

CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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THE CALL TO NUMBER OUR DAYS

Roger Nicole (1915-2010) was one of the truly great Reformed theologians of the 20th century. 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* (1 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 equitable. 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 wrote, “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. ***AN OVERVIEW OF THE PSALM.*** In Psalm 89 the king lamented his mortality (89:47), pleading for divine intervention (so to speak) before it was too late. Psalm 90 explores this situation further. Both psalms face the question of how to react when bright expectations fail – in Psalm 89 the expectations of the Davidic king; in Psalm 90, the *morning* expectations of every mortal, blighted by evening (6-7)! Moses had an answer to share. Psalm 89 recommended dealing with life’s challenges by singing and praying (89:1, 46-51). Moses went deeper. We can reply to our transiency, fragility (5-7) – and indeed sinfulness (vv. 8-9) – by making the eternal God our home (1), and by looking to

him (16-17) to give lasting effect to our sojourn and work on earth.⁴ This opening of the psalm corresponds to the close, in that God is seen here as *our* God, whose eternity is the answer, not simply the antithesis, to our homelessness and our brevity of life. The middle stanzas will display the darker side of the picture, revealing our membership of a race under judgment; but that fact is not given the first word or the last.⁵

- II. ***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 1 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 (1 Cor. 2:14). Those who embrace the world's wisdom are therefore fools.
- III. ***WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO NUMBER OUR DAYS?*** Henry Smith, one of the old Puritans made these observations: "Give 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. *Thirdly*, that our days are few, as though we were sent into this world but to see it, and therefore Moses, speaking of our lives, speaks of days, not months or weeks, but days. *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."⁶ 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.
- IV. ***HOW DO WE APPLY THIS?*** "Without divine grace we are utterly foolish concerning the plainest of things."⁷ 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 luxuriandy 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!”⁸ How does a sense of the brevity of life lead us to apply⁹ 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).”¹⁰ 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 hardens 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!” The prayer which follows (vv. 13-17) springs from the deep source of the preceding meditation. God is everlasting, man transitory and sinful. Man does not consider his sin aright, even when God lays His hand upon him. He needs Divine instruction that he may take to heart the lesson both of his sinfulness and his transitoriness. But Moses does not forget that, in spite of all, God has been and still is the home of His people. He is a compassionate God, as well as a God that punisheth transgression. And therefore he asks not only that he and his people may learn the lesson of Divine wisdom, but that the God who had chastened them would visit them with His lovingkindness, that the night of sorrow may flee away, and the morning of gladness dawn. God’s love, God’s personal manifestation of Himself, His blessing descending upon them as they enter upon their new life in the promised inheritance, -- for this, and not for anything less, he prays.”¹¹

NOTE carefully the emphasis on the character of God. In 1 Corinthians 1:26-31, Paul declares that Christ is the source of all salvific blessing and specifically Christ is the wisdom of God. Our English (KJV) translation gives the impression that there are four distinct blessings listed in v. 30. But actually the Greek text reads something a bit different. There are two “ands” in this verse; the first one is the Greek word *te*, the second one is the Greek word *kai*, the common word for “and.” *Te*, however, in this context, does not convey the same thought as *kai*. The NIV translation captures the actual thought here – that the terms “righteousness, sanctification and redemption” are subordinate to *wisdom* and explanatory of it.¹² What Paul is doing here is *contrasting* the wisdom of the world and the wisdom of God. What is this wisdom?¹³ It has three aspects.¹⁴

- a. ***Christ Our Righteousness.*** This refers *not* to ethical conduct, but is exclusively a forensic term – this righteousness is imputed or reckoned to the believer.
- b. ***Christ Our Sanctification.*** This has reference not so much to the process of sanctification (which is an important aspect of sanctification) but with primary emphasis on its commencement. As such, it demonstrates very clearly that “righteousness” cannot be referring to our own righteousness, otherwise the Apostle would be repeating himself.¹⁵

- c. ***Christ Our Redemption.*** The Greek word is *apolutrosis*. “This particular Greek word occurs in the New Testament ten times, and every time it refers to the future, and not to the past or the present.”¹⁶ The term underscores the believer’s *deliverance* (this has a direct bearing on the total redemption, i.e., the resurrection of the body, cf. Romans 8:23) through the death of Christ on the cross, which thus furnishes the ground both of justification and sanctification.

If we would know wisdom, we must grow in the grace and knowledge of the Person and Work of Christ.

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 Alex Motyer, *Psalms By The Day: A Devotional Translation* (Christian Focus, 2016), p. 256.

⁵ D. Kidner, *Psalms 73-150: Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries* (IVP, 1975), p. 328.

⁶ As cited in C. H. Spurgeon, *The Treasury of David IV* (rpt. Baker, 1978), p. 83.

⁷ W. Plumer, *Psalms: A Critical and Expository Commentary* (rpt. Banner of Truth, 1975), p. 843.

⁸ Thomas Watson, *A Plea For The Godly* (rpt. Soli Deo Gloria, 1993), p. 195.

⁹ The word trans. “gain” in the NIV (“apply” in the KJV) is *bo*, and means “to acquire or bring.” “The verb is used on garnering in the harvest.” A. F. Kirkpatrick, *The Book of Psalms* (rpt. Baker, 1982), p. 552.

¹⁰ Kidner, p. 330.

¹¹ J. J. S. Perowne, *The Book of Psalms* (George Bell & Sons, 1883), p. 450.

¹² Cf. remarks by Leon Morris, *The First Epistle of Paul to the Corinthians; Tyndale Series* (Eerdmans, 1979), p. 50.

¹³ Note the translation in the NIV “wisdom for us from God,” i.e., God made Him (Christ) wisdom on our behalf, cf. comments by Gordon Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians (New International Commentary on the New Testament)* (Eerdmans, 1987), p. 85.

¹⁴ Note that the three terms are nouns, not verbs. They stand in apposition to the noun *wisdom*, cf. G. Fee, *op. cit.*, p. 86.

¹⁵ Cf. the excellent article by Ronald Y. K. Fung, “Justification by Faith in 1 & 2 Corinthians,” in *Pauline Studies: Essays Presented to F. F. Bruce*, ed. D. A. Hagner and M. J. Harris (Eerdmans, 1980), pp. 246-249.

¹⁶ G. Campbell-Morgan, *The Corinthian Letters of Paul: An Exposition of I and II Corinthians* (Revell, 1946), p. 39.