

Psalms 90:10

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

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.

Analysis

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. This verse describes the human lifespan's brevity and difficulty, contrasting sharply with God's eternality. After establishing God's timeless existence (v.1-2) and different perspective on time (v.4), Moses now emphasizes how brief and burdensome human life is apart from God's blessing and purpose.

"The days of our years are threescore years and ten" (יְמֵי־שְׁנוֹתֵינוּ זָהָם שִׁבְעִים שָׁנָה) / yemei-shenotenu vahem shiv'im shanah) sets seventy years as typical human lifespan. "Threescore and ten" is seventy (three twenties plus ten). Moses, who lived 120 years (Deuteronomy 34:7), isn't describing his own experience but normal human experience under the Adamic curse. Before the flood, lifespans exceeded 900 years; after Noah, they rapidly decreased. By Moses's time, seventy years was normal—matching what medical historians and archaeological evidence suggest for ancient populations.

"And if by reason of strength they be fourscore years" (וְאִם בְּגִבּוֹרֹת שְׁמוֹנִים שָׁנָה) / ve'im bigevurot shemonim shanah) acknowledges some live to eighty through gevurot (strength, might, vigor). This isn't divine blessing but physical stamina, robust constitution, perhaps favorable circumstances. Yet even these extended years offer

no escape from life's fundamental burdens.

"Yet is their strength labour and sorrow" (וְעַל כֹּחָם עֲמָל וְאָוֶן/rohbam amal va'aven) describes the content of even healthy, long years. Rohbam (their pride, their best, their strength) refers to what people boast in—health, energy, accomplishments. Yet these amount to amal (toil, labor, trouble) and aven (sorrow, iniquity, emptiness, vanity). This echoes Ecclesiastes's theme: "Vanity of vanities, saith the Preacher, vanity of vanities; all is vanity. What profit hath a man of all his labour which he taketh under the sun?" (Ecclesiastes 1:2-3).

"For it is soon cut off" (כִּי־גַז חֵישׁ/ki-gaz chish) emphasizes suddenness. Gaz (to cut off, cut down) suggests being mown down like grass—a metaphor developed earlier in the psalm (v.5-6). Chish (quickly, hastily, soon) stresses the swiftness of life's end. Just when one gains experience, wisdom, or success, life ends.

"And we fly away" (וְנִפְּחָה/vana'ufah) concludes with imagery of flying—perhaps like chaff blown away (Psalm 1:4) or birds departing (Ecclesiastes 12:4-5). Uf (to fly, fly away, depart) suggests how insubstantial life is—a brief flight, then gone. James 4:14 echoes: "For what is your life? It is even a vapour, that appeareth for a little time, and then vanisheth away."

Historical Context

Moses witnessed unprecedented death in the wilderness. The generation that left Egypt (numbering over 600,000 men plus women and children—perhaps 2-3 million total) died over forty years. At that rate, approximately 75-125 people died daily. Moses conducted funerals constantly, watching an entire generation perish. This psalm's somber reflection on death's universality and life's brevity comes from lived experience of mass mortality.

Ancient Near Eastern wisdom literature commonly reflected on life's brevity. Egyptian Instruction of Ani, Mesopotamian Gilgamesh Epic, and Greek philosophy pondered mortality. Yet pagan responses differed: some advocated hedonism ('eat, drink, be merry'), others stoic acceptance, others despair. Moses's response differs—neither hedonism nor fatalism but prayer for divine wisdom and blessing to make

brief life meaningful (v.12, 17).

The fall's curse included mortality: "Dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return" (Genesis 3:19). Romans 5:12 declares: "By one man sin entered into the world, and death by sin; and so death passed upon all men, for that all have sinned." Death isn't natural but judgment on sin. Even believers die physically (though death's sting is removed, 1 Corinthians 15:55), awaiting resurrection when mortality puts on immortality (1 Corinthians 15:53).

Historically, life expectancy varied. While average lifespan was lower (infant mortality skewed statistics), those who survived childhood often lived to 60-70. Moses's seventy years matches demographic data from ancient populations. Modern medicine has increased average lifespan in developed countries, but maximum lifespan remains roughly the same—validating this verse's observation.

Jesus's incarnation radically changed death's meaning. Though He experienced mortality, His resurrection broke death's power. Believers die physically but live eternally. 2 Corinthians 5:8: "To be absent from the body, and to be present with the Lord." Philippians 1:21: "For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain." Death remains enemy (1 Corinthians 15:26), but defeated enemy—Christ has removed its sting.

Related Passages

Psalms 19:1 — Heavens declare God's glory

Genesis 1:1 — Creation of heavens and earth

Study Questions

1. How does recognizing life's brevity—seventy or eighty years at most—affect your priorities, decisions, and use of time?
2. Why do you think even the 'strength' of extended years is described as 'labor and sorrow,' and how does Christ transform this futility into meaning?
3. How should believers balance healthy enjoyment of life with sober awareness that 'we fly away,' ensuring we invest in what lasts eternally?

Interlinear Text

יָמֵי	שָׁנָה	בָּהֶם	שִׁבְעִים	שָׁנָה	וְאֵלֶּם
The days	of our years	H0	and ten	of our years	H518
H3117	H8141		H7657	H8141	
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וְאִם	בְּגִבּוֹרֵת	שָׁמַעְוֹן	שָׁנָה	וְעַתָּה	יִהְיֶה
and if by reason of strength	they be fourscore	of our years	yet is their strength		
H1369	H8084	H8141	H7296		
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וְעַתָּה	וְאֵלֶּם	כִּי	גָזַל	יֵשׁ	וְנָעָמָה:
labour	and sorrow	H3588	cut off	for it is soon	and we fly away
H5999	H205		H1468	H2440	H5774

Additional Cross-References

James 4:14 (Parallel theme): Whereas ye know not what shall be on the morrow. For what is your life? It is even a vapour, that appeareth for a little time, and then vanisheth away.

Psalms 78:39 (Parallel theme): For he remembered that they were but flesh; a wind that passeth away, and cometh not again.

2 Samuel 19:35 (Parallel theme): I am this day fourscore years old: and can I discern between good and evil? can thy servant taste what I eat or what I drink? can I hear any more the voice of singing men and singing women? wherefore then should thy servant be yet a burden unto my lord the king?

Deuteronomy 34:7 (Parallel theme): And Moses was an hundred and twenty years old when he died: his eye was not dim, nor his natural force abated.

Genesis 47:9 (Parallel theme): And Jacob said unto Pharaoh, The days of the years of my pilgrimage are an hundred and thirty years: few and evil have the days of the years of my life been, and have not attained unto the days of the years of the life of my fathers in the days of their pilgrimage.

Job 14:10 (Parallel theme): But man dieth, and wasteth away: yea, man giveth up the ghost, and where is he?

Job 24:24 (Parallel theme): They are exalted for a little while, but are gone and brought low; they are taken out of the way as all other, and cut off as the tops of the ears of corn.

Isaiah 38:12 (Parallel theme): Mine age is departed, and is removed from me as a shepherd's tent: I have cut off like a weaver my life: he will cut me off with pining sickness: from day even to night wilt thou make an end of me.

1 Kings 1:1 (Parallel theme): Now king David was old and stricken in years; and they covered him with clothes, but he gat no heat.

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