

Life is fleeting
Psalm 90:1-8,12

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

It doesn't usually take much to remind us of our own mortality and the frailty of human life. Maybe as we approach Advent and Christmas, you'll be reminded of those who won't be sharing the celebrations with you this year. This recognition of the reality of our human life is at the heart of today's psalm. And it contrasts our transitory and sometimes fragile lives with an eternal and unchanging God.

It describes us humans as those who return to dust at a single word from God, who disappear like dreams, and who spring up like grass in the morning but become dry and withered by evening. This last image comes from the dry summer climate of the Middle East, which is much the same as we experience here. A few more hot and windy days like today and the green grass that has sprung up with the recent rains will turn brown and parched. This reminds us of just how fleeting life can be. But compare that to how this psalm describes the Lord God. He is our home through all the generations, the creator since before the mountains were born, and has been God from beginning to end. For God, a thousand years are as a passing day, or a few brief hours of the night.

Verse ten, which we didn't read, measures the length of human life as seventy or eighty years at most, and those years are full of trouble and woe. They are gone in the blink of an eye. And this leads to a plea for wisdom. Wisdom to be able to reflect on life and live it fully. Wisdom to make good use of our days, knowing that they will one day come to an end. Wisdom to deal with the knowledge of our own mortality, and the regular reminders of the frailty of life.

Psalm 90 challenges us to view the passage of time in a way that is dramatically different from the norm. What seems ever so long to humans is to the Lord a small speck in eternity. We naturally view time in terms of our usual lifespan, but God views time from eternity, from outside the bounds of time itself. Though we 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. So, the wisdom this psalm asks for is to view time as God does, to have an eternal perspective on all things, and therefore to live only for those things that are indeed eternal.

This godly wisdom puts the things of this world in their proper place. Things that are temporary, that are passing, that have no true permanence, are not where we should place our hopes and dreams. And so as we face up to the fact that our own lives are limited in time, the proper response is to cling to God, to cling to the one who is eternal and unchanging. The eternal and almighty God is the sole ground of hope for us transitory and feeble creatures.

But there's more to it than that. This psalm recognises the depth of our sin and the rightness of God's wrath against such sin. Scripture tells us the wages of sin is death, so when confronted with our own death we must necessarily be confronted with our own sin. And it says here that God spreads out our sins before us, even our secret sins. What sinners try to conceal, the Lord exposes to the light, because he discerns even the thoughts and motives that remain hidden from other people.

The only solution to sin and death is God's grace. Since we have only one life and that one life is short, we should use it to gain the wisdom that comes from trusting in a gracious God. This means trusting in the message of the gospel, through which we gain forgiveness of sins and salvation. This means trusting in an eternal God who willingly entered our limited human existence for the sake of achieving that gospel.

This is what we celebrate at Christmas time, which is coming all too quickly. God, who is eternal and unchanging, took on human flesh, was born as a child in a manger in Bethlehem. God, who is described in this psalm as our home through all the generations, now finds his home amongst us.

If all we had was this psalm describing the vast difference between an immortal and eternal God and our frail and mortal humanity, we probably wouldn't find it all that encouraging or hopeful. But we know that God has been and is our home, our dwelling place. This means he is the place where we can hide, a place of refuge and safety. The creator, the one who was before there was a creation, has given his people refuge throughout the generations. This is a stability that far outweighs the brevity of any individual life.

God has been present with his people and has served as a reliable and strong protector. And through our baptisms, our union with Christ in his full humanity assures us that we also have our home with God. And it is an eternal home. Death could not hold Jesus, and it shall not hold us who live in him.

So, I pray that whenever you are reminded of your own mortality, or of the few brief years you have on this earth, may you turn to God, our place of eternal refuge. May you always view life from God's eternal perspective, giving your time to those things that truly matter. May you seek godly wisdom in all that you do, trusting in God's grace and mercy to redeem your days. And may you embrace this life that God has given you, regardless of how brief it truly is, because you know that God is your dwelling place for all eternity. Amen.

May God's peace, which passes all human understanding, keep your hearts and minds safe in the risen Lord Jesus. Amen.