

Psalms 90:4

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

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

Analysis

For a thousand years in thy sight are but as yesterday when it is past, and as a watch in the night. This verse explains why God has been faithful across all generations (v.1) and exists eternally (v.2)—His perspective on time differs radically from ours. What seems like vast spans to finite humans is but a moment to the eternal God. This relativization of time addresses both despair over life's brevity and hope in God's eternal purposes.

"For a thousand years" (אלף שנים) represents the longest comprehensible timespan in ancient thought. A thousand years encompasses many human generations—far longer than individual memory or experience. For humans, a thousand years is ancient history, incomprehensible vastness. The number suggests completeness, the outer limit of human temporal reckoning.

"In thy sight" (בְּעֵינֶךָ/be'eynekha) emphasizes divine perspective—not how time exists objectively but how God perceives it. Ayin (eye, sight) represents viewpoint, evaluation, perception. From God's eternal vantage point, time appears differently than from our temporal limitation. This echoes Isaiah 55:8-9: "For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, saith the LORD."

"Are but as yesterday when it is past" (keyom etmol ki ya'avor) compares vast timespan to immediate past. Etmol (yesterday) represents the recent past—close enough to remember yet already gone. Ya'avor (it passes, goes by) emphasizes transience. Yesterday seemed significant while it was present, but

once passed, it's merely a memory. Similarly, from God's perspective, even a thousand years is like yesterday—recent, brief, fleeting.

"And as a watch in the night" (בְּלִילָה/וְאַשְׁמֻרָה ve'ashmurah valaylah) adds a second comparison. Ashmurah refers to a watch or guard shift during the night. Ancient Israelites divided night into three watches (Exodus 14:24, Judges 7:19); later practice used four Roman watches (Matthew 14:25). Each watch lasted 3-4 hours. A watch seems long while you're awake during it, but to a sleeper, the entire night passes in a moment. Similarly, vast time periods to us are but a brief watch to God.

2 Peter 3:8 directly quotes this verse: "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." Peter applies it to explain why the promised Second Coming seems delayed—God's timing differs from human impatience. What seems like delay to us is but a moment in God's eternal purposes.

Historical Context

Moses witnessed God's patience with Israel across forty years of rebellion. What seemed like endless wandering to Israelites was, from divine perspective, brief discipline before covenant fulfillment. This helped explain why God seemed slow to judge sin or fulfill promises—His timescale transcends human impatience.

Ancient peoples generally lacked modern concept of linear progressive time. Most cultures viewed time cyclically—seasons, festivals, generational cycles. Israel's covenant theology introduced linear time with purposeful direction: creation, fall, redemption, consummation. Yet even within linear time, God's eternality means He exists outside temporal sequence, seeing all time simultaneously.

Throughout biblical history, believers struggled with God's timing. Abraham waited decades for Isaac. Israel spent 400 years in Egypt before exodus. Exile lasted 70 years. Between Malachi and Christ—400 silent years. The New Testament church expected imminent return; 2,000 years later, we still wait. This verse addresses the tension: God's timetable differs from ours, yet He remains faithful.

Early church fathers used this verse to address perceived delay in Christ's return. When mockers asked, 'Where is the promise of his coming?' (2 Peter 3:4), believers answered: God is patient, not slow (2 Peter 3:9). What seems like delay demonstrates divine patience, allowing time for repentance. Eternity will vindicate God's perfect timing.

Modern physics reveals time's relativity—Einstein demonstrated that time is not absolute but relative to observer's frame of reference. While Scripture's point is theological not scientific, science's discovery that time is not absolute absolute but relative to perspective interestingly parallels the theological truth that God's eternal perspective on time differs from our temporal limitation.

Related Passages

1 Corinthians 13:4 — Characteristics of love

1 John 4:8 — God is love

Study Questions

1. How does God's radically different perspective on time help you cope with waiting for answered prayer, delayed promises, or seemingly slow spiritual growth?
2. What practical difference should it make that what seems like long delay to you is but 'yesterday' or 'a watch in the night' to God?
3. How do you balance the truth of God's eternal perspective on time with the urgency of making the most of your brief earthly life?

Interlinear Text

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|------------------------|-----------------------|---------------------|----------|---------------------|------------|-------------------|--------|------------------|---------|-------|
| כִּי | אֵת | תָּמֹלֶת | כִּי | וּמָ | בְּעֵינֶךָ | יְמָ | שְׁנָה | יְמָ | אֵלֶּךָ | כִּי |
| H3588 | For a thousand | years | H8141 | in thy sight | H5869 | are but as | H3117 | yesterday | H865 | H3588 |
| H505 | | | | | | | | | | |
| בְּלִילָה: | וְאַשְׁמָנוֹךְ | הָ | יְעַבֵּר | רָ | | | | | | |
| when it is past | and as a watch | in the night | H5674 | H821 | H3915 | | | | | |

Additional Cross-References

2 Peter 3:8 (Parallel theme): 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.

Psalms 39:5 (Parallel theme): Behold, thou hast made my days as an handbreadth; and mine age is as nothing before thee: verily every man at his best state is altogether vanity. Selah.

Matthew 24:43 (Parallel theme): But know this, that if the goodman of the house had known in what watch the thief would come, he would have watched, and would not have suffered his house to be broken up.

Luke 12:38 (Parallel theme): And if he shall come in the second watch, or come in the third watch, and find them so, blessed are those servants.

Matthew 14:25 (Parallel theme): And in the fourth watch of the night Jesus went unto them, walking on the sea.