

CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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Series:	Scripture Memory		Pastor/Teacher
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NUMBERING OUR DAYS

“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 “Our 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 to day, 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 for ever.”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. “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 Numbers 20 forms the background for this Psalm. There we read of the deaths of Miriam and Aaron, Moses’ sister and brother. Boice observed, “Like Numbers 20, Psalm 90 is a reflection on human mortality and the brevity of life, plus quiet confidence in God who is the steadfast hope of the righteous. This psalm is probably the greatest passage in the Bible contrasting the grandeur of God with man’s frailty. Few people on earth, perhaps none, have had as strong a sense of the greatness and eternal grandeur of God as did Moses, for Moses knew God intimately and conversed with him *face to face* (Num. 12:8). It is not surprising then that he should begin with a reflection on God’s being a sure eternal refuge for his people.”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; 9:10; 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 else 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. "In Ps. 90:12 Moses responds to the realities he has discussed to this point. God is eternal. Man is ephemeral. We die because of God's justice against our sin. Moses prays in Ps. 90:12 for the *heart of wisdom*, which will flow from the aforementioned *fear of God* in 90:11. This heart of wisdom reckons with the reality of death. It numbers the days and seeks to live them in consideration of God's wrath, according to the fear due him."⁴

II. **WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO NUMBER OUR DAYS?** "To number our days," declared Spurgeon, "is not simply to take the reckoning and admeasurement of human life. This has been done already in Holy Scripture, where it is said, *The days of our years are threescore years and ten; and if by reason of strength they be fourscore years, yet is their strength labour and sorrow; for it is soon cut off, and we fly away.* Nor yet is it, in the world's phrase, to calculate the chances of survivorship, which any man may do in the instance of the aggregate, but which no man can do in the case of the individual. But it is to take the measure of our days as compared with the world to be performed, with the provision to be laid up for eternity, with the preparation to be made for death, with the precaution to be taken against judgment. It is to estimate human life by the purposes to which it should be applied, by the eternity to which it must conduct, and in which it shall at last be absorbed. Under this aspect it is, that David contemplates man when he says, *Thou has made our days as an handbreadth; and mine age is as nothing before thee* (Psalm 39:5).⁵ 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 hourglass, 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 the 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."⁶ James 1:22-25 instructs us to be doers and not merely listeners 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!"⁷ How does a sense of the brevity of life lead us to apply our hearts unto wisdom? The emphasis is on sober reflection. Why? Because this leads us 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 Moses uses harkens 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: I like the way the acclaimed Hebrew scholar Robert Alter translated our text, "To count our days rightly, instruct, that we may get a heart of wisdom."⁸ The old Scottish preacher W. Graham Scroggie captured it this way, "In view then of our sin, life's brevity, and God's wrath, we should learn to *number our days*, that from the Divine instruction we may gather in *as a harvest a heart of wisdom.*"⁹ The emphasis is on rightly considering the brevity of life in light of eternity that a heart of wisdom is gained. The

old Puritan commentator John Trapp wrote, “man of all God’s creatures can number (*bruta non numerant*). But in this divine arithmetic of numbering our days (to which all other is not to be compared, no, though we could, as Archimedes boasted, number the stars of heaven, or the sands by the sea-shore), God himself must be our teacher, or we shall never do it to purpose . . . To the true fear of God, and mortification of sin, which is the sting of death, and makes it a trap-door to hell. This is hard to do, but must be done; or men are undone for ever. To live with dying thoughts is the way to die with living comforts.”¹⁰

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 J. M. Boice, *Psalms: An Expositional Commentary II* (Baker, 1996), p. 741.

⁴ J. M. Hamilton, Jr., *Psalms: Evangelical Biblical Theology Commentary II* (Lexham Academic, 2021), p. 157.

⁵ C. H. Spurgeon, *The Treasury of David IV* (rpt. Baker, 1978), p. 222.

⁶ W. Plumer, *Psalms: A Critical & Expository Commentary* (rpt. Banner of Truth, 1975), p. 843.

⁷ Thomas Watson, *A Plea for The Godly* (rpt. Soli Deo Gloria, 1993), p. 195.

⁸ Robert Alter, *The Hebrew Bible III* (Norton & Co., 2019), p. 218.

⁹ W. G. Scroggie, *The Psalms* (Revell, 1948), p. 243.

¹⁰ John Trapp, *A Commentary On The Old and New Testaments II* (rpt. Soli Deo Gloria, 1022), p. 613.