

CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

717 North Stapley Drive, Mesa, AZ 85203 Phone: (480) 833-7500

Website: www.churchredeemeraz.org

Series: Special Message
Number: New Year
Text: Psalm 90
Date: January 4, 2009(am)

Pastor/Teacher
Gary L. W. Johnson

THE CALL TO REMEMBER AND TO NUMBER OUR DAYS

Roger Nicole is one of the truly great Reformed Theologians of the last 50 years (he is 96!). Recently he was honored with a biography which opened with this jewel about the importance of musing on the past: “There is a biblical injunction about musing: Deuteronomy 8:2 – ‘Remember how the LORD your God led you all the way...’ More than fifty times in Scripture, we are challenged to remember, perhaps supremely in the Lord’s Supper: ‘In remembrance of Me’ (I Cor. 11:24-25). Thus our knowledge of the past must serve us in our decisions in the present. Our experience in the past is an important element in our preparation for the future. It should help us to avoid repeating the mistakes that we made previously. Memory is the bond that unifies the series of experiences and decisions that constitute our life.”¹ If we turn to Psalm 90, we discover that Moses ponders the passing of time in terms of its bearing on life and death, sin and God. He seeks wisdom in order that he might live the remaining days of his life in light of the fact that he knows that one day he will finally die. Nowadays this kind of “reflective” thinking is considered morbid and depressing to dwell on subjects like the brevity of life and the very real inevitability of death. But down through the ages Christians have pondered such things as seen in some of our great hymns. “Time like an ever-rolling stream/ Bears all its sons away/ They fly, forgotten, as a dream/ Dies at the opening day.” These are the familiar words of Isaac Watts that form part of that well-known hymn, “O God Our Help In Ages Past.” The English poet Robert Herrick wrote many years ago, “Gather ye rosebuds while ye may/ Old time is still a-flying: and this same flower that smiles today/ Tomorrow will be dying.” We refer to time as something that can be measured in terms of duration and succession. It has reference to our present mode of existence. We mark time in increments of seconds, minutes, hours, days, weeks, months, and years. “The flow of time,” wrote Charles Hodge, “is equable. It never moves either faster or slower. To our consciousness it is, however, variable. Sometimes it is swift, when we are so occupied that we pay no attention to its progress; sometimes slow, when we are constantly watching its motion, or when many distinct events, usually widely separated, are crowded into a short period. The flow of time is ceaseless. It waits for no man. It is irrevocable. The past is gone forever.”² D. A. Carson writes, “Moses wants us ‘to number our days aright,’ that is, to recognize the limit that is imposed on us, and to live with that limit in full view. Only in this way can we ‘gain a heart of wisdom.’”³ What is the wisdom Moses speaks of in this Psalm? What does it mean to *number our days*? Finally, how does the latter lead us to the application of the former?

I. WHAT IS WISDOM?

Contrary to much popular opinion, wisdom is not simply learning from our mistakes and being able to act on that in future decisions. In the Bible, wisdom, properly speaking, is always associated with *the fear of the Lord* (Prov. 1:7; Ps. 111:10). This is why the godly in Scripture are called wise and the wicked are called foolish (Prov. 12:23; 14:24; 15:14; 27:22). Why is this? To begin with, wisdom implies that the highest end will be sought. What is the highest or ultimate goal? The glory of God. And how are we to bring glory to God? By obedience to God’s Word. To seek anything else as our highest goal is folly. Therefore only God’s people are declared to have wisdom and the unrighteous are said to be fools. We read in I Cor. 1:30 that the Gospel is the wisdom of God. It is because it reveals the character of God and reveals His highest end. It brings those who embrace the Gospel into possession of wisdom. Notice that according to the Apostle Paul, the wisdom of men is called foolishness. Why? Because their *wisdom* (as they call it) actually presents something other than God’s glory as the highest end. Man’s wisdom actually obscures the Gospel and prevents men from seeking the glory of God. To the unbeliever, the Gospel is foolishness (I Cor. 2:14). Those who embrace the world’s wisdom are therefore fools.

II. WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO NUMBER OUR DAYS?

Henry Smith, one of the old Puritans, made these observations: “Five things I note in these words: *first*, that death is the haven of every man; whether he sit on the throne or keep in a cottage, at last he must knock at death’s door, as all his fathers have done before him. *Secondly*, that man’s time is set, and his bounds appointed, which he cannot pass, no more than the Egyptians could pass the sea; and therefore Moses saith, ‘*Teach us to number our days,*’ shewing that it is an easy thing even for a man to number his days, they be so few. *Fourthly*, the aptness of man to forget death rather than anything else; and therefore Moses prayeth the Lord to teach him to number his days, as though they were still slipping out of his mind. *Lastly*, that to remember how short a time we have to live, will make us apply our hearts to that which is good.”⁴ To *number our days* implies that we consider that when seen in the light of eternity our days are actually very few, and that with each passing day, like sands through an hour glass, they are few remaining. As stated, we mark time with watches and calendars, but more significantly we actually estimate the passing of time by *events*. One particular year is remembered by marriage or births or deaths in immediate family or circle of friends. Life is short and uncertain. To act otherwise, as if it were indefinitely long or as though the possession of time is secure, is pure folly. We often hear the maxim, “One day at a time,” and indeed we can only live one day at a time (with no guarantee of there being a tomorrow). We need to be aware of the brevity and uncertainty (as well as the rapidity) of life (Job 7:6; 9:25). What are we doing with our lives in light of eternity? Finally, there is the need to redeem the time we have left to us in light of the tragic fact that we have all wasted many of the days allotted to us.

III. HOW DO WE APPLY THIS?

“Without divine grace we are utterly foolish concerning the plainest of things”⁵ James 1:22-25 instructs us to be doers and not merely hearers of the Word of God. Jesus said in John 13:7, “Now that you know these things, you will be blessed if you do them.” Luke 12:47 reads, “The servant who knows his master’s will and does not get ready, or does not do what his master wants, will be beaten with many blows.” Thomas Watson declared, “How unprofitable is the luxuriancy of knowledge? He who is only filled with knowledge is like a glass filled with froth. What a vain, foolish thing it is to have knowledge and make no spiritual use of it!”⁶ How does a sense of the brevity of life lead us to apply⁷ our hearts unto wisdom? Note the direct connection of verse 12 with the preceding. It is in light of verse 11 that Moses prays for wisdom. Failure to fear God and to be personally aware of God’s attitude towards sin will lead us to folly. “In spite of all signs of God’s displeasure, the message never registers until God brings it home to us. As Weiser points out, ‘the poet observes that part of the nature of sin is that men hardly ever realize the ultimate relationship between mortality and sin, because they live for the moment . . .’ The psalmist includes himself among those who need this lesson. But he has learnt it well. Perhaps nowhere outside the book of Ecclesiastes is the fact of death so resolutely faced, or the fear of God so explicitly related to it (*cf.* Ecc. 12).”⁸ The emphasis is on sober reflection. Why? Because this leads to see how little time we actually have to accomplish God’s purpose for our lives. It leads us to also see the folly of living lives that do not aim for the glory of God. Finally, this prompts us to see everything in light of eternity. The language that Moses used harkens us back to Deut. 5:29. “Oh that their hearts would be inclined to fear me and keep all my commands always, so that it might go well with them and their children forever!”

ENDNOTES

¹ David W. Bailey, Speaking the Truth in Love: Life and Legacy of Roger Nicole (Solid Ground Christian Books, 2006).

² C. Hodge, Conference Papers (Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1879) p. 344.

³ D. A. Carson, How Long, O Lord? Reflections on Suffering & Evil (Baker, 1990), p. 118.

⁴ As cited in C. H. Spurgeon, The Treasury of David IV (rpt. Baker, 1978), p. 224.

⁵ W. Plumer, Psalms: A Critical and Expository Commentary, (rpt. Banner of Truth, 1975), p. 843.

⁶ Thomas Watson, A Plea For The Godly (rpt. Soli Deo Gloria, 1993), p. 195.

⁷ The word trans. “gain” in the NIV (“apply” in the KJV) is *BO* and means “to acquire or bring”. “The verb is used of garnering in the harvest” A. F. Kirkpatrick, The Book of Psalms (rpt. Baker, 1982), p. 552.

⁸ Derek Kidner, Psalms 73-150: A Commentary (IVP, 1975), p. 330.