

Feature Article

Perseverance In Ministry: A Meditation On Psalm 90

by Ken Garrett



PERSEVERANCE AND LONGEVITY

The word *perseverance* is defined as *steady and continued action or belief, usually over a long period and especially despite difficulties or setbacks*. The word *longevity*, on the other hand, simply means the *length* of something's duration, such as (as my dictionary puts it) "*somebody's employment or career*." The former is a word of rich description, including struggle and persistence, all in the context of the will of a person bent on continuing in one direction or endeavor. The latter is simply a measurement of time—a long time.

I am not the only person in the world who wants to live for a long, long time. I want to keep hiking and walking and preaching and loving for many, many years. I want to enjoy this earthly life with my wife and three daughters for decades to come. And I want, one day, not only to be a grandfather, but even a great-grandfather. These are worthy hopes and expectations, dependant mainly upon longevity.

A life marked by perseverance, however, is an entirely different ballgame. It has to do with resistance, failure, exhaustion, difficulties, and setbacks. Longevity is measured by clocks and calendars. Perseverance is recognized by character and a depth of resolve often mistaken for stubbornness. It persists in its course despite clocks and calendars. Longevity is the bottom-line guarantee of many industries - from diet plans to fitness clubs to 401K programs, all promising to be the facilitators of a long, satisfied life. Perseverance, on the other hand, makes no such promises. Sometimes things *don't* get better, at least not by a humanly measured scale. Sometimes the Lord *doesn't* heal and *doesn't* deliver on demand. Sometimes we even come to an unexpected, unplanned end of our days. While these disappointments are the enemies of longevity, very often they prove to be the ingredients of perseverance.

In past years, when describing how I thought life would unfold for me, I have used words like perseverance, credibility, maturity, character, etc. What I was really hoping for was simple longevity—and given the choice I would have traded perseverance for it any day. But not anymore.

MOSES: A MODEL OF PERSEVERANCE IN MINISTRY

Moses was a man who persevered in ministry, facing heights of success and depths of failure (both personally and in the people he led) at which we can only marvel. He was the abandoned child, the adopted prince, the avenging murderer, the fugitive from justice, the shepherd son-in-law "with a past," the man called by God to lead His people out of slavery into freedom and nationhood in a land called Canaan, the land promised to the fathers of Israel centuries earlier. Along with writing the first five books of the Bible, Moses also wrote three songs. In Exodus 15:1-18 Moses led the nation in the singing of a song of exultation after God delivered them through the walls of a parted sea and subsequently destroyed their Egyptian enemies. Deuteronomy 32 records Moses' psalm of reminiscence and warning to his people who had proven themselves prone to wander from their God. It is Psalm 90, however, "A Prayer of Moses, the man of God," that gives us the most detailed and somber look into the heart of Israel's law-giver. Let us now consider this psalm, not as pastors seeking to achieve *longevity* in ministry (although

Moses was 120 years old at his death), but as those who would learn how to *persevere* in ministry; particularly in the face of frequent disappointment and the inevitability of our own physical death.

PERSEVERANCE AND THE TIMELESSNESS OF GOD

A Prayer of Moses, the man of God. Lord, You have been our dwelling place in all generations. Before the mountains were born or You gave birth to the earth and the world, even from everlasting to everlasting, You are God.

Scholars have suggested that Moses wrote this song soon after the events of Numbers 20 while leading the nation of Israel to the land of Canaan. In that chapter, we read of four heartbreaks that Moses, the man of God, endured: 1) His sister, Miriam, died; 2) He failed to obey the instruction of God in the miracle of producing water from a rock and was told he would not enter into the Promised Land; 3) He was denied travel through the land of Edom (ethnically cousins of Israel), and so was forced to lead the nation a greater distance into the desert over more punishing terrain; and, 4) His brother, Aaron, who served as his forty-year partner in ministry, died. The death of dear family members . . . the death of a forty year dream . . . the denial of immediate conveniences necessary to proceed in the task God gave him to accomplish . . . no wonder Psalm 90 is one the most frequently read psalms—at *funerals!*

How does a man “of God” respond to such loss, failure, and disappointment? Moses rested his hope in what he knew to be true about God: *You have been our dwelling place in all generations*. These are profound words from a man who had spent at least one third of his life living in tents. A *dwelling place* is not simply an abode with four walls and a roof. It is a place marked by safety, protection, and peace. But Moses had no such place left on earth. No people with whom to share his life. No place to call home. And, finally, no longer the dream of a blessed land. All of these dreams and opportunities had passed away, one by one. Even the land on which he stood was not his own, and never would be in his earthly life. But from eternity past, God is God, wrote Moses. Before there were any mountains to climb or hills to own or lands to conquer or houses to build, there was a lasting place of rest and safety—God Himself.

If we are to stand with Moses, perhaps forced to see a future and a blessing that has been divinely delayed, we must first acknowledge that God *is*, and that He is a certain kind of person. Perseverance is a measurement of sustained direction, despite resistance, over an extended period of time. But there is a Person beyond the measurements of both time and resistance, One who has provided safety and refuge from both of these inevitable burdens of ministry. *From everlasting to everlasting—even before creation itself*—God’s existence has preceded His people’s troubles, and even the troubled world itself. As pastors, then, our security is not to be found on earth, any more than Moses’ rest would be found in Canaan. It is not found ultimately in our families or churches, as it was not found by Moses in his family or nation. It has preceded us and awaits us. It is the eternal God Himself who calls us to serve Him and suffer for Him in our ministry to His people.

PERSEVERANCE AND TIME-BOUND PEOPLE

From a consideration of the God of eternity, the God unbounded by time itself, Moses moves to the consideration of a creature who is bound by years, seasons, clocks, and timers—man.

You turn man back into dust and say, "Return, O children of men."

What a cold, clinical description of death! We are turned back into dust. The organic and inorganic materials from which our physical frames are made are deconstructed to their basic, unassembled state. I remember the stock Hollywood funeral scenes from the cowboy movies of my childhood, with a black-suited parson intoning the words, “*Ashes to ashes, dust to dust . . . the Lord giveth and the Lord taketh away . . .*” Moses reminds his readers that the Lord Himself is in sovereign control of everything, including the moment in which our bodies cease to have physical life and begin the inevitable decline back into the earthy stuff of which they were made.

The U.S. Bureau of Chemistry and Soils (now defunct) determined the cash value of the material elements of the human body (carbon, nitrogen, sulfur, magnesium, Iron, etc.) and found that our physical remains are worth about \$4.50 at today's market values.¹ The highest valued component is our skin, worth about \$3.50. All of these elements, of course, when reduced to their molecular components, become dust, or in Hebrew, *dacha*. This is not the same word Moses used in Genesis 2 to describe God's creative work in forming man out of the dust of the ground, but is instead a word that connotes the remains of something that has been crushed. It describes the rubble of a destroyed house (Job 4:19), the overwhelming devastation experienced by an abused, neglected widow or orphan (Job 22:9), the crushing defeat of the Lord's enemies (Psalm 89:10), or the devastation of His own people when persecuted by their enemies (Psalm 143:3). (By the grace of God, it also describes the crushing blow willingly endured on our behalf by a Suffering Servant - Isaiah 53:10). Here, in verse three, it is God Himself who allows us to be crushed, a crushing that is often inflicted upon our strength, love, dreams, hopes, and plans.

For a thousand years in Your sight are like yesterday when it passes by, or as a watch in the night.

Many have tried to interpret this verse as some sort of a time-wrinkle theory of God, arguing that one thousand years of our time is swallowed up into one day of *God-time*. The most direct interpretation of the verse, however, leaves no need such for a sci-fi view. Our thousand years are *like* a day, or even a portion of a day, in His sight. The passage of time is without meaning or effect to God. *We* change with time, *He* doesn't. *We* are enslaved to time, finally answering its steady call to lay our heads on death's pillow. *He* answers no such call, because time itself is an entity He created. God created suns, planets, moons, seasons, days, and nights in order to give people reference points by which to measure time and so order our lives according to its passing. God has no need to so order His life, and thus requires no such reference points. Time is one of God's gifts to humans. Of course, along the way we have created a more user-friendly instrument for the measurement of time, the mechanical clock. But while we may have devised a way to measure the increments of seconds, minutes, and hours, the idea remains the same: We are within and under the measurement and demands of time itself, and God is not. Moses placed this verse in a stanza that speaks of the weakness of humans, introduced by the assertion that the timing of our own deaths is a matter completely under the authority and control of God. Likewise, time itself, in its persistent relevance to our lives, is also a mark of our weakness and dependence upon our Creator.

As Moses stood on the heights of Mt. Pisgah and "*viewed the landscape o'er the Jordan stream*"² across a valley he would not cross, he truly was one of a handful of remaining eyewitnesses to some of the most dramatic, epic events in human history. Other than Joshua and Caleb, who would be allowed to enter the Promised Land, those who remembered the parting of the Red Sea could do so only through the blurred memories of childhood. No other Israelite was an eyewitness to the genocide from which Moses was rescued. No one remembered when the nation buzzed with the unbelievable, excited rumor that the adopted son of the queen, Moses, was a Jew! Few remained who had any clear memory of walking-staffs turning into snakes, or waters turning to blood, or Egyptian slave-owners throwing their gold at the feet of their Hebrew slaves in hopes of gaining some sort of merit from their God. As Moses approached the end of his earthly life, he must have wondered what would become of these events; would they be a mere story to read around campfires? A tale to be believed or not believed, heeded or not heeded? He would never tell his story again, for the time on earth allotted him by the Lord was coming to an end.

As pastors, we are big on vision these days—or at least we're expected to be. A pastor must be able to develop, declare, and duplicate his "vision for this ministry" at the mere raising of an eyebrow. While honoring past traditions of faithful ministry, we are often expected to peer into the future, craft this illusive thing called *vision*, and cast it before our parishioners like a spell. In Turkey I've observed carpet salesmen who skillfully and dramatically unfurl their exquisite silk carpets before easily impressed tourists. Sometimes I feel that our dream/vision/future casting efforts look very similar to these carpet-sellers, and have a similar effect on the people we lead. There is something I've noticed about our visions—they are

¹ <http://everything2.com>

² From the hymn, "*There is a Land of Pure Delight*," Isaac Watts (1674-1748).

never planned to come to fruition *after* we're gone from the scene. Such would be akin to a president designing an economic stimulus plan that he knew would not truly bear its fruit until he was out of office, leaving all the credit and glory to his predecessor! We pastors often fail to devise plans that serve the next life. Instead, we are tempted to form action plans, committees, and goals that all bear one thing in common: their end always comes while we're still able to hear the applause of the crowd, still able to celebrate how the Lord did a grand work through us. Could this defective, subservient role we've taken in regard to time itself be a cause for the superficial, *seasonal* nature of many of our ministry endeavors today? Last year's *Prayer of Jabez* will be this year's *Forty Days of Purpose*, which will be next year's . . . You can be sure of it—there will be something packaged and delivered to our offices promising to give us the vision *de jour* for which our people clamor.

Moses didn't have many tomorrows left when he wrote Psalm 90. His vision had to become something enfolded into the grand purposes of a transcendent, timeless God, or there would be no vision at all—at least not one that was worth remembering. Brothers, if our ideas of time are comprised of the comfortable measurement of days, hours, seasons, and years—all passed without a gnawing sense that a timeless God watches us—then, perhaps, we've succumbed to the idea that our God is a not a God *over* time, but exists *under* time, and works according to the same deadlines we've mistakenly assigned to ourselves. But our God is *timeless*, and as such we must purpose to live above time. We must live and minister in such a way that should we die today it would be plainly evident we have invested ourselves in the only two eternal things that can be found on the earth today—people and the Word of God; two things that, once created, will exist forever. Our weakness is often exposed in how *bound* we are to time. This weakness can only be addressed by reliance and trust in the One who exists above, before, and beyond time itself.

You have swept them away like a flood, they fall asleep; in the morning they are like grass which sprouts anew. In the morning it flourishes and sprouts anew; toward evening it fades and withers away.

With unwavering consistency, physical life is "*swept away like a flood,*" isn't it? The assurance of our inevitable demise is not a popular subject for preachers these days, but it should be. Whether in the news of the day, their memories of those whom they have lost, or the shocking jolt of a phone call in the middle of the night, many of our people come into the sanctuary on Sunday mornings having wrestled with the certainty and pervasiveness of death. But they must be told that death itself has ceased to be tyrant- that it now acts as a mere servant, commanded to carry the King's sleeping children back home at the end of a long and tiring day.³ Yes, short of the Lord's physical return we will all lay down one day in the sleep of death, but only until the day when we are awakened, on the new day that is promised. Before that new day comes, however, there is an evening in which our bodies will fade and wither like cut flowers. Ray Stedman said:

Our own personal death is the hard, harsh, square peg that refuses to fit into all the round holes we plan for our future; it is the sand in our oyster that irritates us and makes our spirits protest against it. Why should we learn all these great lessons of life and, just when we have learned them we must give them all up and there is no opportunity to exercise them? Something about that makes us protest.⁴

Moses writes of what we are afraid to speak of in our pulpits: the certainty of death, and the thumbprint of God Himself that is found at every death scene. But, of course, our message goes far beyond the fact of physical death. Stedman continues:

Now, as I near the end, I can say that looking ahead is a time filled with happy anticipation that God is going to answer all the questions which I have had to leave unanswered, because the full meaning of this present experience will never be brought out until death intervenes. Then will come all the answers, abundantly, satisfyingly, fully.

³ 1 Cor 15:54-57

⁴ *A Sermon on Death and Dying*, November 28, 1982

But we cannot lead our dear people into such “happy anticipation” if we do not stand beside them, as their Moses, and honestly face the inevitable intrusion of death into our lives.

PERSEVERANCE AND SIN-BOUND PEOPLE

From a consideration of the eternity of God, the time-bounded nature of man, and inevitability of death, Moses speaks of the universal problem in the relationship between God and man: God’s righteous indignation at the presence of sin in the people He has created.

**For we have been consumed by Your anger and by Your wrath we have been dismayed.
You have placed our iniquities before You, our secret sins in the light of Your presence.**

I am confident that Moses was not a very seeker-sensitive religious leader. The word here rendered *consumed* speaks of the end of a process or endeavor; not simply its cessation, but the manner of its end. It is an end likened to being ground down as a result of a process—a *grinding* process. To be *consumed*, then, means to be finally, completely ground down, brought to the end by the anger of an offended God. Moses writes of the dismay of those who live under such wrath. We might say that they have “come undone.” Jonathan Edwards wasn’t the only leader who preached that the hand that holds our very lives belongs to an angry, offended God. Moses, too, observed that the initial state of fallen humanity is that of being an object of God’s anger and retribution. Of course, not everyone agreed with Moses that they lived under the sleepless eyes of an all-knowing, offended God, and that their deaths were actually the fulfillment of a sentence pronounced on their parents, Adam and Eve, on the day of their fall in Eden. In like manner, our people struggle with the apparent paradox of trusting a God so full of love that His Son would die to save the world from sin and simultaneously so full of righteous anger at sin that all of creation lives under the persistent heat of His withering glare.

Instead of delivering a soothing message of hope, redemption, and healing, Moses continues to describe the futility of life under such divine displeasure.

For all our days have declined in Your fury; we have finished our years like a sigh.

I suspect this is one of those verses that tempts preachers to cringe, making them feel they need to defend a God who is not as mean as He sometimes sounds; that He is full of love and really doesn’t want to be wrathful. I don’t like to think of God’s people ending this life under the glare of a God whose chief feeling toward them (if only according to this verse) is *fury*! Do you? I don’t want them to finish their years *like a sigh* - I want them to live a very full, healthy, productive lives, both physically and spiritually – that end with the warm and grateful recognition of a benevolent God.

As Moses prepared to depart this life, he reflected on the heartache, disappointment, and persistent failure that had apparently robbed his people – God’s people (!) – of the life of blessing and meaning they could have had. As he looked back across the decades and desert expanses, he did not see the villages, synagogues, farms, and schools that might have been built by Israel—the people of God, delivered from the bondage of slavery in Egypt. Instead, he saw . . . graves. That’s why there are no archeological remains of their forty-year sojourn in the wilderness. All they left behind were graves, forever hidden by the ever-shifting sands of the desert. For although they bore the name Israel—the redeemed, saved people of God—they resisted following God, seeming to distrust and disobey Him at every turn. Instead of beginning new lives as free men and women, they wandered as punishment for their treason against God. Instead of former slaves building a culture of learning, achievement, and witness to God’s power and mercy, they became a nation of grave diggers, as each who fled Egypt, save a faithful few, died off in the wilderness. Day by day, year by year, each life quietly made its exit like a feather blown away in the breeze—*like a sigh*.

**As for the days of our life, they contain seventy years, or if due to strength, eighty years,
yet their pride is but labor and sorrow; for soon it is gone and we fly away. Who
understands the power of Your anger and Your fury, according to the fear that is due You?**

A present-day monk has written, “Awareness of mortality exerts a unique power to focus the mind and heart on essentials.”⁵ As a man who has had the “percentage of survival” discussion with his doctor following a diagnosis of cancer, I can say *Amen* to that! As we read of Moses’ seeming grim assessment of human life, particularly in consideration of its length and experience, we must remember that this is a portion of a Psalm written by a man facing the end of his own existence. It is part of a meditation on the fleeting nature of human life as it stands in its *natural* state—guilty of sin and deserving of the wrath of God.

According to Moses, the *quantity* of our days has very little – nothing, in fact - to do with their *quality*. Here, the word *pride* is actually formed from a word that describes a fight, or a battle maneuver, such as storming the wall of a city. Moses is saying, “*At the end of your life, the great battles you have fought and, perhaps, even won, will prove more costly and less profitable than you ever dreamed, for we all die and disappear from the earth.*” Like a startled bird, our spirits fly away from our bodies at death, the most unnatural physical occurrence in human experience. This is the ultimate meaninglessness and futility of a life lived in unforgiven sin and persistent alienation from the God who is the source of all life.

Let us remember, Moses is writing of the people of God—those who had entered into a solemn covenant with their Maker at Mt. Sinai. They had been delivered by the blood of a spotless lamb and had grown up following a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night.⁶ They had survived on manna from heaven and water from a rock, all provided by God. They were God’s people. And yet, while they would have certainly called themselves God’s people, they did not really *know* their God. Particularly, Moses charged them with ignorance concerning God’s anger and fury, along with the resultant failure to render Him the reverential awe that should have marked their lives. Because of their willful ignorance, and their relentless pursuit of a life apart from and uncommitted to God, they died.

In the Army, I often participated in the much-dreaded experience of “standing for inspection.” What a treat: standing at attention (a physical position that, if done correctly, results in excruciating discomfort) in the North Carolina sun along with 300 fellow paratroopers awaiting judgment! Since my eyes were fixed straight ahead, locked onto the back of the beret of the soldier in front of me, my first awareness of imminent judgment was heard and not seen:

Dirt in your barrel—gigged! Thread hanging off your shirt—gigged. (Louder) What did you shine your shoes with . . . a brick and a Hershey bar?—gigged! Where ya’ from, son? Oregon! Did your dad teach you to shave, or was he Grizzly Adams? You missed a spot—gigged!

Closer and closer came the voice, down the rank, soon to be addressed particularly to me. To be “gigged” was to be found in failure of a particular military regulation, mostly having to do with standards of the uniform, one’s haircut, or the cleanliness of one’s weapon. It seemed everyone got gigged for something.

I imagine that these eleven verses leave everyone feeling divinely gigged in some fashion: *Iniquities . . . secret sins . . .* Gigged! Some of us, I think, hoped that entering ministry would deliver us from the persistent feelings of failure and inadequacy we have carried all our lives. How sad that no one told us (or, if we were told, we didn’t really believe) that it’s only when we’re at the end - ground down to a little nub, emotionally spent, physically exhausted, certain of failure and doom apart from divine intervention - that we really get to the good stuff in ministry. The sands of our wilderness do more than simply fill the spaces between our emancipation from Egypt and our entry into the Promised Land—they wear away our false assumptions about ministry and the tendency to depend on our own skills and resources instead of God. The failures drive us to God – or else they drive us out of His ministry.

PERSEVERANCE AND NEED-BOUND PEOPLE

In the concluding verses, Moses instructs those who would persevere in ministry to live in utter dependence on a merciful God. Such dependence begins with a desire for wisdom.

⁵ Columba Stewart, *Prayer and Community: The Benedictine Tradition*

⁶ Exodus 13:21

WE NEED GOD'S INSTRUCTION

So teach us to number our days, that we may present to You a heart of wisdom.

To *number* something is to take special note of it, to assign it a specific place of meaning and import. We may number invitations sent to a party so we can plan for how many places to set and how much food to purchase. By numbering our guests, we gain the wisdom to know how to plan for the party. Moses, of course, is writing of something much more profound. He is writing of our need to assign a specific measure of importance to each of our days in ministry here on earth.

For example, most of us number our days at least once a year when we celebrate our birthday—at least I do! My birthday is a day of introspection and reflection on years long past. But that's a change from past years. When I was younger, birthdays had very little to do with the past (since there wasn't much of a past to consider). Instead, my attention was drawn to the wide expanse of endless years that awaited me—my undefined, unexplored, unknowable future. Now, all things considered, my earthly life is certainly half, if not two-thirds, completed. For me, then, birthdays are a time of reflection; not on a boundless future, but on a well-defined, expanding past.

I wonder what Moses might say to me, today, if we were spending some time together - say, while I was driving to the office in rush hour traffic. I don't know if he would appreciate Bruce Springsteen's *Darkness on the Edge of Town*, so he might reach over and turn down the volume.

"Interesting music, Ken."

"Thank you, sir," I'd say. "I saw the Boss . . . uh, Bruce Springsteen, live before he was even famous, back in '78."

He'd be polite, I think, but he would eventually get around to something challenging, one way or another.

"Glad you enjoyed the concert, way back then. Now, what's on the agenda for *today*, and how are you going to gain the wisdom that you need to face its challenges?"

I'd be silent, either in annoyance at having my music turned off, or in shock at seeing a 3,500 year-old man riding shot-gun.

"My point exactly," Moses might say. "If you don't learn from your past, by means of the explicit intervention of God Himself, it's nothing more than an old song that plays through your life like Muzak. The days of your past are to be studied, numbered, and understood as personalized lesson plans that have been designed for you by God in order to learn how to stand before Him as a wise man, and not a fool. How have you been doing in your studies?"

WE NEED GOD'S COMPASSION

Do return, O LORD; how long will it be? And be sorry for Your servants.

Beginning in Sunday School and continuing throughout our Christian education, we learn that God is everywhere at all times, and that He will never leave us. While we hold these observations as sacrosanct, how is it that one of the heroes of our faith pleads with God to *return*, and to have compassion for His servants? At first read, it seems this verse is describing a God who was once with God's people . . . but now is gone. What a devastating possibility to consider, one that I have often felt but been hesitant to identify because it seemed to challenge some of the wonderful truths about God to which I hold. The Hebrew word for *return* is the same one often translated *repent*—even when it speaks of God. Now, the implications of God repenting usually rates at least a page in any good theology textbook. Would God ever change His mind about anything? Yet, here Moses here asks God to do just that. I suspect many would like to let God off the hook and explain that Moses wasn't *really* asking God to change - that it just

seemed that way. Moses, however, was not confused about the doctrine of the immutability of God. These are song lyrics expressing the *feelings* of a complex, sensitive, faithful, lonely leader. Looking at it from this perspective, I can understand how Moses might feel abandoned, and I actually begin to experience a bit of camaraderie with him. Pastors, we aren't alone in our frequent battles of the soul, for the cry, "*Eli Eli, lama sabachthani?*" still resounds to the farthest reaches of the universe and down the darkest halls of our souls. Apparently I am not the first or only of God's servants to face the truth that I, too, am in desperate need of His compassion.

WE NEED GOD'S CONSOLATION

O satisfy us in the morning with Your lovingkindness, that we may sing for joy and be glad all our days.

Our day starts in the morning when we awaken and begin our activities. But in the first chapter of the book of Genesis we are given a clue as to the different way Moses understood what constituted a day, and when that day began. Six times he writes, ". . . and so there was evening and there was morning, one day." To Moses, and subsequently the nation of Israel, each new day began at sunset. This concept of a day being comprised of a time of darkness followed by light (exactly the opposite our definition) is found consistently in the Old Testament, particularly in the prophetic writings. In fact, the *Day* of the Lord describes a time of world-wide darkness (war, suffering, discipline of God, etc.) followed by a time of light (blessing, Messianic rule, reception of promises, etc.) Here Moses asks the Lord to bring *satisfaction* (a sense of fullness and lack of want or need) *in the morning*—after the darkness of night has passed. And he asks that this satisfaction would last forever, for *all our days*.

Brother pastors, after the darkness of the sufferings you face in this earthly life - those of your own doing, those resulting from mistreatment by others, those experienced by your residency in a fallen, sin-ravaged creation—your hope of deliverance and joy can only be found in God. Satisfaction and lasting gladness are gifts from Him, beginning, of course, at the cross of His Son, and continuing on into the very fabric of our daily experiences. Remember, Moses was a redeemed (or, *saved*) member of the covenant community when he wrote these words, yet he prayed for a lasting satisfaction from God for both himself and his people. Could it be that perseverance in the ministry demands not simply the *blessing* of salvation but also a continued desire for the *blessings* of salvation?

WE NEED GOD'S RESTORATION

Make us glad according to the days you have afflicted us, and the years we have seen evil.

We've all prayed for gladness, in one form or another, and we probably hear our people ask for it at every prayer meeting. I am struck, however, that Moses' request included a qualification: that the gladness would be proportionate to the days and years the Lord had *afflicted* them. What were these days and years? The wilderness years; that specific period of time beginning with a devastating failure, followed by 38 years of discipline that ended on the day the people of God finally crossed the Jordan River to begin the conquest and occupation of Canaan.

They had been on the edges of this land before, at a place called Kadesh-barnea. From this desert oasis Moses had sent twelve spies into the land to assess the quality of its agriculture, the military strength of its cities and villages, and the nature of the people who lived in it. The twelve spies reported that the land certainly was all it was reported to be - "*a land flowing with milk and honey*" - but they added ". . . *the people who live in the land are strong, and the cities are fortified and very large; and moreover, we saw the descendants of Anak (giants) there*" (Numbers 13:28). Although two of the spies saw the challenges of conquering such a people as irrelevant in light of the presence and promises of God, the remaining ten argued that such a military endeavor was unthinkable and certain to fail. The majority of the Israelites decided that the plan of invasion must be abandoned immediately. They even felt a change of formal leadership was in order, as Moses certainly did not have the best interests of the people at heart. For their faithless and stubborn insistence on doing things their way instead of following the Lord's command, they were sentenced to wander in the wilderness of the Sinai Peninsula for thirty-eight years, bringing the

total number of their nomadic, rootless existence to forty years—one year for each day that their own spies spent in the land of Canaan.⁷

Hence, when Moses asked God to bring gladness *according to the days* God had *afflicted*, he placed a specific qualification on the gladness. He asked that it be commensurate with *to the years of painful and heart-wrenching discipline* endured by the sons and daughters of Abraham in the desert wastelands. To his last day, Moses never forgot the wilderness, even when he stood at its edge and viewed the land of promise. To him, the gladness requested would not be fully appreciated were it detached from the pain remembered.

I've never met a pastor who hasn't suffered in and for his ministry—at least not a pastor I'd want to follow. Affliction endured and remembered is the price tag of the deepest appreciation of joy in ministry. Pastors who persevere in ministry are those who have made peace with affliction. In their hearts the troubled years are woven together with the years of gladness, and they should never be pulled apart lest the whole tapestry of a lifetime of ministry lose its unique shape and beauty.

WE NEED GOD'S ILLUMINATION

Let Your work appear to Your servants and Your majesty to their children.

We often know more about what God has done in the past and will do in the prophetic future than we know of what He is doing in our midst, before our very eyes. We miss the obvious, often blind to the fact that what *is* happening is a result of something that began in the endless, inscrutable mind of God. We are by nature *overlookers of the obvious*. Rarely do we see the forest through the trees, unless it is pointed out to us. As Moses ends his song of praise, confession, and supplication, he asks that the servants of the Lord would be given the spiritual eyesight to see the hand of God behind the workings, events, and movements of the world around them. This is the kind of revelation we still need today.

When hurricane Katrina leveled the city of New Orleans and the rest of the Gulf Coast, some of our brothers in ministry were quick to identify the disaster as the work of God, unleashed against a fallen, sinful, Mardi Gras culture of dissipation and sexual immorality. They were roundly rejected and censured—for they had applied salt to a still-bleeding wound rather than a bandage. But I think they were spot on in one respect—the hurricane did come from God. If we believe in a God of complete mastery over every part of His creation, including wind speeds and water-surface temperatures, then we must admit His ability to cause a Category 5 hurricane. The problem behind the reasoning of the dark prophets who spoke of God's judgment after the hurricane was in their claim to understand the *purpose* of God, the *reason* He allowed, even planned (!) a storm of such cataclysmic proportions. We all saw the levees break, the waters flood the streets and turn into a toxic stew that simmered for days afterward. But none of us have been told by God His precise reason for sending the hurricane.

Moses had seen great acts of historic significance in his life. He'd seen the economy of the greatest nation on earth take one bizarre hit after another, and finally collapse. He'd seen the agricultural power of the Nile River valley, one of the most fertile places on earth, become diseased and barren. He'd seen darkness "*so thick it (could) be felt*" cover the Egyptians while their Hebrew slaves walked in the sunshine.⁸ He'd seen the first-born sons of his own people saved from an angel of death by the blood of a Passover lamb, while the Egyptians watched their own firstborn boys taken, in one family after another, throughout a night of death and wailing. He'd seen a sea split down the middle, forming two walls of water through which he led thousands upon thousands of Hebrew slaves to freedom. He'd stood on the sand the next morning and saw the bodies of Egyptian charioteers washed ashore after those watery walls were suddenly collapsed around them. Those were all historical events. They really happened, and could

⁷ See Numbers 13 & 14 for the full account of the story, including the commissioning of the spies, their report to Moses and the people, the faithfulness of Joshua and Caleb, the Lord's promise of forty years of wandering in the wilderness for their failure to obey Him, and the disastrous attempt to invade the land of Canaan without the presence of the Lord.

⁸ Exodus 10:21

be observed, reported, and remembered by any people. But Moses, the Hebrews, and the Egyptians alike all were shown the hand behind those events. They were clearly told not only *Who* was turning water into blood, bringing plagues of locusts, frogs, and lice, but *why* those things were happening—the Lord God was freeing His people, enacting His plan to fulfill a promise made over 400 years earlier to bring His people out of bondage.⁹

Moses, however, knew his people well. He knew that, in time, with neglect of the *word* of God would come a blurring of the *work* of God in history. So, he asks that God's work would be made visible, would *appear*, to His servants. He asks that the Lord's work would be made evident not only to the leaders and citizens of the nation, but also to the leaders and citizens of the generations to follow: *And Your majesty to appear to their children*. The word *majesty* is a derivative of the word *ornament*, an observable feature of something that adds grace or beauty to its appearance. Apparently, it was not enough for Moses to simply know that his people had the word of God in their hands to be preserved throughout their generations; studied, copied, and obeyed. Moses prayed that the succeeding generations of Israelites would see the dazzling, wonderful, awe-inspiring beauty of the Lord; that their hearts would be as captivated by the sheer beauty of the Lord Himself as his had been on the first day he heard the Lord speaking to him from a burning bush . . . a heart that was still captivated on the day he stood before the Lord on Mt. Nebo.

We are just like Moses in this regard. My children all have professed faith in Jesus Christ, bowing the knee, going forward, being baptized, learning doctrine, etc. All the *ing's* that we Christians observe have pretty much been done by my kids. But I long to see more in them - more than the wondrous assurance that they are saved and will spend eternity with the Lord - more than a life lived along the lines of the basic moral constraints of evangelical Christianity - more than having walked the Romans Road at a point in their youth. I want them to love, *really* love the Lord. I want them to gaze on His majesty and glory and holiness with nary a thought of themselves, only an enraptured abandonment to His beauty. I don't want them to merely know His attributes; I want them to marvel at them! Moses knew that the generations of Israelites to follow him would not find their blessing and hope in mere knowledge *about* their Lord, but only in intimate knowledge *of* Him. And so Moses prays that they would gain just that: a revelation of the majesty of the Lord that cannot be discovered by human ingenuity, but can only be revealed by divine initiative.

WE NEED GOD'S CONFIRMATION

Let the favor of the Lord our God be upon us; and confirm for us the work of our hands; yes, confirm the work of our hands.

The wilderness pastor concludes his prayer with two final requests. Firstly, he asks for the Lord's *favor*. The word suggests loveliness, grace, and beauty. I'm struck that Moses does not ask that God's people themselves would become more spiritually beautiful or lovely. Instead, he asks that they would gain a greater measure of the Lord's beauty, of His favor. When my wife and I were courting we would drive to the majestic, wild Oregon coast—just for a few hours of walking on the beach, sitting on a driftwood log, watching the sun set. When I left her to enter the army, it was the way she looked in that warm, orange glow of a fall sunset that I remembered from thousands of miles away. In that favorable light, I saw her in a way no one else ever could – in a way no one had ever been privileged to see. In a similar fashion, Moses prayed for his people to be seen in the light of God's favor, with the unmistakable humility and graciousness that could only have come from the very face of God Himself. He wanted God's favor to rest on, to bathe, to *be upon* them. It's what we should want for our people as well.

Secondly, Moses asks that the work of the people of God be *confirmed*. I have been taught that when something is repeated in the Hebrew language, it's important! "*Confirm the work of our hands. Yes, confirm the work of our hands!*" Moses asks the Lord God to bring about certainty, lastingness, and significance to the efforts of His servants. These are things for which we work very hard in ministry; perhaps, too hard. According to Moses, these must come from God, and not ourselves. The Lord judges

⁹ Genesis 15:13ff

our work, and before Him alone each man stands or falls. The final confirmation of our success, our effectiveness, comes not from our own impressions, but from the Lord Himself. We are called to work hard at a task, to fulfill a commission from the Lord God, leading His chosen people through the dangerous, faith-choking, temptation-ridden wilderness of this world toward another place that has been promised. But it is *He* who actually gets them into that place. It is He who actually finishes what He began when He first saved them from a life of slavery and destruction. And so, like Moses, we are dependant on Him for a true, authoritative assessment of our labor in ministry. We often consider the work of our hands during our lifetimes. In the end, however, it is only the Lord God who truly confirms it.

I understand that many of the grand cathedrals of Europe, often taking decades and longer to complete, were begun by workmen who followed a set of plans they'd received from the building's architect. Sometimes, after many years spent constructing the cathedral, a workman would die before the building was completed. But the plans would be meticulously followed by other workmen who replaced those who died, and thus the building project continued to its completion. We too have the plans of a Master Architect, and we faithfully carry out our part on the project. But most likely we will die before the building is completed—this building constructed of living stones (cf. 1 Pet. 2:4-5). Moreover, though our work can be observed by whoever cares to look its final evaluation and confirmation are something even the greatest pastor must wait to receive from God Himself. He watches the redemption project develop through the ages - from its beginning in a Garden where two people failed, through a day where His Incarnate Son was killed on a hill, to the end when that Son hands back to His Father a creation once marred but now perfectly restored. Then, our work will be truly confirmed, perhaps by the humbling commendation, "Well done, good and faithful servant."

CONCLUSION

A couple of months ago I travelled to Jordan with a group of friends. I had the opportunity of standing atop Mt. Nebo, the highest portion of the mountain range opposite Jericho where Moses stood and surveyed the land of Canaan before he died and was buried in a secret place on that mountain. I gave a short message, looking into the faces of my friends, including my wife and my parents. I told them that we were on a spiritual journey, following in the footsteps of Moses himself:

Not because we drove from Petra to Nebo, loosely following the route that Israel would have trekked through ancient Moab, but because we've been saved from the slavery of sin and guilt, are in a wilderness, and expect to enter a land promised to us—heaven itself.

After peering through the clouds that hovered over the mountain range that day I asked the group to look down at the ground beneath their feet:

As much as Moses stood here and saw the land of Canaan stretching out before him, from 'Beersheba to Dan,' he also saw what you see right now, the earth he lived on, and would die on. *That* land, on the other side of the Jordan, was still promised to him, but *this* land is where he would die. Only a person on a genuine and, therefore, divine, spiritual journey is able to reconcile those two truths.

Our Jordanian guide had paid rapt attention and was visibly moved. He later told me this was the first time he had ever heard a touring pastor speak of the relationship of the two lands—Moab beneath Moses' feet, the Promised Land before his eyes. Most of the time, he told me, tourists stand at that spot on tip toe, leaning forward, cameras on *landscape* settings, fully zoomed to capture pictures of the city of Jericho, the hills of Judea, and the northernmost tip of the Dead Sea. They are not concerned about the land beneath their feet, but wholly fixed on the land beyond. Moses saw that land. But I think he must have looked down at some point, too, and seen that reddish, gravelly, land of Moab beneath his feet. It *was* land, but not the land to which he had been traveling for the past four decades. He could see the Promised Land. His heart was there. He'd spent the past 38 years assuming he'd die there. But the Lord who saved a baby from the Nile, a murderer from the law, and a nation from slavery would not save his leader from a death outside the land of promise. Moses' feet would touch that land on another day, in another time. But on that day, he could only see where he would one day live. He died there, in Moab,

outside the land, in the wilderness—along with his stubborn-hearted, troublesome, rebellious, law-breaking, idol worshipping, Moabite-loving people.

We all stand on this lump of clay called earth, and one day we will return to the dust from which we came—the earth will receive our bodies. Our part in God's great work will be suspended for a season, and then resumed when He awakens us. There will be no immediately discernable difference between those who were blessed with simple longevity and those who chose to persevere in ministry. But upon a closer look you'll be able to tell those who persevered: Their hands and feet will bear all the grime and scars of a long wilderness journey, and their eyes will burn with a glow that comes from a lifetime of gazing intently into a distant, but Promised Land, where a familiar Friend awaits.

. . . he persevered because he saw Him who is invisible.

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