

Sermon for January 29th 2006¹

Text: Psalm 90

As we have been preparing for this morning's baptisms, Kyle and I have been bantering back and forth about who has the best team in the North West Division. As you can see from the jerseys Ty and Austin are wearing we have some fans from another northwest division team here today who are now tied with us for first place.

As I was thinking about Chelsey, Ty and Austin's baptisms I was reflecting on how baptism has parallels with hockey. Just as each team has its own insignia, we have an insignia in the church. The first thing a player does when he signs up with a team is dawn the team's jersey that has the crest emblazoned on its front. When a person is baptized their forehead is marked with the sign of the Cross to show that they are on Jesus' team, the church.

To be part of this team is to declare that Jesus is our coach and we are playing this game called life under his leadership.

In hockey, the players are given an hour, in order to determine who is the victor. After eighty of these hour-long games they move on to the playoffs. It is the team that has made the most of those eighty hours of regular season games and then does the same in the playoffs that will win the coveted cup. All teams are given the same amount of time. But they do not all use it the same way. We saw this on Thursday night when the Flames were playing the Blackhawks. For much of the game they squandered the time they had been allotted and tried to make it up in the last four and a half minutes of the third period. But it was too little, too late, and so they ended up losing to one of the weakest teams in the NHL, 2-0. Thankfully on the same night Vancouver lost to one of the best teams in the league, Detroit 2-1.

In the psalm we read a couple of minutes ago we are reminded that the use of our time is something we are to manage well because it is a precious

¹ I am grateful to Ray Stedman for a written sermon of his, where I got the ideas in this sermon concerning the Wrath of God and the Love of God.

commodity. We do not want to come to the last few minutes of our lives and try to make up for a life that has been lived poorly and misspent.

To wear the insignia of the Cross, as members of Jesus' team, means that we are learning to both live and pray these words:

"Teach us to make the most of our time, so that we may grow in wisdom."

The great saints of old learned the wisdom of having only two days on their calendars: today and *that* day (the day they would be with the Lord). If we want a heart of wisdom, we will learn to live each day in light of *that* day. When we daily remind ourselves of the purpose for our sojourn here on earth, we will cultivate an eternal perspective on time; and it will influence our work and all our relationships.

This morning's psalm puts the time of our lives into perspective when it looks at our lives in light of God's eternity. These verses declare that God is sovereign over your life and mine:

- 1. Lord, through all the generations you have been our home!*
- 2. Before the mountains were created, before you made the earth and the world, you are God, without beginning or end.*
- 3. You turn people back to dust, saying, "Return to dust!"*
- 4. For you, a thousand years are as yesterday! They are like a few hours!*
- 5. You sweep people away like dreams that disappear or like grass that springs up in the morning.*
- 6. In the morning it blooms and flourishes, but by evening it is dry and withered.*

God's relationship to time is one of the great mysteries of the Bible. Peter tells us, "With the Lord a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day" (2 Peter 3:8). Peter seems to be recalling Moses' words: "For

a thousand years in your sight are like a day that has just gone by, or like a watch in the night" (Psalm 90:4). A watch lasted three hours. Imagine. A thousand years going by like three hours! If a person's life lasts roughly 70 years (cf. Psalm 90:10), and a thousand years is like three hours, then our entire life would be reduced to 12 minutes and 36 seconds! On this scale, our entire sojourn on this earth whizzes past in a blur.

Imagine a line of string that stretches across the room. Now take that line of string and extend it through the walls and outside the building where you are sitting. Carry that line out as far as you can see, in both directions, and allow it to disappear beyond the horizon. If you could take an airplane and fly along that line of string in either direction, it would continue to stretch out in front of you. The string would not simply wrap itself around the world, but it would reach beyond our atmosphere, extending out into space, beyond our solar system, beyond our universe. The line is never-ending.

Now, take a pen and make a scratch on this line of string - just one mark. That lone scratch is your earthly life in the scope of eternity.

From a strictly naturalistic perspective, this idea seems hopeless. We're here today and gone tomorrow. Our lives barely register as a blip on the eternal radar screen. Nothing so short can be truly meaningful, can it? Certainly nothing so brief can sustain our deepest hopes and desires, which is why it is so essential for us to place our hope in something and someone who will endure rather than in the fleeting pleasures of this passing world.

In baptism we are reminded that to wear the insignia of the Cross is to see our lives in light of eternity. To live each day knowing that life in this world is so fleeting that we are all like flowers that bloom in the morning and are dry and withered by evening. We are not in control. God is sovereign and when it comes to the matter of our death, none of us can avoid it. As George Bernard Shaw put it, "The statistics on death are impressive. One out of one dies."

But there is another relationship which concerns the Psalmist, God's wrath. He moves on to that in Verses 7-12:

7. We wither beneath your anger; we are overwhelmed by your fury.

8. You spread out our sins before you--our secret sins--and you see them all.

9. We live our lives beneath your wrath. We end our lives with a groan.

Here the Psalmist is facing a reality that many of us try to avoid. He is dealing with what we might call, the tragic sense of life: the fact that every moment of enjoyment is tinged with something sorrowful, tragic, or unhappy. There is a bittersweet quality about life, and this Psalm realistically faces it. These verses are quite ready to come to grips with the problem of evil. Why is human life tinged with a dark side? Why do we have these tragedies, irritations, injustices, and the catastrophes that strike both innocent and guilty alike?

The Psalmist says it is because of the wrath of God. He ascribes them directly to God. Surely this phrase, "the wrath of God" is greatly misunderstood by many people. Many think invariably of some sort of peeved Deity, a kind of cosmic Terrible-Tempered Mr. Bang who indulges in violent and uncontrolled displays of temper when we human beings do not do what we ought to do. But such a concept only reveals the limitations of our understanding. The Bible never deals with the wrath of God that way. According to the Scriptures, the wrath of God is God's moral integrity. When we refuse to yield ourselves to God, we create certain conditions (not only for ourselves but for others as well) which God has ordained for harm. It is God who makes evil result in sorrow, heartache, injustice and despair. It is God's way of saying to us, "Look, you must face the truth. You were made for me. If you, in the dignity of human choice which I have given you, decide that you don't want me, then I will leave. But you will have to bear the consequences." The absence of God is destructive to human life. That absence is God's wrath and God cannot withhold it. In his moral integrity God insists that these things should occur as a result of our choice. See how the Psalmist links these two together.

8. You spread out our sins before you--our secret sins--and you see them all.

9. We live our lives beneath your wrath. We end our lives with a groan.

He sets our sin and God's wrath within the same frame.

The cause of God's wrath then, is always human sin. The manifestation of God's wrath would never be apparent were it not for the secret sins that are set in the light of God's presence. God knows our inner sins, our secret inner thoughts. The Scriptures never teach that a passing thought is a sin. A thought that comes to your mind unbidden, remains there for a moment tempting you to do something wrong, is only a normal exposure to temptation. Even the Lord Jesus experienced it. But here the Psalmist refers to thoughts that we harbor, that we mull over and play with, that we take great pleasure in and often summon up ourselves if they do not come to us unbidden. God is aware of these inner defilements of life, and they are all contributing to the tragic sense of life.

Every now and again someone will ask the question, "Why doesn't God kill the devil? If it's the devil that is doing all this to us, why doesn't God get rid of him?" That same question appears often concerning a human being. "Why didn't God kill Hitler? Look at all the terrible things Hitler did, and the awful bloodbath to which he subjected the world. Why didn't God kill him before he could do this?" We ask such questions with great ease, but when we ask a question like that we should also ask:

"Why didn't God paralyze my hand when I filled out my income tax and put down a wrong figure?"

We should ask, "Why did not God strike me dumb when I yelled at my wife, or my children?"

And "Why didn't he send a stroke when I said that catty thing over the phone to my neighbor? Why didn't he paralyze my tongue?"

If God is going to deal with sin he must deal with it in everyone, not just the Hitlers, and not only in its extreme forms. So the Psalmist faces the fact that God allows his wrath, his moral integrity against sin, to be manifest precisely because it affords him opportunity for the exercise of his love.

Then he goes on to consider the universality of this:

"Seventy years are given to us! Some may even reach eighty. But even the best of these years are filled with pain and trouble; soon they disappear, and we are gone." And so he says in the verse that is at the heart of this psalm:

"Teach us to make the most of our time, so that we may grow in wisdom."

What is a heart of wisdom? Well, it is a realistic outlook on life. It is facing life the way it is, and fully reckoning with the relationships of ourselves to God. It is a life that affirms God is sovereign and his wrath needs to be taken seriously if we are to make sense of life in this world. But it is a life that moves from an acknowledgement of God's wrath to an acceptance of God's love.

In the last section the Psalmist moves to the third of these relationships. It is a declaration of what a heart of wisdom will bring us to. It is the declaration of God's love for us. It begins with a cry for a personal God:

O LORD, come back to us! How long will you delay? Take pity on your servants

You cannot experience the love of God unless you are ready to cry out like this for a personal relationship to God. "Come back to us. This great and mighty God who rules the universe, may he come back to me," says the Psalmist. "Enter my heart and have pity upon me, your servant." That cry for a personal relationship is the key to the results that follow, as set forth in the following verses. When we desire this relationship and are growing in living close to God we can:

1. Expect to know a satisfying love and a recompensing joy.

Satisfy us in the morning with your unfailing love, so we may sing for joy to the end of our lives.

Give us gladness in proportion to our former misery! Replace the evil years with good

There is a joy that makes up for the past, a joy that "restores the years which the locusts have eaten," to use the beautiful phrasing of one of the Minor Prophets. It looks out upon the field of life and sees it eaten of locusts, all its value gone, all its worthwhileness ended, but then it sees God coming in and restoring, planting a new crop, bringing it to fruition and to harvest, so that one may look out across a full field blowing in the wind, every head laden with grain, and rejoice over the fact that God has restored the years which the locusts have eaten. One of the greatest joys of my Christian life is to look back upon the wasted moments and years of my past, and set in contrast to it the fruitfulness of my present experience. God is continually correcting what once looked like a hopeless situation, restoring to me the years that the locusts have eaten. A recompensing joy, that is part of the glory of God's love.

Then the third element the Psalmist sees is in Verse 16.

Let us see your miracles again; let our children see your glory at work

This is an amazing request. It envisions what I would call, hereditary healing. We moderns are inclined to see life out of focus. We seldom think of ourselves as being part of a bundle of life which goes back to the very beginning. But the Bible never takes that view. The Bible recognizes the fact that we are tied to the past and it is affecting the immediate future. God himself stated it in the giving of the Law, in Exodus 20,

**" ... for I the Lord your God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me, but showing steadfast love to thousands of those who love me and keep my commandments."
(Exodus 20:5b-6 RSV)**

There is something in human life that persists from one generation to another. Though you or I may become a Christian and God begins to heal our personal life, we will never experience the full effect of that healing in our lifetime. But our children will! That is what the psalmist is saying here. Notice how he puts it. "Let thy work be manifest to thy servants," i.e., his own generation. Let me understand how you work, Lord, give me an understanding of your methods in society and life, and then let the effect of that understanding be evidenced in my children." That is what often

happens. I have seen young men and women beginning a family, as new Christians. They are discovering for themselves the healing power of God to change a wretched, miserable, and wasted life, and they experience much of the loving grace, kindness, and restoration of God. But their children go on to even greater and richer experiences than the parents had. They are benefiting from the change and understanding that has come into the lives of their parents. That benefit can be passed on, say the Scriptures, to the third and fourth generations. That is why, oftentimes, children are either much worse or much better than their parents.

Then the fourth thing:

And may the Lord our God show us his approval and make our efforts successful. Yes, make our efforts successful!

Here I would like to revert to the Authorized Version; it is much better.

**Let the beauty of the Lord our God be upon us. (Psalms 90:17a
KJV)**

This is a prayer for the visible manifestation of God's beauty. It is what the New Testament calls "godlikeness," or godliness. What is the beauty of God? God is beautiful because he is two things: truth and love. Truth is always necessary to beauty. You can never have anything beautiful that is not true. And love is warmth, graciousness, and attractiveness, which, added to truth, constitutes beauty. A man or woman, boy or girl, whose life is characterized by truth and love is a beautiful person.

**and establish thou the work of our hands upon us,
yea, the work of our hands establish thou it. (Psalms 90:17b RSV)**

What does this mean? The last result of God's love is to make our labor, our work, meaningful, valuable, and enduring. It will not be something wasted, or frantic and frenetic, spent in a moment. The work of our hands becomes an enduring thing, impressive, affecting others, having in itself great value. Who does not long for this?

Here, this morning, in everyone's heart, is there not a longing that your life will be worthwhile, that you will be the kind of person who will be worth something; others will value you and your life. Well, that is the great promise of God's love. That love is available to any who are ready to say, as this Psalmist says, "Return, O Lord! How long?" Come back, O God. Come back into my life and work through me. God is ready to produce in you that kind of love.

Here then, are the three great facts that relate to God and people: God's sovereignty, within the limits of which we all live, whether we like it or not;

God's wrath, which we all experience, whether innocent or guilty, because we are living in a world in which God is allowing our sin to have its full expression.

But in the midst of all this is the glory and wonder of God's love, manifesting itself to us in terms of these qualities of satisfying love: recompensing joy, hereditary healing, visible beauty, and meaningful labor. All is available to those who love him.

To wear the insignia of the Cross is to know how to play the game of life by these rules and so to "Teach us to make the most of our time, so that we may grow in wisdom."