

CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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

Website: www.churchredeemeraz.org

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Pastor/Teacher
Gary L. W. Johnson

THE MERCIES OF GOD AND WISDOM

“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.”¹ The call to be transformed by the renewing of our minds is not something particular to the New Testament. It actually is present throughout the scriptures, especially in the repeated refrain to gain a heart of wisdom. 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. “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.”² 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*' as though there were a number of our days. *Thirdly*, that our days are few, as though we were sent into this world but to see it; and therefore, Moses, speaking of our life, speaking of days, not of years, nor of months, nor of weeks; but '*Teach us to number our days*,' showing 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."³ 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, it 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."⁴ 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!"⁵ How does a sense of the brevity of life lead us to apply⁶ 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.)"⁷ 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. 5:7-9. "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!"

CONCLUSION:

We have a duty-bound obligation to self-examination and reflection, but not simply to cause us regret and bring us into despondency. We should indeed realize our failures, but this should also bring us a renewed sense of commitment to the Lord. 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 toward sin will lead into folly. This "prayer of Moses the man of God," writes Calvin Beisner, "is filled with lessons for the Christian life. Among the clearest is the lesson of dependence: We must depend on God for life and breath, for success and joy. Why? The psalm reveals three reasons. The first reason why we must depend on God is our frailty. We are but dust enlivened by the breath of God. God's providential love for us is our only source of confidence, our only ground for hope. Without Him, we have no future. With Him, all things are possible. The second reason is deeper, more fundamental, than the first. We die because of sin, not because of nature. We are too apt to look upon death as no more than a debt owing to nature; whereas it is not so; if the nature of man had continued in its primitive purity and rectitude, there had been no such debt owing to it: It is a debt to the justice of God, a debt to the law. The very thing that alienates us from God also requires us to cast ourselves upon His mercy, for we can neither escape nor defeat His judgment. He knows our sins better than we do (Ps. 90:8; I Cor. 4:4-5), and because of them we deserve only His wrath (Ps. 90:9). Our only hope then, is in pleading for mercy on the basis of His compassion and unfailing love. We can offer nothing good in ourselves to placate His wrath but must trust solely in His provision in Christ's substitutionary death on the cross to pay the penalty for sin (Rom. 3:25). And the third reason why we must depend on God? He alone is 'from everlasting to everlasting' (Ps. 90:2). Nothing else – and no one else – will do. He alone can satisfy. He alone can comfort. He alone can make us secure."⁸

ENDNOTES

¹ C. Hodge, *Conference Papers* (Charles Scribner's Sons, 1879) p. 344

² D.A. Carson, *How Long, O Lord? Reflections on Suffering & Evil* (Baker, 1990), p. 118

³ As cited in C.H. Spurgeon, *The Treasury of David IV* (rpt. Baker, 1978), p. 224

⁴ W. Plumer, *Psalms: A Critical and Expository Commentary*, (rpt. Banner of Truth, 1975), p. 843

⁵ Thomas Watson, *A Plea For The Godly* (rpt. Soli Deo Gloria, 1993), p. 195.

⁶ 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 Psalms* (rpt. Baker, 1982), p. 552.

⁷ Derek Kidner, *Psalms 73-150: A Commentary* (IVP, 1975) p. 330.

⁸ E.C. Beisner, *Psalms of Promise* (P & R, 1994), p. 49.