

## Life is Short. Serve God Now.

From John Calvin, *Commentary on the Book of Psalms*,  
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### Psalm 90:3-8

3. You shall turn man to destruction, and shall say, Return, you sons of Adam.
4. For a thousand years in Your sight are as yesterday when it is gone, and as a watch in the night.
5. You carry them away as with a flood, they will be asleep; in the morning he shall grow as grass:
6. In the morning it shall flourish and grow; at the evening it shall be cut down, and shall wither.
7. For we fail by Your anger, and are affrighted by Your indignation.
8. You have set our iniquities before You, and our secret sins in the light of Your countenance.

### *The brevity of human life*

3. *You shall turn man to destruction.* Moses, in the first place, mentions **how frail and transitory is the life of man**, and bewails its miseries. This he does, not for the purpose of quarrelling with God, but as an argument to induce Him the more readily to exercise His mercy, even as He is elsewhere said to pardon mortal men, when He considers of what they are made, and remembers that they are but dust and grass (Psalm 103:14).

He compares the course of our life to a ring or circle, because God, placing us on the earth, turns us about within a narrow circuit, and when we have reached the last point, draws us back to Himself in a moment. . . . We have here laid down **a simple definition of our life**, that it is, as it were, **a short revolution in which we quickly complete our circle**, the last point of which is the termination of our earthly course.

This account of human life sets in a clearer light the gracious manner in which God deals with His servants, in adopting them to be His peculiar people, that He may at length gather them together into His everlasting inheritance. Nor is it in vain that it is added, by way of contrast (verse 4) *that a thousand years in God's sight are as yesterday*. **Although we are convinced from experience that men, when they have completed their circle, are at once taken out of the world, yet the knowledge of this frailty fails in making a deep impression on our hearts, because we do not lift our eyes above the world.**

***Men foolishly believe they will live forever and allow the cares of this life to crowd out all thoughts of God and eternity.***

From where proceeds the great stupidity of men, who, bound fast to the present state of existence, proceed in the affairs of life as if they were to live two thousand years, but because they do not elevate their conceptions above visible objects? **Each man, when he compares himself with others, flatters himself that he will live to a great age.** In short, men are so dull as to think that thirty years, or even a smaller number, are, as it

were, an eternity; nor are they impressed with the brevity of their life so long as this world keeps possession of their thoughts.

This is the reason why **Moses awakens us by elevating our minds to the eternity of God, without the consideration of which we do not perceive how speedily our life vanishes away.** The imagination that we shall have a long life, resembles a profound sleep in which we are all benumbed, until meditation upon the heavenly life swallows up this foolish fancy respecting the length of our continuance on earth.

As men are thus blinded, Moses sets before their view God as their judge. *O Lord!* as if he had said, if men would properly reflect upon that eternity from which You behold these inconstant circlings of the world, they would not make so great account of the present life. But as, instead of seriously considering what is true duration, they rather willfully turn away their eyes from heaven, this explains why they are so stupid, and look on one day as if it were a hundred years. . . .

This text is quoted by the Apostle Peter in a sense somewhat different (2 Peter 3:8) while at the same time he does not pervert it, for he aptly and judiciously applies the testimony of Moses in illustration of the subject of which he is there treating. The design of Moses is to elevate the minds of men to heaven by withdrawing them from their own gross conceptions. And what is the object of Peter? As many, because Christ does not hasten His coming according to their desire, cast off the hope of the resurrection through the weariness of long delay, he corrects this preposterous impatience by a very suitable remedy. He perceives men's faith in the Divine promises fainting and failing, from their thinking that Christ delays His coming too long. From where does this proceed, but because they grovel upon the earth? Peter therefore appropriately applies these words of Moses to cure this vice.

**As the indulgence in pleasures to which unbelievers yield themselves is to be traced to this, that having their hearts too much set upon the world, they do not taste the pleasures of a celestial eternity;** so impatience proceeds from the same source. Hence we learn the true use of this doctrine.

To what is it owing that we have so great anxiety about our life, that nothing suffices us, and that we are continually disturbing ourselves, but because we foolishly imagine that we shall nestle in this world forever? Again, to what are we to ascribe that extreme fretfulness and impatience, which make our hearts fail in waiting for the coming of Christ, but to their groveling upon the earth? Let us learn then not to judge according to the understanding of the flesh, but to depend upon the judgment of God; and **let us elevate our minds by faith, even to His heavenly throne, from which He declares that this earthly life is nothing.**

Nor does Moses simply contrast a thousand years with one day, but he contrasts them with *yesterday*, which is already gone; for whatever is still before our eyes has a hold on our minds, but we are less affected with the recollection of what is past.

In regard to the word *watch*, the ancients, as is well known, were accustomed to divide the night into four watches, consisting of three hours each. To express still more forcibly how inconsiderable that which appears to us a long period is in God's eyes, this similitude is added, That a thousand years in His sight differ nothing from three hours of the night, in which men scarcely know whether they are awake or asleep.

5. *You carry them away as with a flood.* Moses confirms what he had previously said, That men, so long as they are sojourners in this world, perform, as it were, a revolution which lasts only for a moment. I do not limit the expression to *carry away as with a flood* to calamities of a more grievous kind, but consider that **death is simply compared in general to a flood; for when we have stayed a little while in the world, we at once fall into the grave and are covered with earth.** Thus death, which is common to all, is with propriety called *an inundation*. While we are breathing the breath of life, the Lord overflows us by death, just as those who perish in a shipwreck are engulfed in the ocean; so that death may be fitly called an invisible deluge.

And Moses affirms, that it is then evidently seen that men who flatter themselves that they are possessed of wonderful vigor in their earthly course, are only as asleep. The comparison of *grass* which is added, amounts to this, That men come forth in the morning as grass springs up, that they become green, or pass away within a short time, when being cut down, they wither and decay. . . .

This doctrine requires to be continually meditated upon; for although we all confess that nothing is more transitory than our life, yet each of us is soon carried away, as it were, by a frantic impulse to picture to his own imagination an earthly immortality.

**Whoever bears in mind that he is mortal, restrains himself,** that instead of having his attention and affections engrossed beyond measure with earthly objects, he may advance with haste to his mark. When we set no limit to our cares, we require to be urged forward by continual goadings, **that we may not dream of a thousand lives instead of one, which is but as a shadow that quickly vanishes away.**

7. *For we fail by Your anger.* Moses makes mention of the anger of God advisedly; for it is necessary that men be touched with the feeling of this, in order to their considering in good earnest, what experience constrains them to acknowledge, how soon they finish their course and pass away.

He had, however, still another reason for joining together **the brevity of human life** and **the anger of God.** While men are by nature so transitory, and, as it were, shadowy, the Israelites were afflicted by the hostile hand of God; and His anger is less supportable by our frail natures, which speedily vanish away, than it would be were we furnished with some tolerable degree of strength.

8. *You have set our iniquities before You.* To show that by this complaint he is far from intending to murmur against God, he asserts that the Divine anger, however terrible it had been, was just, inasmuch as the people had provoked it by their iniquities; for those who, when stricken by the Divine hand, are not brought to genuine humiliation, harden themselves more and more. **The true way to profit, and also to subdue our pride, is to feel that He is a righteous judge.**

Accordingly Moses, after having briefly taught that men by nature vanish away like smoke, gathers from this that it is not to be wondered at if God exanimates [bursts forth] and consumes those whom He pursues with His wrath. The manner of the expression by which God is described as showing the tokens of His anger is to be observed—*He sets*

*the iniquities of men before His eyes.* Hence it follows, that **whatever intermission of punishment we experience ought in justice to be ascribed to the forbearance of God, who buries our sins that he may spare us.**

. . . [The contrast between *our secret sins* and *the light of God's countenance*] implies that men hide themselves in darkness, and wrap themselves in many deceits, so long as God does not shine on them with the light of His judgment; whereas, when He draws them back from their subterfuges, by which they endeavor to escape from Him, and sets before His eyes the sins which they hide by hypocrisy, being subdued by fear and dread, they are brought sincerely to humble themselves before Him.

#### **PSALM 90:9-10**

**9.** For all our days are passed away in Your indignation; we have spent our years as it were a thought.

**10.** In the days of our years there are seventy; and if through strength they are eighty years, yet is their pride but labor and grief; for it swiftly passes by, and we fly away.

**9.** *For all our days are passed away in Your indignation.* . . . [In] my opinion Moses . . . amplifies what he has said above concerning **the rigor of God's wrath**, and His strict examination of every case in which He punishes sin. He asserts that this terror which God brought on His people was not only for a short time, but that it was extended without intermission even to death.

He complains that the Jews had almost wasted away by continual miseries; because God neither remitted nor mitigated His anger. It is therefore not surprising to find Him declaring that their years passed away like a *thought*, when God's anger rested on them so unremittingly.

***Life is very short. Historically, on average, people live about 70 years or up to 80.***

**10.** *In the days of our years there are seventy.* He again returns to the general doctrine respecting **the precariousness of the condition of men**, although God may not openly display His wrath to terrify them. "What," says he, "is the duration of life? Truly, if we reckon all our years, we will at length come to seventy, or, if there be some who are stronger and more vigorous, they will bring us even to eighty."

Moses uses the expression, *the days of our years*, for the sake of emphasis; for when the time is divided into small portions, the very number itself deceives us, so that **we flatter ourselves that life is long**. With the view of overthrowing these vain delusions, he permits men to sum up the many thousand days which are in a few years; while he at the same time affirms that this great heap is soon brought to nothing. Let men then extend the space of their life as much as they please, by calculating that each year contains three hundred and sixty-five days; yet assuredly they will find that the term of seventy years is short. When they have made a lengthened calculation of the days, this is the sum in which the process ultimately results. He who has reached the age of eighty years hastens to the grave.

Moses himself lived longer (Deuteronomy 34:7) and so perhaps did others in his time; but he speaks here of the ordinary term. And even then, those were accounted old men, and in a manner decrepit, who attained to the age of eighty years; so that he justly declares that it is the robust only who arrive at that age.

***Life is difficult, even for young people.***

He puts *pride for the strength or excellence* of which men boast so highly. The sense is, that **before men decline and come to old age, even in the very bloom of youth they are involved in many troubles, and that they cannot escape from the cares, weariness, sorrows, fears, griefs, inconveniences, and anxieties, to which this mortal life is subject.**

Moreover, this is to be referred to the whole course of our existence in the present state. And assuredly, **he who considers what is the condition of our life from our infancy until we descend into the grave, will find troubles and turmoil in every part of it.** . . . [The words] *inconveniences* and *afflictions* [or “labor and grief” imply] that the life of man is full of labor, and fraught with many torments, and that even at the time when men are in the height of their pride.

The reason which is added, *for it swiftly passes by, and we fly away*, seems hardly to suit the scope of the passage; for felicity [happiness] may be brief, and yet on that account it does not cease to be felicity. But Moses means that men foolishly glory in their excellence, since, whether they will or not, they are constrained to look to the time to come. **And as soon as they open their eyes, they see that they are dragged and carried forward to death with rapid haste, and that their excellence is every moment vanishing.**

**PSALM 90:11-12**

**11.** Who knows the power of Your anger? and according to Your fear, so is Your wrath.

**12.** Teach us so to number our days, and we shall apply our hearts to wisdom.

***God’s anger and wrath should make us very humble.***

**11.** *Who knows the power of Your anger?* . . . The meaning . . . is that while God hides Himself, and, so to speak, dissembles His displeasure, men are inflated with pride, and rush upon sin with reckless impetuosity; but when they are compelled to feel how dreadful His wrath is, they forget their loftiness, and are reduced to nothing.

What follows, *According to thy fear, so is thy wrath*, is commonly explained as denoting that the more a man is inspired with reverence towards God, the more severely and sternly is he commonly dealt with; for “judgment begins at the house of God” (1 Peter 4:17). While He pampers the reprobate with the good things of this life, He wastes His chosen ones with continual troubles; and in short, “whom He loves He chastens” (Hebrews 12:6). **It is then a true and profitable doctrine that He deals more roughly with those who serve Him than with the reprobate.**

But Moses, I think, has here a different meaning, which is, that **it is a holy awe of God, and that alone, which makes us truly and deeply feel His anger.** We see that the reprobate, although they are severely punished, only chafe on the bit, or kick against God, or become exasperated, or are stupefied, as if they were hardened against all calamities; so far are they from being subdued. And though they are full of trouble, and cry aloud, yet the Divine anger does not so penetrate their hearts as to abate their pride and fierceness.

**The minds of the godly alone are wounded with the wrath of God;** nor do they wait for His thunderbolts, to which the reprobate hold out their hard and iron necks, but **they tremble the very moment when God moves only His little finger.** This I consider to be the true meaning of the prophet.

He had said that the human mind could not sufficiently comprehend the dreadfulness of the Divine wrath. And we see how, although God shakes heaven and earth, many notwithstanding, like the giants of old, treat this with derision, and are actuated by such brutish arrogance, that they despise Him when He brandishes His bolts. But as the Psalmist is treating of a doctrine which properly belongs to **true believers**, he affirms that they **have a strongly sensitive feeling of the wrath of God which makes them quietly submit themselves to His authority.**

Although to the wicked their own conscience is a tormentor which does not suffer them to enjoy rest, yet so far is this secret dread from teaching them to humble themselves, that it excites them to clamor against God with increasing frowardness [the state of being stubbornly contrary and disobedient; obstinate].

In short, **the faithful alone are sensible of God's wrath; and being subdued by it, they acknowledge that they are nothing, and with true humility devote themselves wholly to Him.** This is wisdom to which the reprobate cannot attain, because they cannot lay aside the pride with which they are inflated. They are not touched with the feeling of God's wrath, because they do not stand in awe of Him.

**12. Teach us so to number our days.** Some translate *to the number of our days*, which gives the same sense. As Moses perceived that what he had up until now taught is not comprehended by the understandings of men until God shine upon them by His Spirit, he now sets himself to prayer. It indeed seems at first sight absurd to pray that we may know the number of our years. What? since even the strongest scarcely reach the age of eighty years, is there any difficulty in reckoning up so small a sum?

Children learn numbers as soon as they begin to prattle; and we do not need a teacher in arithmetic to enable us to count the length of a hundred on our fingers. **So much the fouler and more shameful is our stupidity in never comprehending the short term of our life.** Even he who is most skillful in arithmetic, and who can precisely and accurately understand and investigate millions of millions, is nevertheless unable to count eighty years in his own life.

***How pathetic it is that men and women can excel in mathematics and science—studying geometry, astronomy, engineering, but they cannot measure the days of their own life!***

It is surely a monstrous thing that men can measure all distances outside of themselves, that they know how many feet the moon is distant from the center of the earth, what space there is between the different planets; and, in short, that they can measure all the dimensions both of heaven and earth; while yet they cannot number seventy years in their own case. It is therefore evident that Moses had good reason to beseech God for ability to perform what requires a wisdom which is very rare among mankind.

### ***The purpose of life for Christians***

The last clause of the verse is also worthy of special notice. By it he teaches us that **we then truly apply our hearts to wisdom when we comprehend the shortness of human life.**

What can be a greater proof of madness than to ramble about without proposing to one's self any end?

**True believers alone, who know the difference between this transitory state and a blessed eternity, for which they were created, know what ought to be the aim of their life.**

No man then can regulate his life with a settled mind, but he who, knowing the end of it, that is to say death itself, is led to consider the great purpose of man's existence in this world, that he may aspire after the prize of the heavenly calling.

"Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter: Fear God and keep His commandments, For this is man's all." (Ecclesiastes 12:13; cf. Matthew 28:20).

"Therefore we make it our aim, whether present or absent, to be well pleasing to Him" (2 Corinthians 5:9).