

This psalm, a prayer written by Moses, focuses on our helplessness as mortal, sinful people before a holy God. He points out that our lives are short and we do not understand how much our sin angers the LORD. Moses asks God to show mercy and forgiveness so that we may enjoy His blessings for the remainder of our brief time on earth.

A Prayer of Moses the man of God

Being written by Moses makes this psalm the oldest in the book of Psalms, although commentators debate on what period in his life that he wrote it. Moses is described as “the man of God” which is supported elsewhere in scripture. **Deut. 34:10** “*And there arose not a prophet since in Israel like unto Moses, whom the LORD knew face to face.*” This psalm is described as a prayer and represents Moses’ prayer to God for his people, Israel.

1 Lord, thou hast been our dwelling place in all generations.

The Hebrew word translated “dwelling place” can mean a habitation, but it can also mean a place of refuge or safety. Moses looks back at the LORD’s faithfulness to Israel in the past and perhaps even looking forward to the future, acknowledging that the LORD has been faithful in His protection of Israel and will keep His promise to continue to do so in the future.

2 Before the mountains were brought forth, or ever thou hadst formed the earth and the world, even from everlasting to everlasting, thou *art* God.

Moses then proclaims that from even before He created the earth the LORD has eternally been God,. The phrase “from everlasting to everlasting” speaks of the LORD being God from eternity past to eternity future. There was no time when the LORD was not God, and, as God, He is sovereign over all of the earth.

3 Thou turnest man to destruction; and sayest, Return, ye children of men.

“**Thou turnest** [to cause to return] **man to destruction** [dust]” – The LORD has sovereign control over the lives of men and has ordained that they return to the dust of the ground when they die (**Gen. 3:19** “*In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread, till thou return unto the ground; for out of it wast thou taken: for dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return*”).

“**and sayest, Return, ye children of men**” – The LORD is in full sovereign control over the length of our lives and has the last say in when we will return to the dust of the earth. Those who kill others or themselves are not superseding God’s sovereign control.

4 For a thousand years in thy sight *are but* as yesterday when it is past, and as a watch in the night.

Moses is acknowledging that time has little meaning to God. Looking at the past 1,000 years for the LORD is like us remembering the previous day. A watch in the night was 3 or 4 hours long and 1,000 years to God is as brief a time as a watch in the night. Peter makes a similar statement, where his point is not to make a mathematical formula of how time progresses for God but to say that time is not a concern for God (**2 Pet. 3:8** “*But, beloved, be not ignorant of this one thing, that one day is with the Lord as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day*”).

5 Thou carriest them away as with a flood; they are as a sleep: in the morning *they are* like grass *which* groweth up. 6 In the morning it flourisheth, and groweth up; in the evening it is cut down, and withereth.

“**Thou carriest them away as with a flood**” – Mankind likes to think that they are significant as a race and will be around for a long time, but Moses points out that God can carry them away as if by floodwaters at any time.

“**they are as a sleep**” – Men are as oblivious to reality as if they were asleep. Scientists like to believe they know how the universe was created and how life on this earth came about, but they deny the actual truth and are as unaware of reality as a sleeping man.

Rom. 1:20-22 “*For the invisible things of him from the creation of the world are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even his eternal power and Godhead; so that they are without excuse: Because that, when they knew God, they glorified him not as God, neither were thankful; but became vain in their imaginations, and their foolish heart was darkened. Professing themselves to be wise, they became fools.*”

“**in the morning they are like grass which groweth up. In the morning it flourisheth, and groweth up; in the evening it is cut down, and withereth**” – In reality, man is a short-lived creature which can perish prematurely as easily as grass that can be growing in the morning and withering in the evening after it has been cut. Moses pointing out the contrast between mortal man and the eternal God.

7 For we are consumed by thine anger, and by thy wrath are we troubled. 8 Thou hast set our iniquities before thee, our secret *sins* in the light of thy countenance.

“**For we are consumed by thine anger, and by thy wrath are we troubled**” – Men are oblivious to the fact that they are accountable to God and are subject to His wrath for their sins. They ignore the fact that they are sinful creatures and that God’s wrath will consume them.

“**Thou hast set our iniquities before thee, our secret sins in the light of thy countenance**” – Men are able to hide some of their sins from other men, but all sins are visible to God, and they will have to give an account to Him. God can take our secret sins and set them before Himself, illuminating them in the light of His presence to be evaluated and judged.

9 For all our days are passed away in thy wrath: we spend our years as a tale *that is told*.

“For all our days are passed away in thy wrath” – Men, who are sinners by nature, spend their days under the wrath of God. The only exceptions are those who have found redemption and forgiveness of sins in the LORD.

“we spend our years as a tale [moan; groan; sigh] *that is told*” – The words “that is told” are not in the original Hebrew (as indicated by italics) and the Hebrew word translated “tale” refers to a guttural sound such as a moan, groan or sigh. Moses seems to be emphasizing that men under the wrath of God can never be truly happy or enjoy life and instead live their lives with a moan, groan or sighing under the knowledge that they will have to face God when they die (**Job 14:1** “*Man that is born of a woman is of few days, and full of trouble*”).

10 The days of our years *are* threescore years and ten; and if by reason of strength *they be* fourscore years, yet *is* their strength labour and sorrow; for it is soon cut off, and we fly away.

Moses sees the average man’s lifespan to be 70 years, with some able to live to the age of 80 if they have good health. However, living longer merely means that they endure more of the labors and sorrows of life. Further, even the longer lived men have a short life when compared to eternity.

11 Who knoweth the power of thine anger? even according to thy fear, *so is* thy wrath. 12 So teach *us* to number our days, that we may apply *our* hearts unto wisdom.

“Who knoweth the power of thine anger?” – What man truly understands the strength or magnitude of God’s wrath against sin? To us, many sins are mere annoyances and only the more violent sins are worthy of severe punishment such as the death penalty. However, as mortal human beings, we cannot truly understand how much our sin angers a holy God.

“even according to thy fear [terror; reverence], *so is* thy wrath” – We are just as limited in understanding how much our sin angers God as we are in understanding how much we ought to fear and reverence God. Isaiah became acutely aware of his sinfulness when he had a vision of God on His throne (**Isa. 6:5** “*Then said I, Woe is me! for I am undone; because I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips: for mine eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts*”).

“So teach us to number our days, that we may apply our hearts unto wisdom” – Moses prays that God would help us to understand that we have a limited number of days remaining in our lives and that we should be wise and use those days to repent of our sins and seek to obey God. **Prov. 9:10** “*The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom: and the knowledge of the holy is understanding.*”

13 Return, O LORD, how long? and let it repent thee concerning thy servants.

“Return [turn back], O LORD, how long?” – After making the case that we are under God’s wrath for our sins, Moses now asks God for mercy and forgiveness, wondering how long will He be angry with us. He asks God to turn away from His anger.

“and let it repent [to have compassion; to be sorry] **thee concerning thy servants”** – Moses asks God to have compassion on us, His servants. Moses includes himself as being under the wrath of God.

14 O satisfy us early with thy mercy; that we may rejoice and be glad all our days.

“O satisfy us early [in the morning] with thy mercy [goodness; kindness]” – The word “satisfy” speaks of satisfying one’s needs. Moses is asking the LORD to meet their needs, an act that demonstrates His goodness, and to do so early in the morning. The idea of early in the morning implies that Moses is asking that the LORD would show His mercy by meeting our needs sooner rather than later. **“that we may rejoice and be glad all our days”** – When the LORD has met their needs then they can rejoice for the remainder of the lives.

15 Make us glad according to the days *wherein* thou hast afflicted us, *and* the years *wherein* we have seen evil.

The Hebrew word translated “afflicted” means “to be humbled or humiliated” and Moses uses it here to refer to the times that the LORD would humble or humiliate Israel before their enemies because of their sin. Here he is asking that the number of days/years that the LORD would bless Israel would at least equal the number of days/years that He would humble them due to their sin. The word “evil” refers to the negative consequences that their sin has caused.

16 Let thy work appear unto thy servants, and thy glory unto their children.

Moses then asks that there be no ambiguity when the LORD is working in Israel, whether it be when blessing or punishing Israel. He prays that the LORD would enable Israel to understand that it is the LORD Who is blessing them or is punishing them, and through that understanding Israel’s descendants would see and perceive the LORD’s glory.

17 And let the beauty of the LORD our God be upon us: and establish thou the work of our hands upon us; yea, the work of our hands establish thou it.

“And let the beauty of the LORD our God be upon us” – The “beauty of the LORD” implies His delight, approval and favor. Moses asks that Israel would be allowed to enjoy these things.

“and establish thou the work of our hands upon us; yea, the work of our hands establish thou it” – By establishing the work of Israel’s hands, the LORD would be giving value and significance to their lives and the work that they did. Moses is asking the LORD to bless the work of their hands.