

Psalm 90

by Albert N. Martin

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Now will you turn, please, to the 90th Psalm. And follow as I read this Psalm that I trust will become for you an instrument of profitable New Year's meditation. You will notice that at the top of the Psalm, it is called a prayer of Moses the man of God.

"Lord, Thou hast been our dwelling place in all generations. Before the mountains were brought forth, or ever Thou hadst formed the earth and the world, even from everlasting to everlasting, Thou art God. Thou turnest man to destruction, and sayest, Return, ye children of men. For a thousand years in Thy sight are but as yesterday when it is past, and as a watch in the night. Thou carriest them away as with a flood; they are as a sleep: 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. For we are consumed in Thine anger, and in Thy wrath are we troubled. Thou hast set our iniquities before Thee, our secret sins in the light of Thy countenance. For all our days are passed away in Thy wrath: we bring our years to an end as a sigh. The days of our years are threescore years and ten [that is, 70], or even by reason of strength fourscore [or 80] years; yet is their pride but labor and sorrow; for it is soon gone, and we fly away. Who knoweth the power of Thine anger, and Thy wrath according to the fear that is due unto Thee? So teach us to number our days, that we may get us a heart of wisdom. Return, O Jehovah; how long? And let it repent Thee concerning Thy servants. Oh satisfy us in the morning with Thy lovingkindness, that we may rejoice and be glad all our days. Make us glad according to the days wherein Thou hast afflicted us, and the years wherein we have seen evil. Let Thy work appear unto Thy servants, and Thy glory upon their children. And let the favor [or beauty] of the Lord our God be upon us; and establish [or confirm] Thou the work of our hands upon us; yea, the work of our hands establish Thou it."

Now as I have already suggested, it is my purpose in directing your attention to this Psalm not to give a detailed exposition of the Psalm, which would be impossible in the light of two realities, my own surface acquaintance with the Psalm and the limitations of the time allotted to one period of exposition, but I do have a very intensely pastoral concern in directing your attention to the Psalm in setting before you something of the structure of the Psalm and an outline of its contents. And that pastoral concern is simply this: in the first Psalm, the blessed man or woman is described as the one who meditates in the Law of God day and night. And one of the problems that the true people of God face is that with their desire to meditate on the Word of God, they often find themselves at a loss as to how to meditate or precisely where they should meditate on the Word of God in terms of their present circumstances. And believing that each one of you who is in Christ and is in any kind of a healthy state of soul desires to have your perspectives regarding the passing of this calendar year and the coming of another year, to have your perspectives regulated by the Scriptures, I desire to give you at least enough acquaintance or an

appetizer in the 90th Psalm that will whet your appetite for further reflection and meditation.

Now let's notice by way of introduction just something concerning the author of this Psalm. We have every reason to believe that Moses was indeed the one who penned this Psalm. There is no reason to doubt the validity of ascribing this Psalm to Moses who is here called the man of God. And surely among the Old Testament figures, perhaps none except Abraham stands higher in stature than does Moses, this great man of God who walked with God, who spoke with God face to face as God spoke with few men, the man who was the administrator of the old economy, who was, according to Hebrews, faithful in all his house. And Moses in all likelihood penned this Psalm towards the close of his own earthly life and ministry. He penned this Psalm as one who could look back over the history of his own life, over the history of the life of the people of God both in Egypt and then as God brought them out of Egypt, and then perhaps throughout the great majority of those forty years of wondering at the end of which you'll remember that the Lord was pleased to take the life of Moses and then personally bury him in a place that was never revealed to the people of God.

Someone has estimated that during those wilderness wanderings, Moses witnessed approximately fifteen thousand deaths per year. When we take the record of those who came out of Egypt and try to calculate the general figures of how many came out of Egypt, what the normal birth rate would be, and then the fact that in those forty years God says that entire generation that came out of Egypt died off. Their carcasses rotted in the wilderness. And only Joshua and Caleb of that generation were privileged to go into the land of Canaan. Here was a man who had seen something of the ravaging effects of death upon the nation he loved, to which he had given himself as God's appointed leader. Approximately fifteen thousand times a year he had heard some of the wail of those who had lost loved ones and had witnessed the burial of different members of the nation of the children of Israel. And it's out of that very realistic perspective of an old man who has constantly lived in the midst of death as the leader of God's people that he writes this Psalm in which, as we have the title in the 1901 edition, sets forth God's eternity and man's transitoriness.

Now as you seek, I trust, to use the Psalm as a basis of meditation in your own reflections upon life as you stand on the threshold of a new year, let me suggest that you view the Psalm first of all in terms of the first two verses as constituting the initial unit of the Psalm. And in verses 1 and 2, we have what I am calling Moses' fundamental confession of faith. The first element of that confession is that God has been the habitation of His people in all periods of their pilgrimage. "Lord, Thou hast been our dwelling place in all generations." Now imagine what this meant to a man like Moses. He knows the history of His people. From the time Abraham was 75 years old, he was a sojourner, he was a pilgrim, he was a wanderer, he was a nomad with no certain dwelling place. Following Abraham was Isaac and Jacob and then the sons of Jacob and the four hundred years down in Egypt, and now the majority of the years of the wandering in the wilderness. And during that entire span of time covering hundreds of years, the people of God have had no piece of real estate that they could call their own. There was no sense of the permanence and settledness and security that comes with being able to point to a place and say, "That's my house. That's my home. That's my dwelling place." But Moses makes this wonderful confession of his own experience and the experience of all the people of God that the Lord Himself has been the dwelling place of His people in all generations. From one

generation to another, God has come in covenant faithfulness and pledged Himself in that crowning promise and blessing of the covenant that He would be the God of His people. He would be theirs, and they would be His. And so he begins the Psalm with this fundamental confession of faith that focuses upon God Himself in covenant faithfulness as the habitation of His people. And then the second aspect of his confession of faith is that which pertains to God as the eternal and the unchangeable one (v. 2). This God who is the dwelling place of His people is a predictable God because He is the eternal, unchangeable God. "Before the mountains were brought forth, or ever Thou hadst formed the earth and the world, even from everlasting to everlasting, Thou art God." The moment we try to use human language to express eternity, we feel both the impoverished nature of language and the limitations of a creature of time trying to think in terms of timelessness. And perhaps there is no more eloquent and simple expression of this great reality than is found in verse 2 of Psalm 90: "Before the mountains were brought forth...." Mountains in Scripture always represent that which is permanent and unchangeable. You remember in the 46th Psalm: "though mountains [the very symbol of permanence] be shaken in the heart of the seas, [we will not be afraid]." So Moses is asserting,

"Before the mountains were brought forth [those constant reminders of that which from the standpoint of creation is permanent and stable], or ever Thou hadst formed the earth and the world, even from everlasting to everlasting [from eternity past, if we may use the term, to eternity future], Thou art God."

And you see, if there were any change whatsoever in God, what had been from eternity would not be the same as what now is or what shall be. And in this very simple but eloquent way, we have testimony to what theologians call the immutability, the changelessness of God. And because He is changeless, He is predictable in terms of His covenant commitments. And that God who, of course, has been supremely and finally revealed in the Lord Jesus Christ--of that very Christ it can be said, "Jesus Christ, the same yesterday, today, and forever." And the writer to Hebrews ascribes to our Lord the very qualities that are here attributed to God. So then, Moses, as he comes to the end of his days, having been forced by the realism of constant interaction with death, constant manifestations of the tragedies of life, begins on this very positive confession of his faith: God has been the habitation of His people, and this God is eternal and unchangeable.

May I say by way of application that here Moses sets a wonderful example for us as the people of God. As we would seek to meditate to our profit as we stand at the close of this present year and on the threshold of a new year, upon what should we focus our meditation as a starting point? Well, you do not focus it on man in all of his changeableness, upon yourself in all of your changeableness, upon your failures, upon the failures of your fellow creatures. But you must begin where Moses began. Begin not with God in abstraction, but God in the wonder and the glory of His covenant commitments to His people. He is the dwelling place of His people. From one generation to another, He has manifested Himself to His people as He did to Abraham as the God of grace, the God who says, "I will be their God, and they shall be My people." And because this God is from everlasting to everlasting, we can count on His unchangeable faithfulness. And it is there we must begin our meditations. It is upon this reality that we must ground every other consideration.

Then the second unit of the Psalm--and this is not an absolute division, but it is one I hope you will find workable--begins with verse 3 and concludes with verse 11. And it

is what I'm calling Moses' accurate assessment of man's experience. From his confession of faith in God as the dwelling of His people and the unchangeableness of God, he now takes up the subject of man and God's dealings with him: "Thou turnest man to destruction, and sayest, Return, ye children of men." And even though men should live a very lengthy life as they did, you remember, in those days early in the history of the world when it was not uncommon for men to live seven, eight hundred, and then some even into nine hundred years. Yet before God, this is nothing: "For a thousand years in Thy sight are but as yesterday when it is past, and as a watch in the night." The Hebrew has divided up the night into three watch periods. And he says a thousand years are but as one segment of the night, one watch in the night. "Thou carriest them away as with a flood; they are as a sleep: 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. For we are consumed in Thine anger...." He brings together a number of lines of imagery, various analogies in which he accurately assesses man's experience. And we can perhaps summarize what he says under three simple statements.

First of all, under the sovereign will of God, man is a transitory creature: "Thou turnest man to destruction. [Thou turnest man back to the dust from which he came.]" Now here Moses gives an accurate assessment of man's experience. He had seen again and again and again people who in the flush of their youth were vigorous and full of all of the vision and energy of youth. He had seen them mellow with the passing of the years. He had seen their faces become lined with age and their bodies weakened. And he had seen them die. And he says behind this process is the activity of this God who is the dwelling place of His people, this God who is the changeless, eternal God: "Thou turnest man to destruction." He sees in operation the sovereign will of God in constituting man in his present condition a transitory creature.

Secondly, one of the motifs that runs through verses 3 to 11 is that Moses sees man as existing under the wrath of God. And there are several references to this: "For we are consumed in Thine anger, and in Thy wrath are we troubled" (v. 7). Verses 10 and 11: "The days of our years are threescore years and ten, or even by reason of strength fourscore years; yet is their pride but labor and sorrow; for it is soon gone, and we fly away. Who knoweth the power of Thine anger, and Thy wrath according to the fear that is due unto Thee?" The obvious cause of that anger and wrath is the sin of man: "Thou hast set our iniquities before Thee, our secret sins in the light of Thy countenance." Moses was not a humanist. He did not believe in the ultimate goodness of man. He had lived too long with himself, and he had lived too long with the people of God to have any dreamy notions that every day in every way we're getting better and better. No, no, Moses himself knew to the bitterness of his own soul how that in a moment of weakness, though he had talked face to face with God, and though he had been commended for his meekness and his forbearance, he disobeyed God and struck the rock and spoke abusively of the people of God. And God said, "For this cause, you will see the land, but you will never enter it." And before he died, he was given the privilege of going to a place where he could view the land from afar, but he never entered it. And so Moses, as he assesses the realities of life, comes to the conclusion not only that in the sovereign will of God man is a transitory creature, but man is a creature under the wrath of God.

Then he concludes with a question which brings these two things together: "Who knoweth the power of Thine anger, and Thy wrath according to the fear that is due unto Thee?" He says, "In light of these realities, who among the sons of men has a

due appreciation of this reality?" The question, of course, is not answered in the passage. But surely the answer is implied in the very way he asks the question: that one of the tragedies of our sin is that our sin has blinded us to the very realities that our sin has brought upon us. It's unthinkable that men living in this generation could have high, lofty, confident views of man's ability to sort himself out. Surely the history of the past fifty years and the conditions of our own nation in the past twenty years would convince any man who had half an eye one-third open that any notion that man is either getting better or has the ability to make himself better is sheer folly. Yet Moses must have felt something of that even in his own day. And in the light of these realities, he says, ""Who knoweth the power of Thine anger, and Thy wrath according to the fear that is due unto Thee?"

May I urge you as you meditate upon this Psalm as you find occasion not only to begin where Moses began, but go where Moses went from that beginning. Beginning with the great reality that God is the dwelling place of His people--He is the changeless, eternal, immutable God--then look out from that perspective upon man, man as he is, turned again and again to destruction; man as he is, obviously under the wrath of God as Paul so clearly articulates in Romans 1:18: "The wrath of God is [already being] revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men who suppress the truth in unrighteousness." And then he describes the manifestations of the wrath of God. And you see the tragedy in our own society. The very things that are an indication of the wrath of God are being spoken up as indications that man is finally coming to his own. What a tragedy! The wrath of God is revealed when God gives men up to perversions in terms of human relationships, when there are covenant breakers at every level of human relationships, when there is a reversal of the sexual roles and there is homosexuality, when there is covenant breaking of all sacred ties that bind men together. Paul says this is an indication that God has given men up. Because they have so set their hearts upon sin, God says, "If that's what you want, I'll give it to you." Moses had witnessed that in his own day. He had seen them turn to idolatry. He had seen them turn to all forms of perversion. He had seen them in their rebellion against the law of God and against the leadership that God had instituted. Moses had observed these realities. And I urge you to take a long, hard, sober, realistic view of man's experience and come to grips with the fact that God is turning man back to destruction, that man is living out his life now in a situation conditioned by the wrath of God. God grant that as you reflect upon this, you will come to the question of verse 11. If you're looking at things as they really are, the test will be that you will cry out with Moses, "Who knoweth the power of Thine anger, and Thy wrath according to the fear that is due unto Thee?"

Well then, from his confession of faith and his accurate assessment of man's experience, the Psalm concludes with Moses' petitions appropriate to these facts. In the light of what God is to His people (their dwelling place), what He is in Himself (the unchangeable, eternal God); in the light of what man is (a transitory creature existing in a condition in which the wrath of God is manifested), Moses frames some petitions that are most appropriate to those realities.

The first is a simple plea for a sane reaction to those realities. Look at verse 12: "So teach us to number our days, that we may get us a heart of wisdom." Facing those realities, he prays for himself and the people of God who yet live: "O God, give us a heart of wisdom that we may number our days." Now think of it, no one can dispute the fact that the allotted time span for the average man or woman is 70 or 80 years. And yet most men live as though they were going to live forever. They do not number

their days. They can calculate the distances between galaxies in terms of numbers that blow our minds. When people start talking about expanses that involve a number and then 25 or 30 zeros after it, I find I'm staggered when they start quoting these figures. Men can calculate in every realm but in the realm that counts the most. Moses had lived to see people squandering away their days as though they had an unlimited supply of them. And he says we don't have an unlimited supply. Even if we are given our full allotment of 70 or 80 years, there is a fixed number to our days. "So teach us to number our days," that is, to realistically come to grips with the fact that man is transitory. He is like the grass that is growing up and shall be cut down. He is like the watch in the night that passes so quickly. Moses says in the light of that, "that we get a heart of wisdom." And what is a heart of wisdom in the context? It is a heart that dictates a pattern of life commensurate with the brevity of life. And anything else is folly because it is living out of touch with reality. "Be not unwise," Paul says, "but understand what the will of the Lord is, redeeming the time [buying up the opportunities], for the days are evil." There's a New Testament parallel to this very prayer.

Now for you children, it's hard for you to think that your days are numbered, but they are. If you're 10 years old, you've already used up one-seventh of your allotted time if God gives you your full 70. Think of it, one-seventh. And before long it will be one-sixth. And then before long it will be one-fifth and one-fourth and one-third and one-half and two-thirds and three-quarters.

I shall never forget to my dying day as long as God gives me my memory the trauma of my 40th birthday some six and three-quarter years ago. Because I had thought in terms of the history of longevity in my bloodlines, and without presuming upon the goodness of God, assuming that by heredity, if God is pleased to use the genes that went into what made me me and these other factors, that perhaps I would be given my 80 years, the thought that on the first day after my 40th birthday I was starting down the other side of the hill to go through that door that only swings one way, I tell you, I was struck and sobered like I've never been sobered. As long as I was in my 20s and 30s, though I trust I lived in the light of the fact that God could take me at anytime, it was always thought, I'm still climbing up that hill. You see, I hadn't reached the halfway point. But suddenly you're there, and you've reached it. And I had heard others tell me this, and now I know it by experience: once you reach that, you don't go down the same rate you came up. You go down the hill a lot faster than you went up. And time seems to crawl when you are 10, 11, and 12. You wonder if you'll ever be a teenager. And then you remember that 13th birthday. Then for a girl, there's something special about her 16th, and for a boy, his 18th. Now he's supposed to be a man. He's got six whiskers on his chin, and he has to shave twice a month. And then he can't wait till he's 21. And it seems like time drags. And then as you begin to take on life's responsibilities, time begins to gather momentum, and no longer does it drag. It begins to walk, and then it begins to briskly walk, and then it begins to run. There's something about that 40th birthday. It begins to take wings and fly. And I'm told that after the 50th or 60th, it kicks in the afterburner and breaks the sound barrier.

Now when Moses prayed, "So teach us to number our days," he's saying, "Lord, apart from your grace working in our hearts, we'll be fools; we'll act as though our days have no number. "Teach us to number our days that we may get us a heart of wisdom." And so Moses' petition is appropriate to the facts that he's laid out in the previous part of the Psalm. First of all, there is the simple plea for a sane reaction to

these realities. And then there is a series of petitions appropriate to those concerns. And some have suggested that you have six specific petitions. Some may be parallelisms in which you have one petition enlarged from a little differing perspective. But try to catch something of the overall thrust and burden of those petitions.

"Return, O Jehovah; how long? And let it repent Thee concerning Thy servants." Now that plea for God to return is not as though God has forsaken His people and He's asking them to come back. He began in verse 1: "Lord, You've been the dwelling place of Your people." No, but it has to do with God being propitious to His people, God returning in the sense of looking upon them again with favor by pardoning their sins and thereby repenting, once again manifesting His favor and His smile upon His people.

"Oh satisfy us in the morning with Thy lovingkindness, that we may rejoice and be glad all our days." He asks that he may know the presence of God in favor. And then as one of the wonderful fruits of that presence, there will be rejoicing and gladness all the days that yet remain.

"Make us glad according to the days wherein Thou hast afflicted us, and the years wherein we have seen evil." "Lord, as You have shown Your wrath and displeasure upon our sins, now come with singular tokens that are just as evident with respect to Your mercy and Your goodness."

"Let Thy work appear unto Thy servants, and Thy glory upon their children." You see the plea? Moses' heart now enlarges, and he longs that God would come forth to the baring of His arm not only to Himself, but there is this broader concern. He prays for the servants of God. And then he thinks of the upcoming generation, that the glory of God seen in the mighty works of God would be manifested to the children of the people of God.

"And let the favor [or 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 so we see the great concerns of these specific petitions. Having prayed that he would have that wisdom that takes due account of the brevity of life, of the allotment of days given by God, and does not go on in the madness of thinking life will exist forever, what kind of life does he want? You see, almost anyone would request a lengthening of his life simply on the basis of that innate desire to preserve life. But now the question I press upon you is this: what kind of life do you want in the extension of that life? Is it that you might have more days upon which to squander God's gifts, more days in which to carry out a life of rebellion and indifference to the claims of God in His law and in the Gospel? Not so with Moses. He asked for wisdom to number his days. And then he asked that those days be filled with a sense of the presence of God, the favor of God, the blessing of God, the manifestation of the glory of God in the works of God, and that he might be useful in the work which he performs until his task is done. You see, again in Scripture, there is no warrant for the thought that serious reflection upon the issues of life and death produce a kind of detached and impractical mysticism. No, no, Moses draws aside long enough to meditate and reflect in order that when he goes back to his tasks with his sleeves rolled up and sweat upon his brow, he may attack those tasks with all the vigor of a man who knows his days are numbered. And he longs that in those tasks, he may know the presence and the blessing of the God who is his dwelling place.

Well, I suggest to you who are the people of God, surely this Psalm provides a wonderful framework for prayer and meditation as we stand on the threshold of a new year. But I would be foolish to think that all of you here tonight can be rightly addressed as the people of God. There are some of you who perhaps can parrot the words of verse 1, but you cannot say them in truth: "Lord, Thou hast been our dwelling place." God is not your dwelling place until you know that God as He's revealed in His covenant promises and in His saving activity in the Lord Jesus Christ. God is not your dwelling place until you have fled for refuge to the Lord Jesus Christ Himself. And all that is said in verses 3 through 11 is eminently true of you.

You are in the process of being turned back to destruction. Each indication of the seeds of death in your body, whether it is in the appearance of another crow's foot at the eyes or a wrinkle in the folds of the chin or in the falling of a hair from the temples, whatever is an index of the passing of time and the advancement of age and the seeds of death, these are constant and eloquent preachers to you, my friend, saying God is turning you back to destruction. And that physical death which will overtake you is just a frightening preview of that death of deaths which is separation of soul and body from the presence of God in that place that the Bible calls Gehenna, hell, the lake of fire, outer darkness.

And O my friend, that God has been merciful to you and brought you through another year. Don't you realize what a burden you've been to God and His Word? Taking the gift of life and squandering it upon the pursuit of your own carnal passions. The earth itself groans beneath your feet while you live on God's earth in defiance of His Law and indifferent to His glory, and above all, indifferent to the Gospel of His Son. O, do you not know that the goodness of God is intended to lead you to repentance? Don't despise that goodness. Pray with Moses, "O God, teach me to number my days. Help me to bring near that hour when I must be summoned out of this life, when I like the grass shall be cut down and wither. And having died, I must go to judgment. O God, help me to number my days."

You see, this is no attempt to try to scare people into getting serious about the Gospel. These are facts, my friend. You can't argue with them. You're on your way to death. You may have some kind of carnal hope when you hear a talk show that some brash physician says we are now unlocking the mystery of aging, and in another 50 years we may be able to obliterate death. I simply laugh at the poor fools--poor, educated, brilliant fools. My friend, all those secret hopes you may cherish--there is no substance to them. God is turning man to destruction because man is a sinner, and the wages of sin is death. And it's appointed unto man once to die.

May God grant that if you stand on the threshold of this new year out of Christ; the living God is not your dwelling place, my friend, God offers Himself to be the dwelling place of every poor, helpless sinner no matter what your sin has been if you will come through the Door that He has appointed, and that Door is His Son. No sinner has ever been turned away because he sinned too much or sinned too greatly. He invites every sinner to come. O, that this new year would find you saying for the first time in truth, "Lord, You are my dwelling place." And then in the confidence that He is your God, you then can begin to live with the great passion that Moses expressed in his prayer, that it might be life lived in communion with God, life lived under the blessing of God, in the joy of God, with the presence and power of God upon your labors.

I realize I'm speaking to many young mothers and parents of little ones who seem to be absolutely hemmed in with the pressures of just meeting the bills from week to week and responding to the cries for help: "Mommy this, Mommy that, Daddy this, Daddy that." You wonder at times, is there ever going to be an end to it, any meaning to it? My friend, the end will come very, very quickly. You'll sit there at family worship a few years from now and say, "How in the world did all three of my kids become teenagers? How did that happen?" I love that song from Fiddler on the Roof: "I don't remember growing old, dear. Sunrise, sunset, time passing so swiftly." O dear young mother, young father, take this 90th Psalm; make this your prayer:

"Lord, as I face a new day [you may not even have time to go away and kneel and pray; your hands may be busy while you're praying], establish the work of my hands upon me. Establish the work of my hands upon us. The work of our hands, establish Thou it, Lord. May every service performed in the care of these little ones be an offering unto you as I fulfill my God-appointed role as a mother, as a father and provider and organizer and administrator of the household. Lord, in the midst of all of this, may Your glory be manifested in your works, not only to us, my wife, my husband, and me, but O Lord, upon our children."

You see how much fuel there is here for fruitful prayer. I trust that God by the Holy Spirit will take this very simple and cursory overview of this Psalm that has been my companion for many years and be pleased to make it profitable for each one of us as we seek to do what the Scripture says the blessed man or woman does. He meditates on the law of God day and night. Take the prayer of Moses the man of God and make it yours. Be sure to begin where he began with that great confession of faith. Then look out and view life realistically as he viewed it in verses 3 to 11, and then make that earnest prayer your prayer, that you would number your days and have a heart of wisdom. And then those specific petitions which he prayed, make them yours. Flesh them out with the particulars that apply to your situation as they apply to no one else's. God delights when we do that as His children. And I believe if we do, under the blessing of the Spirit of God, we will find that we have not entered the new year in vain. Amidst all of the time that you legitimately spend with loved ones feasting and laughing, and some of you no doubt watching football games and all of the rest, may God grant that you'll make time to sneak away and sit down with Moses the man of God and meditate upon his prayer to the profit of your own soul.

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