

Bible Study: Psalm 90 – A Prayer for Life Leader’s Guide

Class Objective: We want our brothers and sisters in Christ to look compassionately on those who, through personal sufferings, might be tempted to go in the wrong direction on life issues. We want to show them how the brevity and suffering of this life is used by God to draw us closer to him, so that even in the face of our own suffering, we make choices that glorify God.

During the class, the students write their own prayer to God based on this prayer of Moses. You will direct them to return after each section to this prayer below, to fill in the blank, and then make an applicable petition. It can be used as the closing prayer of the class. Some suggestions are written below..

OUR PRAYER FOR LIFE:

PART 1: God, we marvel at your eternal nature.

SUGGESTED APPLICABLE PETITION: When we are tired, weary, frightened, and lost, help us to find our hope in you, now and forever.

PART 2: God, we tremble at your holy nature.

SUGGESTED APPLICABLE PETITION: Help us to bear up under the consequences of our sins – the suffering of this life and eventually physical death. Lead us away from sinful methods of avoiding suffering. Use our suffering and the brevity of life to help us grow in wisdom and in an appreciation of your gifts, especially those which are eternal.

PART 3: God, we lean on your gracious nature.

SUGGESTED APPLICABLE PETITION: When circumstances are at their worst, help us to cry to you for help. Build our faith in the forgiveness of sins, won for us through your Son. Give us confidence and strength in the assurance that your love is unfailing.

SUGGESTED APPLICABLE CLOSING PETITION: Help us to demonstrate faith, especially when suffering and death enter our lives. Help us to fight for the sanctity of life in an evangelical and caring manner. Bless families that are struggling with infertility or the knowledge that their child will be born with a disability. Help us to protect those who can’t protect themselves. Guard society from those who would play God. Bless the efforts of the church to proclaim the Gospel, so more and more people may enjoy eternal life.

INTRODUCTION:

It used to be that life issues involved the clearly-defined issues of abortion and euthanasia. As Christians we recognize that our lives are in the hands of God. We have no right to take the life of another, whether they are oblivious to the world, because they are still in the womb, or because they are suffering from Alzheimer’s in a nursing home. Science has

discovered the healing potential of embryonic stem cells. They've mapped DNA and hope to fix some genetic defects. They are looking at the possibilities connected with cloning – can we grow organs to replace ones that are dying? Parents go to genetic counselors to receive advice about their unborn child – will it be healthy, and if not, what are the options? What does this all mean? Where should we stand? Or is our place on the sidelines, because it has all gotten too technical and beyond us?

Let's not throw in the towel too quickly! As children of God, guided by the Holy Spirit, we have the wonderful advantage of God's Word, which teaches us what is truly important.

For our study, we will not discuss the beauty of life, but rather we will consider our mortality and the suffering we experience in life. Why? Maybe you can come up with an answer yourself:

DISCUSS: *Many use "quality-of-life" arguments to advocate abortion and euthanasia. How do we expose ourselves to that argument, when we promote life by talking about its "beauty"?*

Think of an example of someone who lost what was most beautiful to them in life – the talent around which they made a living and enjoyed, or someone who lost their partner, or a teen athlete, who can't 'afford' being pregnant right now. Here's an example:

There was a Bulgarian girl, who was such a talented pianist, that she was given a full grant to study at one of the most prestigious music schools in America. She loved music and was full of potential... but while in America, she began to suffer from a severe nerve condition. Her joy soon became pain. Just to play the piano for a little time made her hands and arms ache miserably. If she hadn't been a Christian, how convincing do you think you would have been in pointing to the beauty of life?

Thankfully God has opened our eyes to the objective beauty of life. Yet, aren't we also prone to despair at times? Aren't we overwhelmed by sorrow, guilt, depression, and weariness at various times in our lives? If we can find hope even in our darkest moments, then we will be well armed for the spiritual battle of our lives, and the spiritual battle for the sanctity of all human life.

Before we dive into Psalm 90, let's begin with prayer:

Dear Lord, from everlasting to everlasting you are God. Bless us today as we consider the prayer of your servant Moses. As we consider our mortality and the groaning of our flesh and the world, refresh us with the thought of your eternal mansions. Give us wisdom as we reflect on your gift of life and how we can protect it in today's society. Apply your Word to our daily struggles, so that we can learn from them and teach others. Give us opportunities to share your truths with those who are wrestling with their frailty. And in all that we do, lead us to give glory to your name. In Jesus' name, we pray. Amen.

Psalm 90 is the only psalm attributed to Moses, making it the oldest of the psalms (as far as we can tell). We can guess that it was written during the wilderness travels of the Israelites as they wandered about for 40 years – disciplined by God for their unbelief.

Bible Study: Psalm 90 – A Prayer for Life

PART 1: MORTALITY AND IMMORTALITY

Psalm 90

A prayer of Moses the man of God.

- 1 Lord, you have been our dwelling place throughout all generations.***
- 2 Before the mountains were born or you brought forth the whole world, from everlasting to everlasting you are God.***
- 3 You turn people back to dust, saying, “Return to dust, you mortals.”***
- 4 A thousand years in your sight are like a day that has just gone by, or like a watch in the night.***
- 5 Yet you sweep people away in the sleep of death; they are like the new grass of the morning—***
- 6 In the morning it springs up new, but by evening it is dry and withered.***

v. 1 - *From the generation of Abraham to the generation of Moses, how permanent were the homes of God’s adopted children?*

Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob lived in tents, foreigners among the Canaanites; Joseph was a slave and a prisoner, before his rise in power; when Israelites did settle in Egypt, they soon became slaves, making them and their property, property of Egypt...; and yet they were still “homeless,” wandering in the wilderness.

v. 2 - *How certain and permanent a “dwelling place” is the Lord?*

More certain and solid than the mountains the Israelites traveled around and over. He is eternally “permanent.” Can’t get any more permanent than that!

v. 3 - *What is the #1 cause for death? disease? violence? natural disaster?*

Sin. Because of our sin, God’s justice calls for our temporal and eternal death. Disease, violence, and natural disasters are just means by which God carries out his judgment.

Leader: Explain the Hebrew word “adam” points to the name of the original man. The first Adam was not created to be mortal, but to live forever. Also, the word for “dust” is different from the Hebrew word for “dust” used in Adam’s creation. This word for “dust” comes from the Hebrew “to crush.” Every son of Adam will be crushed, because of sin.

v. 4 - *A watch of the night was three hours. On the timeline of eternity, how long is the line of your life? How long will its memory last?*

From God’s view outside of time, our earthly lives are momentary.

Eternity:

v. 5-6 - *The “sweeping away” is the idea of a flash flood, washing people away into death. How many people have been able to stand against the flood of God’s justice and not be swept away into death?*

SUMMARIZE THESE VERSES IN PART ONE OF “OUR PRAYER FOR LIFE”:
Return to the beginning of this study and fill in your prayer. As mortals, what attribute of God do we marvel at? In your mortality, what help do you seek from God?

Leader: See the prayer on page 1 for suggestions.

DISCUSSION:

Some scientists are trying to extend our life expectancy at any cost. Can you name some ways in which science is willing to terminate lives to pursue longer life?

Embryonic stem cell research, cloning (extra organs), organ harvesting before death, selective reduction after in-vitro fertilization.

Their ethics show that they are not only willing to sacrifice lives, but even something more valuable. What is that? (cf. Luke 9:24)

Luke 9:24: “For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will save it.” Even if we extend our life expectancy by 50 years, what will we have gained in comparison to the eternity that God offers to us through Christ?

When does the brevity of our life serve as a comfort?

When we’ve lost someone dear to us, and we look forward to our reunion. When we or someone we love has experienced a different form of loss (talent, livelihood, ability, mental capacity, one or more of their senses). Our mortality should drive us to our immortal God, who will be our “dwelling place” now and forever. The eternity home of God certainly seems a lot more pleasing, when we suffer in this life.

A discussion on suffering might be started.

Bible Study: Psalm 90 – A Prayer for Life

PART 2: SUFFERING AND GOD’S JUSTICE

- 7 *We are consumed by your anger and terrified by your indignation.*
 8 *You have set our iniquities before you, our secret sins in the light of your presence.*
 9 *All our days pass away under your wrath; we finish our years with a moan.*
 10 *Our days may come to seventy years, or eighty, if our strength endures; yet the best of them are but trouble and sorrow, for they quickly pass, and we fly away.*
 11 *If only we knew the power of your anger! Your wrath is as great as the fear that is your due.*
 12 *Teach us to number our days, that we may gain a heart of wisdom.*

- v. 7-8 - *What was the sin of the Israelites that led God to make them wander about the wilderness for 40 years? (Numbers 14)*

They didn't trust that they would be able to overcome the inhabitants of the Promised Land. God called it "treating me with contempt... they refuse to believe in me, in spite of all the signs I have performed among them" (v. 11).

- v. 9 - *Was the suffering of those 40 years, a punishment for their sins?*

Numbers 14:20-23: *"The LORD replied, 'I have forgiven them, as you asked. Nevertheless, as surely as I live and as surely as the glory of the LORD fills the whole earth, not one of those who saw my glory and the signs I performed in Egypt and in the wilderness but who disobeyed me and tested me ten times— not one of them will ever see the land I promised on oath to their ancestors. No one who has treated me with contempt will ever see it.'"*

It was a consequence for their sins, but it was not a payment for their sins, because God forgave them, thanks to the future sacrifice of Christ. But there are consequences for disobedience. The consequence in their case was that they would never see the Promised Land (except for Joshua and Caleb, who trusted the Lord).

- v. 10-11 – *When we suffer in life, is this a punishment for our "iniquities" and "secret sins" (cf. Hebrews 10:17,18)?*

"Their sins and lawless acts I will remember no more." And where these have been forgiven, sacrifice for sin is no longer necessary. No, again, Christ already paid for our sins. But suffering and death remain consequences of our sins.

- v. 12 – *What wisdom do we gain from the discipline that God leveled on the Israelites? Read the following:*

Hebrews 12:10,11

"They disciplined us for a little while as they thought best; but God disciplines us for our good, in order that we may share in his holiness. No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it." Discipline has as its goal a strengthening of faith,

that shows itself in righteousness and peace. When we experience especially difficult discipline from God, we know he is doing it out of love – just like a coach will be harder on his star players, God shows us special attention, to make us all the stronger.

Discipline shows his love. From his vantage point from eternity, he peers keenly into our lives, and though our sins ought to bring all of his wrath, his intentions are motivated by his love.

Hebrews 3:15-4:2

“Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts as you did in the rebellion.’ Who were they who heard and rebelled? Were they not all those Moses led out of Egypt? And with whom was he angry for forty years? Was it not with those who sinned, whose bodies fell in the wilderness? And to whom did God swear that they would never enter his rest if not to those who disobeyed? So we see that they were not able to enter, because of their unbelief. Therefore, since the promise of entering his rest still stands, let us be careful that none of you be found to have fallen short of it. For we also have had the good news proclaimed to us, just as they did; but the message they heard was of no value to them, because they did not share the faith of those who obeyed.” The brevity and suffering of our lives should make us careful not to take his word for granted. We relish his Gospel and do not use it as an excuse for sin. We do not procrastinate in our life of sanctification. God warns that our eternal rest could be refused to us, for our unbelief.

SUMMARIZE THESE VERSES IN PART TWO OF “OUR PRAYER FOR LIFE”:

Return to the beginning of this study and fill in your prayer. As sinners, what attribute of God do we tremble at? In your mortal, sinful state, what help do you seek from God?

See the prayer on page 1 for suggestions.

DISCUSSION:

How has God used your personal moments of suffering to teach you to “number your days” and to gain a “heart of wisdom”?

Ask the members of the class to offer any of their own experiences; have one of your own ready, while they are thinking.

Name some ways in which the 5th Commandment is trampled, as people attempt to avoid suffering.

In-vitro fertilization costs the lives of all of the embryos that don’t survive – some people feel that this is not too high a cost to fill the empty spot of their barrenness.

Embryonic stem cell research is boasted as the hopeful cure for a wide assortment of suffering, but it comes at the cost of the destroyed embryos.

Euthanasia is the supposed escape from suffering.

Aborting a child who will live in poverty or will be born handicapped saves parents and the child suffering – so they say.

Bible Study: Psalm 90 – A Prayer for Life

PART 3: COMPASSION AND HOPE

- 13 Relent, O LORD! How long will it be? Have compassion on your servants.**
- 14 Satisfy us in the morning with your unfailing love, that we may sing for joy and be glad all our days.**
- 15 Make us glad for as many days as you have afflicted us, for as many years as we have seen trouble.**

v. 13,14 – Here we see Moses demonstrating his God-imparted wisdom. He speaks to the promises of God. In prayer Martin Luther said that we should pray to the promises of God, because then we will pray with a confident heart, because God does not lie. Listen to Moses' prayer, when God threatened to wipe out the Israelites,

(Numbers 14:17-19). "Now may the Lord's strength be displayed, just as you have declared: 'The LORD is slow to anger, abounding in love and forgiving sin and rebellion...' In accordance with your great love, forgive the sin of these people..."

What attributes of God does Moses turn to in prayer?

Compassion, unfailing love.

The "unfailing love" of the Old Testament is synonymous with the word, grace, in the New Testament. What does grace mean?

God's undeserved love.

v. 15 - How does our hope in Christ make this verse an understatement?

We know that our suffering will be small in comparison with the eternal joy we will have in heaven. Our suffering in this lifetime is only a foretaste of the suffering that would be hell. Christ suffered beyond whatever we could ever imagine, so that we will not know what true suffering is really like. How great eternal rest will be!

SUMMARIZE THESE VERSES IN PART THREE OF "OUR PRAYER FOR LIFE":

Return to the beginning and fill in your prayer. As sinners, what attribute of God do we lean on? As needy recipients of God's grace, what help do you seek from God?

See the prayer on page 1 for suggestions.

DISCUSSION:

When people lack faith in God, how do they react to: the brevity of life?

They try to do whatever they can to make their life longer and more enjoyable – even at the expense of the unborn and embryos, at the expense of those who are handicapped, have Down syndrome, or are autistic; once when I complained about our dumb dog, a friend

said, “Life is too short to waste on a dumb dog.” How awful if we apply that same line to children with a disability, or even a child who was conceived at an inopportune time.

the suffering involved in this life?

They have no problem stepping into the place of God and trying to pluck out the consequences of sin – experimentation with human embryos, with human DNA; quite the dangerous tampering.

It’s not the beauty of life that tempts us to make sinful choices concerning life issues. Usually it’s the dark side of life and its brevity that leads us down the wrong, irrational, and immoral path. When Alzheimer’s runs in the family, we are more eager to condone the destruction of embryos “for the greater good.” When we are told by our doctor that we may have a child with Down syndrome, we may convince ourselves that the child would be better off not being born. When we look at all of our flaws and inabilities, we start to daydream about how the lives of our children or grandchildren might be enhanced, if we could somehow tap into DNA coding or cloning.

If that is where temptation finds its strength, let’s have compassion on those who are struggling with pain and fear. And then lovingly direct them to the source of our strength and certainty – our immortal and loving God. Let us shine the light of God’s Word on these consequences of sin, so that we can gain wisdom and number our days – as to our mortality and as to the resurrection into eternity.

Bible Study: Psalm 90 – A Prayer for Life

PART 4: LASTING WORK

- 16 May your deeds be shown to your servants, your splendor to their children.*
17 May the favor of the Lord our God rest on us; establish the work of our hands for us— yes, establish the work of our hands.
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- v. 16 - *Though Moses and his generation were denied entrance into the Promised Land, what comfort did they have and pray for?*

Their children would see the splendor of God’s promises being carried out.

According to the verse, what is one reason for protecting the life of the unborn?
 So they might see the splendor of God’s gracious deeds in this life, and the next.

- v. 17 - *When the Israelites were originally denied entrance into the Promised Land because of their unbelief, they tried to fight their way in anyway. They were beaten back. Why didn’t they succeed? (cf. Numbers 14:44,45)*

“Nevertheless, in their presumption they went up toward the high point in the hill country, though neither Moses nor the ark of the LORD’s covenant moved from the camp. Then the Amalekites and the Canaanites who lived in that hill country came down and attacked them and beat them down all the way to Hormah.” The Lord was not with them.

Our sins have doomed all of us to a life of suffering and then death. In what way are all of the efforts of geneticists and bio-technicians doomed to failure (cf. Matthew 6:33,34)?

“But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own.” None of them will offer a life completely free of suffering and the consequences of sin. None of them will offer eternal life. In the end we all have to face God.

What work of ours has the promise of God, that he will establish it and use it to display his splendor to our children?

The Gospel message is the only “work” that lasts through the ages and into eternity. Only the Gospel shows the full beauty and splendor of God’s love. Only the Gospel can overcome the sufferings of life. Jesus alone has conquered death. Through suffering and death, he has given us the only escape from the awful consequences of sin. May our actions be Gospel-motivated, and may they point others to that same Gospel!

How does a Christian’s faith in God affect his/her attitude toward life issues?

With thankful hearts they try to do what is pleasing in God’s eyes and trust that God will bless their efforts in a way that is to their greatest benefit, even if it does involve suffering.

SUMMARY:

Wisdom doesn't come from clinging to this life, and wisdom doesn't come from running away from our problems. Wisdom comes from taking our mortality and our suffering seriously. It comes from taking God and his will for our lives seriously. Wisdom comes from hearing his promises and knowing that the Lord seriously applies them to our spiritual pains and needs.

DISCUSSION:

Are parents showing a lack of trust in God if they agree to prenatal testing on their unborn child?

Christian parents would obviously NOT follow any advice that would call for aborting the child. But a genetic counselor can look at a family's history to sort through possible dangers. Some tests can be arranged to find out if there is a problem. Some health issues can call for an operation in the womb. If a child is found to have spina bifida, the parents have the option of giving birth to the child through cesarean section – this would prevent the trauma that would occur to the spine from traveling through the birth canal, and then maybe the child won't grow up in a wheelchair. Ultimately, the parents make the final decision, and Christians would make such decisions through prayer and consulting God's Word and perhaps their pastor.

What are the potential misuses of the mapping of DNA?

Using that information to try to remap one's DNA – not just to remove disease and genetic defects, but in order to create the better human being – smarter, stronger, more athletic, more musical, more resistant to addictions or diseases. Altering the genetic makeup of people is risky business, because we're a bit short on our understanding. If we don't even understand why God created us males and females (sinful gender-role mix-up, or homosexuality), why do we think that we can do better at "making man"?

SUMMARIZE THESE VERSES IN PART FOUR OF "OUR PRAYER FOR LIFE":

Return to the beginning of this study and fill in your prayer. Add one last petition to reflect your concerns about life issues in today's world. Finish the class with your prayer.

Leader: You may choose to write their suggestions on a white board and close with a prayer that incorporates the main thoughts. Or, the class could end with a silent prayer, as each one prays the prayers that they've written down for themselves. Or, you could finish with the alternate prayer:

Alternate Prayer: Isaac Watt's Hymn, "Our God, Our Help in Ages Past" (Christian Worship #441) is based on this psalm. The class can close by reading or singing the following verses (keeping in mind what was learned).

O God, our help in ages past, Our hope for years to come, Our shelter from the stormy blast, And our eternal home,

Under the shadow of your throne Your saints have dwelt secure; Sufficient is your arm alone, And our defense is sure.

