

Psalm 90 – Count your days and wise up!

For almost 30 years, until last year, our church produced a small leaflet at this time of year which we distributed in mailboxes in the neighborhoods and towns around the church. The pamphlet was called "Reflexions" and there were articles in it that encouraged readers to reflect. We asked readers to reflect on such things as the meaning of life, the human condition and the character of God. In the articles, we used current events, the death of Johnny Halliday, the construction of the airport at Notre-Dame des Landes, the Olympic Games. We used things that people were already thinking of to try to get spiritual lessons across.

If we wanted to write an article now to encourage reflection, it would not be too difficult to find a subject. It would, of course, be the famous coronavirus. This virus pushes us to think, to ask questions. Even though we have already suffered illness in our life and even if death has already knocked on the door of our family and friends long before the virus arrived, we have never lived a time when we were so aware of the suffering of other human beings. We have never been more aware of the reality of death around the world. All of this makes us think.

And this morning we are turning to a song written by a man who also experienced suffering and death. He too was made to think. And we turn to the oldest of the Psalms. The book of Psalms is a songbook in the Bible and Psalm 90 is the oldest song. It's a song written by Moses. Moses was a man chosen by God to bring God's people out of slavery in Egypt. Moses was born at a time when the Egyptians were killing Hebrew children because the Hebrew people were too numerous. Moses therefore survived infanticide. Moses saw firsthand the mistreatment of his people in slavery. Moses saw firsthand the judgment of God against the Egyptians in the death of the firstborn of Egyptian families.

He heard the cries of the Egyptian parents. He saw firsthand the destruction of the Egyptian armies that were chasing the people of God as they came out of Egypt. He saw firsthand the judgment of God against his people who murmured against God in the wilderness. A whole generation fell in the wilderness because of their disbelief and disobedience. Moses saw it all. Death and suffering were omnipresent in his life.

And in this Psalm, Moses reflects on all that he has experienced. He seeks to grasp the meaning. "How am I to understand my experience?"

And in April 2020, we are faced with suffering and death. What can Moses say to help us understand? The answer is found in verse 12 of Psalm 90. Moses makes a request of God: "Teach us to count our days, so that we apply our hearts to wisdom"

He said, "Teach us to do something." If you ask someone to teach you how to do something, it's because you don't know how to do it, you have difficulty doing it. So Moses said to God that there are two things that he and God's people cannot do: Count their days well and apply their hearts to wisdom. Isn't that what the coronavirus crisis is teaching us? Count your days well and apply your heart to wisdom. What do we see in this psalm that helps us do this?

Count your days

What does this mean? The Psalm shows us three things that we will grasp and understand when we count our days.

Man's days are fleeting

We see that in verses 3 to 6: " 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."

There are two main images used by Moses. He describes the human condition with two words: Verse 3 - "dust" and verse 5, "grass". What he says is not very flattering. We would have preferred him to say: Man is like a lion, strong and powerful. Man is like a big oak, solid, unshakable. This is what modern man tends to believe, isn't it? "I can do everything. There are no limits. I went to the moon. I split the atom. I am stronger than ever!" Moses says that we will return to the dust and that we are like grass. We are like grass: It grows, we mow it, we throw it in the composter, and we forget it. And the next day, there is more grass growing in its place. We read the same thing in Psalm 103: "Man? His days are like grass, it blooms like the flower of the fields: when a wind blows on it, it disappears, and the place it once occupied no longer recognizes it." (Psalm 103.15-16) Dear friends, the wind is blowing. And this psalm tells us that it will soon blow on you and on me. Human life is fleeting. Your life is fleeting. Count your days well.

In verse 3, Moses said to God, "You return man to dust." What he says here reminds us of what God said to Adam in the garden in Genesis 3: "You are dust, and you will return to dust." We will soon be dust. You are going to die, and so am I. All of us, without exception. And although the human being tries to control everything in his life, although he wants to manage everything: "it's me who decides, I'm the master, I'm the sovereign" the current crisis reminds us that it is not at all me who manages, who controls my life. Let me tell you what annoys me a little right now. It's when in the newspaper they talk about the death of a great man of this world. Sports star dies of virus. A great politician, a great singer, an actor. It's as if the virus has no right to reach them. It's as if it's not normal for the big names in this world to die. But we will all return to the dust. And the dust of the richest man will look like the dust of the poorest man. Hear what Psalm 49 says: "The wise men die, the stupid man and the fool also disappear, and they leave their possessions to others." We are like grass. Let's count our days.

Man's days are difficult.

Verse 10: " 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." We appreciate moments of joy, moments of happiness. There are things in life that make the heart rejoice. We have the ability to appreciate beauty, culture, friendship, love. There are things that make us smile. But our world is still a world of suffering and pain. I do not know a single person whose life is not marked by suffering: physical, psychological, relational, disappointments, failures, worries. Moses experienced this suffering. You who listen to me, you know it. Yes, thanks to a lot of entertainment, we sometimes forget it, but human life is a life marked by suffering.

An fleeting life. A life of suffering.

How to explain these realities? Why is human life like this? How do we explain the pain, the suffering? This is a question that our 6 year old son asked us yesterday morning at breakfast.

Man's days are under the judgment of God

The reality of God's judgment is probably a subject that you hear very little about. I read Ouest-France and Le Monde every day, I watch the news at 8 pm and it is never mentioned. But this Psalm speaks of it. Maybe it even shocks you that I dare to talk about it. But when we try to understand a suffering world, the Bible clearly tells us that suffering, pain and death are part of God's judgment against sin.

Verses 7, 9, and 11 all speak of the wrath or fury of God: "We are consumed by your anger, and your wrath is terrifying to us." We like to talk about God's love, his grace, his compassion. But to speak of his anger, his fury, his wrath? It bothers us. Should we see God like this? How do we explain the anger, the judgment of God? Verse 8 helps us: " You have set our faults before you, our secret sins in the light of your presence"

God takes out our faults and puts them before Him. What does it mean, our faults? It means our sin, our rebellion against God, our idolatry, our choice not to love God, to exclude God from the world he created, to exclude God from the life he gave us.

The wrath of God is against this sin. Do not think that the wrath of God is a hysterical reaction, an absence of self-control. Rather, it is a settled reaction, measured, proportioned and perfectly mastered. God abhors evil and wants to judge it. And therefore, the Bible tells us that our world lives under the judgment of God. You live under the judgment of God. You need to count your days.

In the New Testament, the apostle Paul speaks of how, by God's judgment, "For the creation was subjected to futility," Death, suffering, illness, frustration, unhappiness, all of these things are part of God's judgment against a sinful world. Before I go any further I want to be very clear. I don't mean and this psalm doesn't mean that individual suffering is directly related to individual sin. It sometimes may be. Certain choices, certain habits, certain behaviors can lead directly to suffering. It happens. But I have no authority to say that someone has the virus because of a particular sin in their life. The Psalm does not say that those with coronavirus are more guilty before God than we who are not. I have no authority to say this and I will never say it.

I'm simply saying what the Bible says, again the words of the apostle Paul: "All have sinned" "The wages of sin is death." Your life is fleeting, your life is difficult, your life is under the judgment of God. These three great truths hang over us and push us to count our days.

Moses asked God to teach him to count his days. But he does it with an even bigger, more important goal. He said, "that we may apply our hearts to wisdom." Moses says that how we count our days will reveal things that will drive us to seek wisdom.

All over the Bible we see a contrast between wisdom and folly, the wise man and the foolish. The fool, according to Psalm 14, is the man who says that God does not exist. "The fool says in his heart: There is no God" (Psalm 14.1) He denies what is clear and obvious. He refuses to accept the truth that God has revealed. The wise man, he accepts the revelation of God and he follows the advice of God. He listens to the voice of God and he puts his trust in God. This is wisdom. It is to accept what God says about the human condition. It is to live in the light of what God has revealed of himself. And in this Psalm we see that a wise heart finds both security and salvation in God.

A wise heart finds security in God

We all look for security. I have the impression that I see Vérisure cars everywhere. People call on Vérisure to install a house alarm because they are looking for security. We wear face masks and wash our hands regularly because we want to be secure. But the Psalm says that true security is found in God. First, in verse 1 we see a faithful God and a protective God. "You have been our dwelling place". These are the words of a man who was homeless for more than 40 years. He did not have a permanent home, but his security was in God alone. At the end of verse 1, Moses underlines the faithfulness of God: "From generation to generation". In a world where nothing is certain, God remains faithful.

Then Moses draws our attention to the eternity of God, as opposed to the fleeting nature of man. V2: "Before the mountains were born, before you created the earth and the world, from eternity to eternity, you are God." Verse 4: " For a thousand years in your sight are but as yesterday when it is past and like a night watch." Human beings are fleeting while God has neither beginning nor end. He isn't limited by time. Time has no effect on his being. He is not weakened over time. He is never in a hurry. He does everything when he chooses. He knows all things, whether they are past, present or future. So wouldn't it be wise to trust this God? Wouldn't it be wise to seek security in him?

In verse 3, Moses portrays God as the One who is sovereign over human life: " You return man to dust and say, "Return, O children of man!" It's God who gives life, it's God who takes life. God is sovereign. Our time is in his hands. Our life depends entirely on Him.

Moses describes for us the faithful, protective, eternal, sovereign God. What reassuring realities in a world that fluctuates continuously, where nothing is certain. This virus reveals a world where nothing is certain. But God sits forever on his throne. God is a rock, a solid and faithful abode. Moses shows us the madness of trusting fleeting things. He shows us the madness of seeking shelter in our own life. God is the only safe refuge. God is the only eternal, faithful abode. The wise man builds his life on this God, on his Word. The fool builds his house on the shifting sand of this world.

The wise heart finds salvation in God.

God is faithful, protective, eternal and sovereign. But the problem for us human beings is that it is this same God who is angry with our sin. This is what we saw at the beginning of the Psalm. So does Moses tell us other things about God that can comfort us, reassure us?

Yes. And this is at the end of the Psalm. Moses, aware of his great need, aware of his inability to divert the wrath of God, he throws himself on the mercy, kindness and grace of God. He asks God to do a work to restore his people and their children. Time does not allow us to take a close look at all that Moses said about God, but note the words we find in verses 13-17, the words that speak of God: Verse 13: Pity. V14: Goodness. V16: Glory. Verse 17: Grace.

In these verses Moses shows us a God who saves and who transforms lives. Those who deserve the wrath of God, when God comes to them in his goodness, instead of the pain and misery of verse 10, there is joy and joy in verse 14. Look at the transformation in verse 15: "Make us glad for as many days as you have afflicted us, and for as many years as we have seen evil."

Misfortune, humiliation are replaced by joy. Wouldn't it be wise to desire this joy, this gladness? This joy and gladness are for those who know that their sin is forgiven. Wouldn't it be wise to cry out to God to save as Moses cried out? If you really believe that you are a sinner, that you have trampled on the law of God, you believe that you have chosen to build your life by excluding God and because of all these things, God puts your faults before him and the wrath of God is against your sin, wouldn't it be wise to cry to God "have mercy on me"? The wise heart finds its salvation in God.

Two thousand years ago, on a Roman cross, Jesus Christ took upon himself the wrath of God against the sin of people like you and me. He suffered the wrath of God. Why? He took this anger, he underwent the judgment of God so that we can say: Satisfy us with your steadfast love and not with your anger. He underwent God's judgment against our sin so that we could say: Make us glad rather than condemn us. He suffered the wrath of God so that we could say: let your work of salvation manifest itself and not your work of judgment. By his death on the cross, we can say: Let the grace and not the judgment of the Lord our God be upon us.

My friends, this virus shows us that our days are like grass. You don't know when the wind will blow on you. You do not know. Wouldn't it be wise to be ready? Wouldn't it be wise to find security in God? Would it not be wise to say: "May the grace of the Lord my God be on me"?