and let others traipse and sing, love and lose, fight and struggle above us.”* But God is also there, shaping the story, off the stage and on the stage, closing a chapter as a turtle bounces, smiling while it does. To His eyes, you never leave the stage. You do not choose to exist. It is a chapter ending, an act, not the play itself. Look to Him. Walk to Him. The cocoon is a death, but not the final death. The coffin can be a tragedy, but not for long. . . . I will die, and when I do – whether it be in my bed as age creeps over me, or struck by lightning, a meteor or a UPS truck – when my body and soul find their divorce, His hand will be the one that cuts the thread and shows me the path He blazed through tragedy. His finger will point to the His parade.” In these strange and trying days of viral chaos, God is still at work, accomplishing his eternal plans. May we number our days and seek God's wisdom and trust His ways and live every day for eternity!