

New Year's Eve 2018

Hymns: 69 - 71 - 70 - 75 v1,4 (441 in place of Psalm)

Order: Evening Prayer

*This is a day and year the Lord has made. Let us rejoice  
and be glad in them! Amen!*

PSALM 90

***TEACH US TO NUMBER OUR DAYS!***

Dear fellow survivors of 2018,

Just a few weeks ago, I couldn't be so sure I would survive to see 2019. In fact, a few days into my hospital stay, I experienced a brief break from my coughing and wheezing. Out of the silence came a "dong," followed by several seconds of silence and then another "dong." It reminded me of the bell tolling they do back at St. Peter's in Helenville, Wisconsin, where I served in the 1990s. The church stands high on a hill overlooking the countryside, and its bell can be heard for miles. The death of a member is announced within hours by the tolling of the church bell, one time for each year of the person's age. The tolling was done in groups of ten tolls. When I heard that "dong," coming from where I knew not, I rallied my strength to call my wife and asked her to hurry back from our house. At 3pm, Tuesday, December 12<sup>th</sup>, I had to wonder if from somewhere there might be tolling for me. I wasn't in a panic. In fact, as miserable as I felt, death almost seemed welcomed. I just wanted my wife by my side.

Turns out the dong came from some machine in the nurses' station circle outside my hospital room. Well, a quart of fluid off my left lung, nine days in the hospital, and some fifteen pounds lighter, I stand with you at the threshold of a new year. We just don't know how long our Lord will delay before coming for any of us. This congregation too has members not all that far from one hundred years old. If a hundred years sounds old, how about some 3,400 years old?! That's how old this Psalm 90 is. It probably is the oldest psalm of all. It was written by Moses. Don't let the number 90 fool you! The psalms are not in chronological order. Psalm 90 actually starts the third of five sections of the psalms. Moses and Israel's experiences in the wilderness are mentioned frequently in this section. Psalms 95, 99, 103, and 106 all refer to Moses or the wilderness experience.

A psalm reflecting on death was a fitting subject for Moses because death as a judgment of God was experienced in very dramatic ways during the wilderness years. Virtually all of the adults who came out of Egyptian slavery died during the forty years in the wilderness— the youngest of them age 60 or so. As the forty years came to an end, Moses himself was facing death outside the promised land because of his disobedience to God. Psalm 106, the concluding book of this section of psalms, sounds the same solemn note of judgment which is found in Psalm 90.

Psalm 90 focuses on death as a judgment upon sin, but it also points to the Lord as the One Whose power extends beyond death. For this reason Psalm 90 is one of the psalms most frequently heard at funerals. Because it

rejoices in God's timelessness, we often hear it on New Year's Eve – this year as our sermon text! In the place of a psalm singing this evening, we sang Isaac Watts' well-known hymn, "O God, Our Help in Ages Past." That hymn is based on this psalm.

The REAL cause of death is not simply natural weakness, sickness, or human violence. All of these may be secondary causes, but the real cause of death is God's judgment against sin. God did not create man to die, but death has become our sentence. God had lovingly warned Adam that the consequences of disobedience would be death. Nevertheless, Adam and Eve disobeyed God, and so death came to them and to all of their descendants. *The wages of sin is death!* (Romans 6:23). Physical death is the separation of body and soul. God returns the body to the ground from which He created it, and the soul returns to God Who made it.

*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 of the morning –*

*6) Though in the morning it springs up new, by evening it is dry and withered.*

*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.*

Because of sin the lifespan of human beings is short. Seventy or eighty years are not a long time. Moses himself was granted another forty years after reaching the age of eighty, for the leading of Israel in the wilderness. Even then, Moses was quite the exception. The last chapter of Deuteronomy tells us "*Moses was a hundred and twenty years old when he died, yet his eyes were not weak nor his strength gone.*" God can make exceptions to His own rules. He obviously wanted Moses to serve Him in the people of Israel all the years in the wilderness, and to be able to do it in good physical health. Yet read how his life was troubled from infancy in a Nile River basket, to hassles with the children of Israel he led.

Because of sin, your life and my life are troubled. The sorrows and difficulties which sin has introduced into the world fill the whole span of our lives. We Christians are given the spiritual insight to understand that the evils of life are to serve as a daily reminder of the seriousness of sin and the greatness of God's anger against sin. Non-Christians may shake their fists against the sky and demand answer to their "Why!?" Many people try to suppress acceptance that sin is a major part of human life – all of our lives. But even when they push God's Word aside, the natural knowledge of God and His laws brings feelings of guilt to the surface again and again.

The result is that fear of death is natural to all people. The inescapable sense of guilt and persistent reminders of

God's wrath leave sinners with no escape. To many, God's wrath against sin seems unreasonable and excessive. But no one in this life knows the full wrath of God. Only hell will reveal it! God's wrath against sin is proportionate to the seriousness of sin. Sin is an offense against a limitless, holy God. Sin therefore deserves limitless punishment. For the guilty sinner there is no escape. This is how Moses expresses it:

*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....*

*11) Who knows the power of Your anger?*

*For Your wrath is as great as the fear that is due You.*

God hates sin. He cannot tolerate it..... But He also loves humankind whom He created in His own image. So He dealt with our sin. God so loved the world that He gave us His Son into this world, as we have just celebrated with another Christmas. The boy Jesus grew in wisdom and stature and in favor with God and man. "This is My Son, Whom I love!" the Father announced at Jesus' Baptism. But then a few years later the Father placed our sins on Jesus, and turned His back on the beloved Son as Jesus took the punishment for our sins upon Himself.....and died – that we might live now and forever with our eternal Lord!

The opening verses of the psalm had proclaimed the eternity of God so that it might be contrasted with the mortality of mankind – that mortality to be emphasized later in the psalm. Moses is not interested in a philosophical discussion of God being eternal, but in the practical application of God being eternal. Moses begins and ends the psalm with the assertion that the Lord is OUR God! The eternal nature of God is not simply described as the opposite of our mortality – it is proclaimed as the answer to our mortality! Since God is immortal and eternal, He can be a “dwelling place” for His people throughout all generations.

God’s eternalness is not just endless time, but independence from time! For God a day is like a thousand years and a thousand years are like a day. Though we may suffer change and decay, God remains unchanged. Before the earth was created, as long as it endures, and after it is gone, God is always the same. Thank God!

Moses’ closing prayer contains two main elements. The first is a plea for understanding and wisdom:

*12) Teach us to number our days aright, that we may gain a heart of wisdom....*

As we daily observe death all around us, we are warned to make the most of this time of grace which God has given us, since death is inevitable. We are warned against being like the rich fool who accumulated treasure on earth, but forgot about the needs of his soul. Since we have only one life and that one life is short, we should use it to gain the wisdom which comes from God. That wisdom is the

message of the Gospel of Jesus Christ through which we gain forgiveness of sins and salvation.

The second part of the prayer is a plea for mercy:

*13) 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 splendor to their children.*

*17) May the favor of the Lord our God rest on upon us – Establish the work of our hands for us – Yes, establish the work of our hands.*

We do not deserve to have our lives prolonged, but we pray that God would give us the time and the wisdom to serve Him faithfully on this earth. Such labor brings joy to all the days of our lives, even to life under the burden of sin. Only the labor that we do for the Gospel can produce fruits which will endure into eternity. We pray that God will establish and bless our labors for the Gospel so that they will bear fruit for us, for our children, and for others – now and forever!

Make Moses' psalm your heart felt prayer this night as another year of grace lies before you! Amen!

Our meditation this evening ends in looping us around back to the beginning of this Psalm 90:

- 1) *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! Amen!*