

Satisfy Us Even Though Life is Short

Psalm 90 (NIV)

A prayer of Moses the man of God. ¹ Lord, you have been our dwelling place throughout all generations. ² Before the mountains were born or you brought forth the whole world, from everlasting to everlasting you are God. ³ You turn people back to dust, saying, "Return to dust, you mortals." ⁴ A thousand years in your sight are like a day that has just gone by, or like a watch in the night. ⁵ Yet you sweep people away in the sleep of death—they are like the new grass of the morning: ⁶ In the morning it springs up new, but 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 Our days may come to seventy years, or eighty, if our strength endures; yet the best of them are but trouble and sorrow, for they quickly pass, and we fly away. ¹¹ If only we knew the power of your anger! Your wrath is as great as the fear that is your due. ¹² Teach us to number our days, that we may gain a heart of wisdom. ¹³ Relent, 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 splendor to their children. ¹⁷ May the favor of the Lord our God rest on us; establish the work of our hands for us— yes, establish the work of our hands.

Today we have entered 2017. Is that exciting for you? Are you chomping at the bit to start fresh with a new year full of new possibilities and new hopes and new dreams? Are you ready to leave 2016 behind as if that year was certainly not one of the best years of your life? Does it kind of bum you out that you are in a new year because 2016 was so good you didn't want it to end? Does it kind of bum you out that it's 2017 because another year has ticked by and you aren't getting any younger? Are you looking at me right now thinking, "Big deal, Pastor. This is just another day on the calendar. 2017 will be just like every other year. Why would it be any different. Nothing changes."? A new year gets us reflecting on the passing of time.

Psalm 90 was written by none other than Moses. We don't know at exactly what point in his life that he wrote this psalm, but we can tell that when he wrote it, he seemed to be noticing the very quick passage of time in his life. Nearly the entire first half of the psalm is about how fleeting human life is. "[The Lord turns] people back to dust, saying, 'Return to dust, you mortals.'" (verse 3) "You sweep people away in the sleep of death— they are like the new grass of the morning: In the morning it springs up new, but by evening it is dry and withered." (verses 5-6) Moses even says why our lives are cut short like that of grass: "We are consumed by your anger and terrified by your indignation." (verse 7) A graphic reminder to the fact that we die only because we have sinned, just as the curse was given to Adam after he had disobeyed God in the Garden of Eden. "Our days may come to seventy years, or eighty, if our strength endures; yet the best of them are but trouble and sorrow, for they quickly pass, and we fly away." (verse 10) Seventy or eighty years of life doesn't sound too bad, but once you get there, it seems all too short. You're here one day; gone the next. And even with those years given to us, the best of those years are still colored with trouble and sorrow. "All our days pass away under your wrath; we finish our years with a moan." (verse 9) A very depressing thought that we cannot pick the time or place or manner of our death. We may not go "with our boots on," so to speak. We might die with a groan, an exhausted and pained sigh, instead of a triumphant battle cry, going out in strength and power.

Moses lived to be 120 years old and died just before the Israelites entered the Promised Land. He had lived plenty of years, years beyond normal life expectancy at the time. He watched an entire generation of Israelites slowly die off during the 40 years of wandering in the wilderness because they had not trusted God, because they had complained against God. Their stubborn, rebellious hearts kept them from experiencing the joy of entering the Promised Land. Sadly, Moses knew he was going to suffer the same fate. Because he had not done what the Lord told him to do when providing water for the people, because he had rebelliously disobeyed God as the people did, God told him that he would never enter the Promised Land.

Maybe this is when Moses composed this prayer psalm as he was reflecting on all the years he spent leading God's people through the wilderness. That news of judgment would certainly make any one of us step back and examine our lives asking ourselves, "What will I leave behind?" "What was the point of all that I did?" "What is my reason for living?" "What am I accomplishing by continuing to do this?" "Will anything that I have done last for a future generation?"

Does a new year make you feel very mortal? Did things happen in 2016 that make you say today, "This is the year I get serious. I will make out my will and plan my funeral because I don't know when this will all come to an end. I don't know how much longer I am going to be here, and I want what I have done in this life to make a difference, to matter, after I'm gone."?

If we make an honest assessment of our lives, we know that there is an awful lot of things that we do that will not last. But at the same time we look for meaning in our lives by what we do. It's a conundrum. If most of what I will do will not last, then why really bother to do any of it? Give me a purpose. Give me a reason to live and keep going, God. Give me something meaningful to do.

Some of us find meaning in life through work, that the work I do impacts other people, that it's not just that I have to put in time to make a living, buy food, eat it, and then eventually die. What I do affects lives, brings joy to others, improves living. Some of us find meaning in our families, that time spent with our loved ones, investing that time in training the next generation of the world will result in better citizens, more productive workers, and a better world for the future of humankind.

We can find meaning for our lives in work and in family but only after we have the right priority in our lives. The very first thing we need to have in order to find meaning in our lives by what we do is to see who God is and what he has done for us. "Lord, you have been our dwelling place throughout all generations," Moses prays. (verse 1) Is the Lord your dwelling place? Is he the one whom you reside in, your home base? Was he in 2016? Are you planning on making him your dwelling place in 2017? Do you thank him for each day that you wake up and take a breath? Before you go to bed at night, do you thank him for the home you live in, the bed you sleep in, the people that he has put in your life? Do you thank him each day for what he has done for you? If not, is God really your dwelling place? It's something that we all need to examine because if God is not our dwelling place, then nothing we do will last. Life will be just doing a bunch of stuff and then we die. If God is not our dwelling place, we will finish your years with a moan, with a sigh.

We see life as Moses did. Our years on this earth are short. We die because of sins. We die because of the blatant things that we did wrong. We die because God has brought to light our secret sins. There is nothing about our lives that we can hide from him no matter how many times we lie to ourselves or how many resolutions we make trying to do good and leave behind a lasting legacy to make the world a better place. We know that because we have sinned, whether openly or secretly, God is angry with me, with us. He must punish sin and the sinner. That impending judgment weighs over our heads, and we cry out to him like Moses, "Relent, LORD! ... Have compassion on your servants." (verse 13)

God is our only chance to have lasting meaning in this world. That's why we pray like Moses, "Satisfy us in the morning with your unfailing love, that we may sing for joy and be glad all our days." (verse 14) Change all our days of toiling, God, all these days of trouble and sorrow, all these days when we have been afflicted by other people, and give us instead days of joy and happiness and gladness.

When God is our dwelling place, he indeed satisfies us with his unfailing love. When he is our priority in life, that everything we do we do because we know the love of God, that he gave his one and only Son to live for us and die for us and was raised from the dead for us, then we see the full extent of his unfailing love. What's more is that this love is unfailing. From everlasting to everlasting, he is our God. He does not change. He keeps his promises. He always makes good on his Word. And if his Word said that he loves us in spite of our iniquities, in spite of our secret sins that his law has brought to light, then he does. Then he does have compassion on us. Then he has shown us his deeds of love so that we know that we are saved.

Knowing what God has done for us, knowing that he is our dwelling place from generation to generation and from everlasting to everlasting, our attitude toward the work of our hands changes. Whatever we do now, we do as a work in service to our unchangeable God. Whatever little task we do at work using the talents that God has given us, he recognizes that as a good deed before him. Whenever we put our time into our family teaching them about our unchangeable God and the compassion that he has had for us through Jesus Christ our Lord and Savior, we are giving to our children a gift that will last long beyond their earthly lives, the gift of eternal salvation. This is a work that God establishes for us, a work that lasts, a meaning for what we do in this life.

If you came today yearning for a clean slate in 2017, you have it. The LORD has relented. He has had compassion on you. By the gift of the Christ Child at Christmas he has given you a life to look forward to, a life in heaven, a life where you will be glad for many more years than you have ever had of trouble. Because God is our dwelling place, because we put our trust in him and make him our priority, we will be glad forever.

No matter how many years we live, no matter how much time passes during our lives, our God stays the same. His compassion for us remains the same. His faithful love never fails us. We are freed to work for God. We can share with others the great things he has done. We are the instrument to show God's splendor to our children and, God-willing, to our children's children. We can pass on the God who is our dwelling place from everlasting to everlasting. "May the favor of the Lord our God rest on us; establish the work of our hands for us— yes, establish the work of our hands." (verse 17) May we share the compassionate and ever-loving God for many years to come, a God who makes the work of our lives worthwhile as we share him with others. Amen.