Our lives tend to shift between two moods. I do not mean dramatic swings between great elation or deep dejection, but rather the simple shifts that are part of the quiet rhythm of the everyday. They raise us from the stability of routine to a warm feeling of confidence, or lower us into doubting that anything really matters or is worth our effort.

Our psalm speaks to me of this alternation of temper. We begin it confidently enough. After all, it is a psalm, part of our sacred literature, something Jews have recited for millennia and perhaps familiar from the early part of the Shabbat morning service. It announces itself—quite uniquely—as “A prayer of Moses, the man of God.” If Moses could say this, then surely we will benefit from his words. And, like all good prayers, it reminds us “before Whom we stand,” as the common synagogue ark wall motto has it. We turn to God, this time addressed as the Ever-was-and-Enduring-One who has been a lasting source of help to us (vv. 1-2). This description of God’s deathlessness initially seems only a basic expression of trust, but it will soon return, with a rather ominous shift, exactly as a mood swing does, to us.
For beginning in verse 3 a more troubling tone appears. God wants us to stop taking ourselves and our accomplishments so seriously. Looking back now on the accomplishments we worked so hard for over the years, what happened to them? What were they really worth? Can we even remember all the things that we were once so intense about—or took such care to evade? And if we still esteem them, what really do they amount to in God’s “eyes” for whom “a thousand years...are like yesterday...like a watch in the night,” “a flood,” “a sleep,” or the overnight grass (vv. 4-6)? Useless, all useless; empty, all empty. A sigh rises from the soul.
1. A prayer of Moses, a man of God:
   Adonai, You have been a refuge for us
   in every generation.
2. Before the mountains were born,
   before You brought forth the earth and the
   inhabited world,
   from world to world—
   You are the Almighty.
3. You bring people down
   from arrogance to contrition;
   You say,
   ‘Return to Me, children of Adam and Eve!’
4. For a thousand years are in Your eyes
   like yesterday, which has just passed,
   like a watch in the night.
5. The stream of human life is like a dream;
   In the morning, it is as grass, sprouting fresh;

The mood intensifies, moving on now to what we see
as the cause of our dis-ease: God’s anger, fiercely executing
God’s justice (vv. 7-9). For we cannot stand before God
claiming to be wholly righteous and thus worthy of God’s
good gifts: Life, health, and all that properly goes with
them. In simple truth, we haven’t done all God wanted us
to do—and though we can’t think of anything so terrible
that we did, we are reminded that God knows even our
“hidden misdeeds” (v. 8). So, in a bitter charge, the psalm
says all our life, brief as it is, has been permeated by God’s
wrath. Surely there are people whose lives have been an
unending succession of tragedies.
Despair threatens to overwhelm us—but even as we feel that, another thought arises in us: This is a prayer of Moses. “The man of God” may fearlessly acknowledge the aching sense of human transitoriness, but he does not lose hope. And, so we trust, neither will we, praying a “Prayer of Moses.”

A subtle hint of confidence now asserts itself, that the human lifespan is seventy years, occasionally eighty—no small matter when the average child born in biblical times was lucky to make it to thirty-five (v. 10). The numbers are comforting and remind us of what often happens. But the numbers will not magically banish all our momentary
6. In the morning, it blossoms and flourishes; but by evening, it is cut down and shrivels.
7. So are we consumed by Your anger; we are terrified by Your rage.
8. You have placed our sins before You; Our hidden misdeeds are exposed by the light of Your countenance.
9. All our days vanish in the glare of Your wrath; We have used up our years, which pass like a word unspoken.
10. The days of our years may total seventy; if we are exceptionally strong, perhaps eighty; but all their pride and glory is toil and falsehood, and, severed quickly, we fly away.
11. Who can know the force of Your fury? Your rage is as awful as our fear!
12. To count every day—teach us, so we will acquire a heart of wisdom.

feelings of loss and deprivation. There is too much about their caustic realism that is true. Life can easily grind us down and before we know what has happened it has flown away. When this distemper seizes us, we see God as very fierce and unrelenting indeed (vv. 10-11).

Is it too modern to say that all this harshness ascribed to God may, underneath, say more about us than God? We are angry, mad that another trouble has come upon us. But now the several references to our sins are highly suggestive. Perhaps we are particularly sensitive because we fear that our inattention or misdeeds may make us partly (largely?) responsible for putting us in harm’s way.
Acknowledging these very deep, disturbing feelings—which confess our possible complicity in what has happened—doesn’t turn life into a yellow-brick road to dance down. But it helps us distinguish our passions from our sober sense of God’s nature. In any case, this emotional discharge has had one effect, for the poem’s tone now changes. To begin with, we admit that maybe we might learn something from all of this. As we say, “If I ever get over this, I’ll be a different person” (v. 12). Then, too, we find ourselves hopeful enough to ask God quickly to turn our tears to joy and keep us untroubled in the future (v. 14) or at least to compensate us for all our suffering (v. 15).
13. Return, Adonai—how long?
   Take pity, have compassion on Your servants.
14. Satisfy us in the morning
   with Your Hessed/Lovingkindness,
   and we will sing and rejoice all our days!
15. Give us joy
   that will challenge the days of our affliction,
   the years we have seen evil.
16. Let Your work be revealed to Your servants,
   let Your splendor be on their children.
17. May the pleasantness of my Master, our God, rest
   upon us,
   and may the work of our hands be established;
   Establish the work of our hands!

More, we’d like all that love and kindness we have known from God to be manifest, not just to us but to our children as well (v. 16). And, since we must not forget how ephemeral we really are, we ask God to invest our striving with some of God’s own enduring power. Yes, all things considered, we are again quietly confident about life and its promise—as long as we have God’s help. Once more we say, “God, establish the word of our hands” (v. 17).

Will our prayer be answered? That is for God to determine. But in one sense, it already has been, for we end this prayer different from when we started it.