

God's Great Ballad | The Flow of the Psalms

Memento Mori

Psalm 90 (Maturation)

7.19.20

(A Prayer of Moses, the man of God) Lord, You have been our dwelling place in all generations. ² Before the mountains were born Or You gave birth to the earth and the world, even from everlasting to everlasting, You are God.

³ You turn man back into dust and say, "Return, O children of men." ⁴ For a thousand years in Your sight are like yesterday when it passes by, or as a watch in the night. ⁵ You have swept them away like a flood, they fall asleep; In the morning they are like grass which sprouts anew. ⁶ In the morning it flourishes and sprouts anew; Toward evening it fades and withers away.

⁷ For we have been consumed by Your anger and by Your wrath we have been dismayed. ⁸ You have placed our iniquities before You, Our secret sins in the light of Your presence. ⁹ For all our days have declined in Your fury; We have finished our years like a sigh. ¹⁰ As for the days of our life, they contain seventy years, Or if due to strength, eighty years, Yet their pride is but labor and sorrow; For soon it is gone and we fly away. ¹¹ Who understands the power of Your anger and Your fury, according to the fear that is due You? ¹² So teach us to number our days, that we may present to You a heart of wisdom.

¹³ Do return, O LORD; how long will it be? And be sorry for Your servants. ¹⁴ O satisfy us in the morning with Your lovingkindness, that we may sing for joy and be glad all our days. ¹⁵ Make us glad according to the days You have afflicted us, and the years we have seen evil. ¹⁶ Let Your work appear to Your servants and Your majesty to their children. ¹⁷ Let the favor of the Lord our God be upon us; and confirm for us the work of our hands; Yes, confirm the work of our hands.

We're looking at the Book of Psalms...with a stress on how the book is organized, the themes of the FIVE BOOKS in the whole collection.

Our friend, theologian, O. Palmer Robertson contends that the five books have five cohesive motifs/subjects. We finished Book Three last week, with the theme of Devastation (Israel was taken into exile by Babylon) and then THIS WEEK: MATURATION.

When they returned to Jerusalem, the Israelites were changed. The experience of suffering, the sight of the fallen Temple, the 70 years captivity in which they were to pray for and serve Babylon – and then they return to rebuild the walls and to resurrect the Temple – that experience tempered the Israelites. They matured under God's guidance.

And this FOURTH Book tells that part of the story – the theme of MATURATION – the Israelites are growing up. The exile didn't destroy them after all.

This is the only Psalm attributed to Moses, “the man of God” (“God’s man”). It uses the style and vocabulary of Deuteronomy CH 32-33 at the end of Moses’ life when he himself had been matured/changed by God.

It reflects on TIME... the passing of time. It’s a prayer and meditation on change... Time waits for no one and time takes a toll on us... changes us and eventually takes everything from us...and then we die.

How are we to think and respond to this fact of life, that time marches on (without our permission!) and “The train it won't stop going/No way to slow down” (Jethro Tull, “Locomotive Breath”).

- 1) **How do we normally face time/change/death?**
- 2) **A New Way to face time/change/death and**
- 3) **How to Practice this New Way**

How do you do with change? Some people seem to crave it – often changing jobs, locations, friends. But what about change you can’t control?

And what about those unwelcomed changes that come with the passing of time – how do you do with those changes? And we could talk about “fight, flight or freeze” but when it comes to time all these strategies are basically forms of denial because time is relentless and no one escapes its ravages and consequences.

A Pulitzer Prize winning book (that I simply MUST bring up at least once a year) a wonderful and terrible book called ***The Denial of Death*** by Ernest Becker. It was published in 1973. It won the prize in 1974 but before he could receive the prize, Ernest Becker died. And the premise of the book is that we are in some ways like angels (i.e. we have these powers of sublime thought and creativity and reflection) and in some ways we’re like animals. We have all these ... fluids... and these bodily functions... and we depend on food (like all the animals) and we put food IN... and some time later it comes OUT (are you following me?)

And at some point – at around 18 months of age, we become horrified that the digested food comes out. DEATH COMES OUT OF US...like animals.

The problem is... we can reflect on it. We’re like angels. We write poetry and (like the Psalms!) and we are self-conscious about death. We see it come out of us... and we know death is coming for us.

And his point is – this is so utterly horrifying to think that we will die, that we will be eaten by worms... that if you really think about it: you'll lose your sanity. So, the key to getting on with life is to deny death. And we all learn ways, defense mechanisms, so we can deny, ignore, forget, divert our attention from this horrific, tragic idea that WE WILL DIE... and if we get the luxury of a death-bed...we will think, "Wow! Where did the time go?"

To be psychologically healthy then you have to fool yourself into forgetting about your mortality. Some do it by obsessing on safety measures (we lie to ourselves that we can cheat death by security systems) or we turn exercise into a religion. We stay "forever young" (Dylan) in all the ways that we do.

Or we use diversions like hobbies or drugs or alcohol or food – to divert our attention from what we know is inevitable but is just too terribly painful to consider. Time will change us and our bodies (and all our fluids) will soon (70 – 80, maybe even 100 years) but in the scope of things our lives are just a one tick of the second hand of the universe...a vapor... and then we're gone.

And Moses is thinking of this... at the end of his own long life (which now doesn't seem so long – where DID the time go?) See vv. 3-6? "You turn man back into dust... v. 5 "You have swept them away like a flood... they fall asleep... like grass in the desert – it lives for a few hours, fades and withers away."

And, Moses connects the brevity of life and the horror of death with God's anger against sin.

Moses lived with this people who promised to trust God... but they did not. God had been to them a dwelling place (last week) as in v. 1 – He had done miraculous things for them and they should see His goodness and His loving intentions but they DID NOT TRUST HIM.

And Moses had seen a whole generation... people who treated God like He was deceitful/mean. They treated God like He was an evil man. They thought and acted like the One True and Living God of Abraham was just like the synthetic gods of Egypt... again and again, He showed them that He was unique, holy, one-of-a-kind – He proved it.

But they would not trust Him. And they all died in the wilderness...a whole generation. How many funerals had Moses attended (Aaron (Num 33) /Miriam (Num 20))?

No wonder this Psalm seems a little dark.

I think also of that one funeral... that Jesus Christ attended. He seems totally oblivious/unafraid of the passing of time. He hears that His good friend Lazarus is dying and He meanders back the long way. By the time He arrives, Lazarus is already in the tomb...dead four days.

He meets the two sisters and they both (in turn) complain, "What took You so long?! If You had only been here our brother would be alive."

He sees the toll that time, change and death is taking on them. He asks, "'Where have you laid him?' They said to Him, 'Lord, come and see.'"

And then (you know) that shortest verse in the entire Bible "Jesus wept." (John 11.35)

And why... why did Jesus weep? Was it (as the leaders said) because He loved the man? Was it because the sisters' anguish GOT to Him? Was it because the phrase, "It's too late!?" That phrase did NOT apply to Him and NOW He saw people living ...bound...trapped by time, change and death and He knew, like Moses knew, that SIN was to blame.

Maybe, "Jesus wept" because the whole human condition was now before Him... (what Ernest Becker saw – the Denial of Death is futile).

And Jesus saw that His brothers and sisters simply could NOT deny it. Eventually it comes for all of us. And the only way we could be saved from sin, death, change, time was for Him to trade places with Lazarus. He would have to go INTO the tomb... if Lazarus and His other friends would be saved from it.

And now it was all up close and personal IT ALL BECAME VERY CLEAR THAT THIS IS WHY HE CAME. And Jesus wept.

As Moses, in today's Psalm, as he reminded himself of the whole big story...the God who wants to be our dwelling place; the God who is Creator, who birthed the mountains, the earth, the world; the everlasting God who is NOT subject to time, to change, to death; the absolutely Holy God who hates sin with a holy hatred. AND human beings who from the time of our first disobedience just can't stop sinning... and ALL those sad funerals.

And as Moses reflects on all the sin and resultant death he's seen – the horror/tragedy and grief of the human condition – God's man calls on the LORD of the Covenant, vv.13-14 "Return, O LORD; how long will it be? And be sorry for Your servants. O satisfy us in the morning with Your lovingkindness, that we may sing for joy and be glad all our days."

And in the fullness of time, the LORD of the Covenant answers: in Jesus Christ He deals with this unspeakable horror... the Creator God, the Covenant LORD, the Redeemer comes... He embodies lovingkindness/HESED (God's loyalty to His promise) He stands outside that tomb and "Jesus wept".

HE DOESN'T DENY DEATH... He weeps over it and then – NOT BY BEING NICE...not by lowering God's standards/justice or by abolishing the Law and our debt but by fulfilling the Law and

paying the debt, Jesus Christ takes hold of time, change, sin and death AND HE DEALS WITH THEM. He conquers and subdues them – He’s the Potentate of Time. The phrase, “It’s too late” doesn’t apply to Him.

And after living the perfect life (keeping the Law as it was intended to be kept... always sincerely and joyfully) and then paying the penalty for those who broke the Law and dying under the crushing weight of justice (answering the question posed in v. 11, “Who understands the power of Your anger and Your fury?” (Only Jesus understands!)

THEN, He sleeps in the womb of the earth...and emerges three days later... alive and glorious.

He obeyed the Law for me (as if I myself did it) ...He pays for my sins (so that nothing remains of the debt)

He Himself is flawless in His love for God and man – innocent and good in every way so DEATH HAS NO CLAIM ON HIM – death cannot hold him and He rises from the Tomb (to satisfy us in the morning with His hesed/grace).

He even defeats our great enemy – the power behind the Pharaoh who held Moses and the Israelites in slavery – it’s said of this enemy – “that through death (Jesus Christ) might render powerless him who had the power of death, that is, the devil, and might free those who through fear of death were subject to slavery all their lives. (Heb 2:14-15)

See the fear of death is the root of all fears; it drives people to live in slavery/denial...and to think, say and do what’s destructive and empty and always disappointing in the end.

Now let me end by suggesting how the Gospel helps us to face death, how to practice this New Way and the Difference It Makes.

For all that we’ve said about death this morning, did you notice the word NEVER occurs in the Psalm? Moses only uses metaphors like “turn to dust” and “swept away” and “fades and withers” Warren Gage pointed out to me that one of the Bible’s favorite metaphors for death is sleep. You see it in v. 5. And in the New Testament you can think of a number of examples:

Jesus tells the mourners at the house of Jairus, about his daughter, “Leave; for the girl has not died, but is asleep.” (Mat 9.24). Or 1st Corinthians 15 mentions “those who have fallen asleep in Christ” (18). In 1st Thessalonians CH 4 “God will bring with Him those who have fallen asleep in Jesus.” (14)

And in light of this metaphor and all that we’ve said today, I want to suggest that for the believer in Jesus Christ, sleep is sacramental, i.e. it’s a rehearsal for the Ultimate Sleep and Rest that death IS for those who are IN Christ. That little prayer is actually pretty fitting, “Now I lay

me down to sleep/ I pray the Lord my soul to keep/ And if I die before I wake/ I pray the Lord my soul to take.”

Have you ever though that for believers, sleep is like death. Each time we sleep we’re rehearsing. We wake up and we’re momentarily disoriented and THEN we’re happy to be in a new day. Maybe this is what it’s like to die in Christ. We close our eyes and wake up in THE New Day and we’re Home where we belong. Practice that when you fall asleep from now on – it’s a rehearsal for death.

A Second Practice: “Memento Mori”. We are given the right to face our deaths and change and time NOT in denial. We can live soberly, joyously, discerning with a heart of wisdom the passing of our days (So teach us to number our days, that we may present to You a heart of wisdom.)

We see sin for what it is – a problem SO great that it causes death and to fix it required the death NOT of Moses, God’s man – but of Jesus the GodMan... we see that – the Gospel – as the key to having a heart of wisdom. We don’t want to die but we don’t have to live in denial – this is the wisdom that the Gospel gives us to face death.

Lastly, memento mori (remember your death) doesn’t mean that our life is inconsequential. Our work matters. Our callings are important. We work NOT as a way to get eternal life or as our ultimate source of identity and significance (not a substitute for God) but we work with God.

We’re not building a legacy to make a name for ourselves (so we live on in peoples’ memories) – but we want our children and future generations to love this God who first loved US. We work (as we said last week) we live out our callings – whether street sweepers or neurosurgeons – whether financial planners of pastors or chefs or fathers... or teachers or attorneys or neighbors – we don’t see work as the way to defeat death – but knowing that WE WILL SOON DIE (70 or 80 years or so) – we ask God to use our labors to glorify HIM – to confirm the work of our hands.

In monasteries in the East and West this Psalm is chanted right before the monks go to work...It’s the Christian version of “Hi-Ho, Hi-Ho It’s off to work we go”. Remembering our death doesn't make us weird or too heavenly minded. It actually fills our work with gravitas... “Let Your work appear to Your servants and Your majesty to our children. Let the favor of the Lord our God be upon us; and confirm for us the work of our hands; Yes, confirm the work of our hands.”