

Psalms 90:3

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

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

Analysis

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

This verse reveals the sovereign paradox at the heart of human mortality—God both judges humanity with death and calls humanity to repentance. The same divine voice that pronounces destruction also summons return. This reflects the tension between God's holiness requiring judgment and His mercy offering restoration.

"Thou turnest man to destruction" (תָשַׁב אָנוֹשׁ עַד־דָקָה/tashev enosh ad-dakka) uses shuv (to turn, return) paired with dakka (crushing, dust, powder). Enosh emphasizes humanity's frailty—not adam (man created in God's image) but enosh (mortal, weak, dying man). God turns frail humanity back to crushing, to pulverization, to dust. This echoes Genesis 3:19: "Dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return." Death is God's active judgment, not natural inevitability—He turns us to destruction.

"And sayest, Return, ye children of men" (וְתָאֹמֵר שׁוּבוּ בְנֵי־אָדָם/vattomer shuvu veney-adam) uses the same verb shuv (return) but with opposite meaning. While God turns man to destruction, He simultaneously calls man to return—to repent, come back, turn around. Beney-adam (children of Adam, sons of humanity) connects humanity to Adam, the first man who fell and whose descendants inherit mortality. Yet God calls these children of Adam to return, offering restoration despite deserved judgment. This paradox pervades Scripture: "As I live, saith the Lord

GOD, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked; but that the wicked turn from his way and live" (Ezekiel 33:11).

Historical Context

Moses witnessed this dual reality throughout Israel's wilderness wandering. God judged the rebellious generation with death in the desert (Numbers 14:29-35), yet repeatedly called them to return and repent. After the golden calf, Moses interceded and God relented from total destruction (Exodus 32:11-14). When Israel rebelled at Kadesh, God sentenced them to forty years wandering but preserved the nation. Divine judgment and divine mercy coexisted—God turned them to destruction (that generation died) yet called them to return (offering ongoing relationship).

This verse reflects the Adamic covenant's consequences. 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." Yet even in judgment, God promised redemption through the seed of the woman (Genesis 3:15). Throughout redemptive history, God's pattern remains consistent: judgment on sin, call to repentance, provision for restoration.

The prophetic literature repeatedly sounds both notes. Isaiah pronounces judgment then offers restoration (Isaiah 1:18-20). Jeremiah announces exile yet promises return (Jeremiah 29:10-14). Joel calls for repentance with promise of blessing (Joel 2:12-14). Hosea declares God's steadfast love despite deserved judgment (Hosea 11:8-9). The dual message—judgment and mercy, destruction and return—characterizes God's dealings with humanity.

Related Passages

Matthew 25:31 — Final judgment

Revelation 20:12 — Judgment according to deeds

Study Questions

1. How does understanding death as God's active judgment (not natural process) change your perspective on mortality and eternity?
2. What does it reveal about God's character that the same voice pronouncing destruction also calls humanity to return and repent?
3. How do you reconcile God's righteous judgment with His merciful call to return, and what does this teach about His nature?

Interlinear Text

אָדָם: בָּנִי שְׁבָרֵךְ וְאֶתְּנָשֵׁךְ אֶתְּנָשֵׁךְ שְׁבָרֵךְ
Return man H5704 to destruction H1793 and sayest H559 Return H7725 ye children H1121 of men H120

Additional Cross-References

Genesis 3:19 (Parallel theme): 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.

Ecclesiastes 12:7 (Parallel theme): Then shall the dust return to the earth as it was: and the spirit shall return unto God who gave it.

Psalms 104:29 (Parallel theme): Thou hidest thy face, they are troubled: thou takest away their breath, they die, and return to their dust.

Psalms 146:4 (Parallel theme): His breath goeth forth, he returneth to his earth; in that very day his thoughts perish.

Job 12:10 (Parallel theme): In whose hand is the soul of every living thing, and the breath of all mankind.

Numbers 14:35 (Parallel theme): I the LORD have said, I will surely do it unto all this evil congregation, that are gathered together against me: in this wilderness they shall be consumed, and there they shall die.

