

SERIES: Cries from the Heart
SERMON: **The Cry of Futility**
SCRIPTURE: Psalm 90
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Are you ever baffled and blown away by the many strange and random events of life that seem to have no purpose and no benefit? Speaking just for myself, I think my faith is sometimes more challenged by the little irritations of life than it is by the major tragedies. I can somehow look at 911 or the death of an aged parent or a terrible car accident and generally find meaning and even value, but the random frustrations find me asking myself, “What was *that* all about?”

I’m not known for my story telling, but I have a story I want to share with you today. It’s about our dog Buddy, whom many of you have met, who is now about 84 in dog years and getting steadily more senile (along with his owners). One very wintry afternoon while we were living in St. Louis I was planning to stay at the office at the church instead of going home for supper, since I had an Elder meeting that night and we lived about 25 minutes from church. I got a call from my wife in the middle of the afternoon saying Buddy had locked himself in our bedroom. My son Andy for some reason had put him in there, and while pawing at the door to get out he had turned the knob on the deadbolt lock.

You’re probably wondering what a deadbolt lock is doing on a bedroom door, but all I can say is that it was there when we bought the house. Unfortunately what seemed like a blessing turned into a curse. Well, I went home right away and tried every stray key in the house, but nothing fit. The dog, of course, was barking at the door and pawing at it incessantly, despite my pleas with him to calm down.

I tried a knife and a credit card, and even took the lock apart, but to no avail. I discovered a dead bolt has a notch in it that prevents it from being pushed back in by a knife or a credit card—it has to be *turned back* by the knob, which of course was still inside the bedroom. Finally I decided to take the door stop off the jamb, realizing too late that this was a split jamb and the stop was an integral part of the jamb (a few of you know what I’m talking about; the rest can just imagine). Before I knew it I had destroyed a beautiful varnished doorway.

By now I was thoroughly frustrated and gave into the pleas of my wife to call a locksmith. I hate calling repairmen, but what else could I do? The locksmith said he would be there in 45 minutes and the charge would be \$55. After an hour and a half he still hadn’t shown up (remember, this was a wintry day and there was new snow and ice on the roads), so I called back and was told he was on his way and would be there in a few minutes. By now I was late for the Elder meeting, the dog’s been in the bedroom barking and scratching incessantly for about four hours, and still no sign of the locksmith.

I finally decided I just had to get the dog out, so I cut a hole in the sheetrock between the family room and the bedroom—through two walls, mind you—large enough so the dog could get out and

my son could get in to unlock the door. I finally got to the Elder meeting three hours late (which isn't as bad as it sounds, since they were usually just warming up by then), but I left at home a broken lock, a door jamb that needed to be replaced, a solid wood six-panel door scratched to pieces by the dog, a hole two feet by two feet in the walls of two rooms, and a dog I would gladly have loaned to Michael Vick! The locksmith never did arrive and never even called! And I swear that every word of that story is true and has not been embellished one whit!

Now I have weathered some pretty significant crises in recent years, including a much more serious encounter with another four-legged creature—a black horse who jumped through the windshield of my car at night resulting in his immediate death and a multitude of broken bones for me—but I don't think anything challenged my faith quite like this incident with Buddy. The reason is that I could see no purpose and no value in it at all. It didn't seem to be for chastisement, because I had no known, unconfessed sin in my life; it didn't build my faith—just the opposite; it didn't result in a stronger marriage; it didn't help me be a better pastor. It just happened. And it made me wonder, “What's the point?” I can't believe I went through all that just to get a sermon illustration.

The 90th Psalm wrestles with questions like these: “What's the point? Why can't we see more meaning in life's seemingly random events? Why is life so short?” This is the only Psalm attributed to Moses. James Boice argues that the likely historical setting is the events recorded for us in Numbers 20, near the end of the 38 years of wilderness wanderings. In that one chapter we encounter the death of Moses' sister Miriam, the harsh discipline of Moses himself for striking a rock, and finally the death of Moses' brother Aaron. Obviously, Moses had more serious reasons than I to wonder about the futility of life.

The death of Moses' sister was a harsh blow to him. She had not always been loyal to Moses, but for nearly four decades she had shared in the awful burden of leadership of the Israelites. To see her die right on the doorstep to the Promised Land was a sad reminder of God's judgment on that whole generation.

Even more troubling to Moses was his own exclusion from the Promised Land due to a serious error in judgment. You will recall that as Miriam died they were crossing the Desert of Zin and ran out of water. The people began to complain against Moses and Aaron, “Why did you bring us up out of Egypt to die of thirst in this desert?” Moses went to the tabernacle and fell face down before the Lord. The Lord told him to take his staff and speak to a rock and promised that it would pour out enough water for the people and the livestock.

So Moses took his staff and gathered the people together in front of the rock. But instead of speaking to the *rock*, he spoke to the people and struck the rock, (Numbers 20:10-12):

“Listen, you rebels, must we bring you water out of this rock?” Then Moses raised his arm and struck the rock twice with his staff. Water gushed out, and the community and their livestock drank.

But the Lord said to Moses and Aaron, “Because you did not trust in me enough to honor me as holy in the sight of the Israelites, you will not bring this community into

the land I give them.”

It's not hard to empathize with Moses and perhaps even feel that God was being unfair to him. After all, Moses was almost 120 years old at the time, having governed this incredibly rebellious nation for forty years. He hadn't even wanted the job in the first place, but God drafted him. He had been so patient, so solicitous with God in behalf of the Israelites, offering at times to have his own life taken if God would spare theirs. But now, his patience exhausted, he strikes a stupid rock. Not major league disobedience, mind you. Not like adultery or murder or anything like that. There's not a one of us who wouldn't have been tempted to do the same thing he did! In fact, I would have been more inclined to strike the rebels themselves.

But you know something? God's evaluation of sin is very different from ours. He views *all* disobedience as inexcusable, especially when it compromises His sovereignty and holiness, as apparently this did. In saying, “Must *we* bring you water out of this rock?”, Moses was taking some of the credit which belonged to God alone. And in striking the rock rather than speaking to it he was acting independently of God's instructions.¹

Then Numbers 20 is capped off with the account of the death of Aaron, Moses' brother and right-hand man. He too was judged culpable in the rock incident, so he, too, was not allowed to go into the Promised Land. Moses was instructed to take his brother up on Mount Hor, remove his priestly garments and place them on Aaron's son. Aaron died there and Moses himself buried him.

About thirty eight years earlier the Israelites had sinned when they sided with the ten spies at Kadesh Barnea who said the Promised Land was too dangerous to occupy. At that time God told them that only the two believing spies, Caleb and Joshua, would enter the land. Everyone else who was of age at the time would die in the wilderness. Miriam, Aaron, and Moses were the last survivors of that generation. Now Miriam and Aaron are gone and Moses is told that his own days are numbered.

I'm sure the thought crossed his mind, “What's the point? You work your fool head off for forty years and then make one mistake and it's all for nothing! Talk about futile.” Some of you have had similar thoughts when you're been laid off after 30 years with the same company, or you're served papers by your spouse after 25 years of marriage, or your stock goes south while everyone else seems to be getting rich, or even when a dumb dog locks you out of your own bedroom.

But in this great Psalm, Moses not only offers up a Cry of Futility—he also provides an answer. In fact, he starts with the answer and then comes back to it again after verbalizing the question.

The nature and character of God contrasts sharply with that of mankind. (1-6)

Moses starts with the eternal grandeur of God, informing us that He is the God of history, the God of creation, the God of eternity.

*“Lord, you have been our dwelling place throughout all generations.
Before the mountains were born or you brought forth the earth and the world,
from everlasting to everlasting you are God.”*

He is the God of history. The philosopher Hegel wrote, “If history teaches us anything, it is that history teaches us nothing.” His point was that man tends not to learn the lessons he should from his mistakes and therefore he is condemned to repeat them. Moses is keenly aware of this tendency and the vicious cycle of sorrow it produces in human history. But he is also keenly aware that there is something that is permanent and solid and foundational in history—and that is God’s presence and providence. The person who is anchored in Him is eternally secure, and the one who trusts in Him has a secure “dwelling place” or “refuge.”

He is the God of creation. “Before the mountains were born or you brought forth the earth and the world . . .” This is, of course, only one of a multitude of passages in the Bible that speak of God as Creator. This is not a popular concept in culture today, to say the least. The scientific gurus of our day (and I call them gurus because they serve almost as a religious priesthood for the intellectual elite) accept Darwinian naturalism as true, not so much because there is overwhelming evidence for it, but because its only alternative, special creation, is clearly impossible. And why is it impossible? Well, if you even have to ask such a question you are demonstrating yourself to be incapable of serious scientific dialogue according to these gurus.

I am willing to admit the possibility that we evangelicals have sometimes been too dogmatic on such issues as the young earth, 24-hour-creation days, and the geologic implications of the Noahic flood. We could be a little more humble in recognizing that there is a lot we don’t know about the process God used to bring the earth into existence. But there is no reason—spiritual or scientific—for us to be mealy-mouthed about the fact that our God brought the earth and the world into existence by His great power. He is the creator God—nothing is more clear in the Bible.

He is the God of eternity. “From everlasting to everlasting you are God.” This is the very first Scripture verse many children learn, partly because it is short, but also because it is so basic. From one end of eternity to the other, if ends there are, God was and will be. He is unlimited by history, by space, or by time.

That’s where Moses begins this Psalm. But quickly he turns to the stark contrast between this kind of God and the nature and character of mankind. We are creatures subject to death; our tenure on earth is very brief.

But we are creatures subject to death. In contrast to the eternity of a creator God, we are here today and gone tomorrow. Verse 3:

*You turn men back to dust,
Saying, “Return to dust, O sons of men.”
For a thousand years in your sight
Are like a day that has just gone by,
or like a watch in the night.*

*You sweep men away in the sleep of death;
 they are like the new grass of the morning--
 though in the morning it springs up new,
 by evening it is dry and withered.*

Not only that, our tenure on earth is very brief. Seven and a half years ago we entered a new millennium. That was a really big deal, if you recall. But as huge as the turn of a millennium is for us, Moses says it's insignificant to God. A millennium is just like a day in God's sight. You will perhaps recall that the Apostle Peter quotes this verse in his second epistle: "With the Lord a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day." Peter's point is that though it seems to us that God has been really slow in keeping His promise to send Jesus Christ back to this earth, in fact, He has only been gone a couple of days and the delay is giving people time to repent of their sin and come to faith.

Moses uses an analogy to explain man's brief tenure here on earth, an analogy that all of us can relate to—grass turning brown in the blazing daytime sun. Remember your lawn back in June and early July? Due to unseasonable rains and relatively cool weather you were cutting it every 4 or 5 days, but now a lot of it is brown and brittle.

Our lives are like that. A person can be at the height of his career, enjoying family and friends, thriving on all kinds of success, and the next day he can get a diagnosis of inoperable liver cancer or have a heart attack or have a total reversal of fortune. In the total scheme of history a man's life is just like the wink of an eye.

Now that Moses has contrasted the nature and character of God with that of mankind, he is ready to reveal the cry of his heart that generated this Psalm:

The futility of life is evident in both its quantity and its quality. (7-11)

*"We are consumed by your anger
 and terrified by your indignation.
 You have set our iniquities before you,
 our secret sins in the light of your presence.
 All our days pass away under your wrath;
 we finish our years with a moan.
 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."*

The Psalmist has already spoken of the brevity of life, but here he elaborates by reminding us of something that has been true for at least the last 4,000 years, probably ever since the great flood of Noah. The expected life span of a human being is about 70 years, 80 if you're fortunate. Now there are exceptions. I Googled for the oldest person alive and got answers ranging from 114 to 132. Moses himself was 119 or 120 when he wrote this Psalm. We have a few nonagenarians in

this church (people in their 90's). That is unusual; 70 to 80 has been pretty normal for the past 4 millennia.

Now 70 or 80 years is a long time, but only to those who are young. To the person in his 60's it appears pretty short, for time picks up speed as it goes along. I have commented before on a strange phenomenon. When I was a kid Christmas came only once every two or three years. Now it comes every four or five months! That's what the perspective of age does to you.

But the short quantity of life is not the only thing that produces a sense of futility; so does the quality of life. The last half of verse 10 says, "Yet the span of our years is but trouble and sorrow, for they quickly pass, and we fly away." Now there has never been any generation in any nation of the world's history that has a higher quality of life than we enjoy today. When it comes to convenience, health care, climate-control, ease of food production, mobility, communication –we have it all. But we easily forget that there are many more people today who live from hand to mouth, lack personal freedom, never travel more than 100 miles from the place they were born, are in constant danger of violence from their enemies, and lack the basic dignities we take for granted. For such people these words in the Psalm ring especially true: Even for many of *us*, in spite of our privileges and conveniences, there is more than enough trouble and sorrow to go around.

I don't think Moses is a pessimist. He's just trying to be a realist. Life is the pits sometimes. Why? Well, there are two reasons—an immediate one and an ultimate one.

God's wrath is the immediate reason. Verse 7: "We are consumed by your anger and terrified by your indignation." Verse 9: "All our days pass away under your wrath; we finish our years with a moan." Verse 11, "Who knows the power of your anger? For your wrath is as great as the fear that is due you." Moses is saying that much of the futility in his life is due to God Himself. He's not about to blame the devil for all his trouble. He certainly isn't going to blame bad luck. Life isn't a game of chance to Moses, a game that some win and some lose. No, Miriam died and Aaron died and he himself is going to die on Mt. Nebo within sight of the Promised Land because of God's wrath.

Now it's easy for us to misunderstand the wrath of God. Ray Stedman writes,

"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 . . . 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 man refuses to yield himself to God, he creates certain conditions (not only for himself but for others as well) which God has ordained for harm. It is God who makes evil result in sorrow, heartache, injustice and despair."

And friends, let's face it, a lot of the trouble and sorrow *we* experience in life is due to this same source. Even when trouble isn't directed *at* us by a sovereign act of God, it is at least *allowed* by Him. In other words, He could have prevented it and didn't. God is a key player in the futility we

experience.

But there is another cause we must take into account if we are going to avoid drawing the wrong conclusion and getting angry with God at *His* anger.

Our sin is the ultimate reason we experience futility. Verse 8: “You have set our iniquities before you, our secret sins in the light of your presence.” God’s anger is not capricious; it is a response to sin in our lives. You know something? I am convinced that God chastises His people differently today than He used to. In biblical times He often acted directly and swiftly. I think of Uzzah and Ahio, who were executed on the spot when they touched the Ark of the Covenant, Nadab and Abihu, who lost their lives for offering strange fire before the Lord, or Ananias and Saphira who experienced sudden death when they lied about their giving.

We don’t see much of the sudden death kind of discipline from the Lord today, and I’m very grateful for that. But does that mean He doesn’t discipline? Is it not possible that today God is allowing the natural consequences of our sin to bring judgment upon us? Is the scourge of STD’s and AIDS just a medical phenomenon or could it be divine discipline for violating the laws of God? Is global warming, along with resultant increases in hurricanes, tornadoes, and drought, just a weather phenomenon, or could it be divine discipline for violating His command for us to be good stewards of this earth? Is it not possible that much of the emptiness and futility that so many are experiencing today is itself the discipline that the Lord is using on His people to wake them up to their sin and turn them back to Himself?

Well, quickly I want us to move from the problem to the solution, for that is where Moses takes us beginning in verse 12.

Only God can redeem us from a sense of the futility of life. (12-17)

*Teach us to number our days aright,
that we may gain a heart of wisdom.
Relent, O LORD! How long will it be?
Have compassion on your servants.
Satisfy us in the morning with your unfailing love,
that we may sing for joy and be glad all our days.
Make us glad for as many days as you have afflicted us,
for as many years as we have seen trouble.
May your deeds be shown to your servants,
your splendor to their children.
May the favor of the Lord our God rest upon us;
establish the work of our hands for us--
yes, establish the work of our hands."*

We are dependent upon Him for perspective. (12) “Teach us to number our days aright, that we may gain a heart of wisdom.” A heart of wisdom is the highest goal anyone could

have. When Solomon was told by God that he could have anything he desired—money, fame, pleasure—he chose wisdom, and his wisdom gained for him money, fame, pleasure. Unfortunately he prostituted that gift eventually, but the fact remains that he made the right choice in asking God for a heart of wisdom, a proper perspective on life.

Well, how do we get a heart of wisdom? Numbering our days aright will help produce it. Nearly 40 years ago Dr. Bruce Waltke, my esteemed Hebrew professor in seminary, decided to take this exhortation literally. In his Day Timer he wrote down the number of days he had left, based upon 70 years minus what he had already used. Each morning (and he was about 35 at the time) he would cross out the number he had written down the previous day, 12,775, and write one less-- 12,774. That was a visual way of reminding himself that the day he had just lived could never be recovered. It was gone, so each day needed to count for God.

I don't think a person has to be quite so mathematical about "numbering his days." In fact, it could be dangerous if you came to believe you were guaranteed 10,000 more days or 5,000 or even 500. On the other hand, many young people are notorious when it comes to assuming they are immortal. They will drink and do drugs and drive like idiots, giving little thought to the natural consequences that have taken the lives of so many of their peers. They don't even number their decades, much less their days.

But this is not a problem just for the young. I know people in their 60's or 70's who still live as though eternity were a mirage. Their time is spent selfishly, their money is hoarded, and they fail to come to grips with the fact that their last day on earth is rapidly approaching. The rich fool of Luke 12 bragged, "I will tear down my barns and build bigger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. And I'll say to myself, 'Self, you have plenty of good things laid up for many years. Take life easy; eat, drink and be merry.'" He was apparently in the prime of life, not nearly 70 years old. "But God said to him, 'You fool! This very night your life will be demanded from you. Then who will get what you have prepared for yourself?'" We are dependent upon God for perspective. It is only He who can teach us to number our days aright.

We are dependent upon God for compassion. (13, 14) "Relent, O Lord! How long will it be? Have compassion on your servants. Satisfy us in the morning with your unfailing love, that we may sing for joy and be glad all our days." If you are going through a time of deep trouble and you're feeling that life is futile, then do what Moses did—go to your Father in heaven and plead with Him to let up. In a passage in Luke Jesus asks, "Which of you fathers, if your son asks for a fish, will give him a snake instead? Or if he asks for an egg, will give him a scorpion? If you then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!" I can't promise you that the pressure will end as soon as you pray for it, but I do think we should express our total dependence upon His compassion.

We are dependent upon Him for fairness. (15) "Make us glad for as many days as you have afflicted us, for as many years as we have seen trouble." Life is not fair, and we are not guaranteed so many blessings to make up for so many sorrows. But God is a just God. In eternity

He will balance the books, rewarding the righteous and punishing the wicked. Even in this life it is OK to appeal to Him for fair treatment—not to demand it but to request it. If you feel that you have had more than your share of trouble, pray that God will give you some relief, some joy to balance it out. We are dependent upon Him for fairness; we certainly cannot depend upon anyone else.

We are dependent upon Him for insight into His ways. (16) “May your deeds be shown to your servants, your splendor to their children.” I think what Moses is asking for here is simply discernment. He knows in his heart that God is a sovereign, just, wise, and good God. But he often cannot see the justice or the goodness in the events of life as they unfold. So he prays that he and his children might have insight into God’s ways.

We are dependent upon Him for meaningful labor. (17) The Psalm ends with these words: “May the favor of the Lord our God rest upon us; establish the work of our hands for us—yes, establish the work of our hands.” Nothing leads to more of a sense of futility than the feeling that we are insignificant. We have to know that we are making a difference, that our being here makes the world a better place. We gain feelings of significance, worth, or value from family, from friends, from sports, from various achievements. But mostly our significance comes from work. Every human being was made to work, and if we do not learn to work we miss out on one of the great blessings of life.

But what many of us fail to acknowledge is that we are dependent upon God to establish the work of our hands. We can, and should, give ourselves wholly to our work—whether that be rearing children, serving God vocationally, going to school, or working for a company—but all the effort in the world will not make us successful if God is not in it. In Psalm 127 Solomon says the same thing:

*Unless the Lord builds the house,
its builders labor in vain.
Unless the Lord watches over the city,
the watchmen stand guard in vain.*

Please note that Solomon doesn’t suggest that the laborers don’t have to labor or that the watchmen don’t have to guard. He simply says that they do it in vain if God is not involved.

Conclusion: For centuries this great 90th Psalm has been read at funeral services, and it is easy to see why. It recognizes the shortness of life and the sense of loss we all feel when someone is taken before his or her prime. But this is not primarily a funeral Psalm. It is one written for the living that we might live better, in greater dependence upon a great and good God, who loved us enough to send His one and only Son to die for us. He is the answer to the feelings of futility that touch all of us from time to time and overwhelm some of us on occasion.

i. Further, I suggest to you that this was *not* just any old stupid rock. This was a special rock. In Numbers 20:8 God says to Moses, “Speak to *that* rock before their eyes.” Which rock? I think it

is the same rock that had produced water for them at Sinai many years before. They had apparently carried that rock on a cart through the desert as a reminder of God's provision. That rock represented God's presence in such a unique way that Paul speaks about it in 1 Cor. 10:1-4:

For I do not want you to be ignorant of the fact, brothers, that our forefathers were all under the cloud and that they all passed through the sea. They were all baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea. They all ate the same spiritual food (manna) and drank the same spiritual drink; for they drank from the spiritual rock that accompanied them, and that rock was Christ.

I don't pretend to understand all that Paul saw in this incident, but it's obvious that Moses' action in striking the rock when God told him to speak to it was a serious breach of faith, and because of his sin he was told he would not personally enter the Promised Land.