

Counting our Days

The 90th Psalm, attributed to Moses, is a corporate prayer and a group lament, bemoaning the brevity and troubles of life. Perhaps Moses, who is described in the title to the psalm as “the man of God,” is writing as an old warrior of the faith. He may have composed these lines as the Israelites prepared to cross over into the Promised Land after their long wilderness wanderings. In the closing verse, Moses prays that his life spent in leading the Israelites through this difficult pilgrimage will not have been in vain (17). This rather somber psalm says some vitally important things about the need to “count our days.”

Follow as I read **Psalm 90**.

*Lord, you have been our dwelling place
in all generations.*

*2 Before the mountains were brought forth,
or ever you had formed the earth and the world,
from everlasting to everlasting you are God.*

*3 You turn us back to dust,
and say, “Turn back, you mortals.”*

*4 For a thousand years in your sight
are like yesterday when it is past,
or like a watch in the night.*

*5 You sweep them away; they are like a dream,
like grass that is renewed in the morning;*

*6 in the morning it flourishes and is renewed;
in the evening it fades and withers.*

*7 For we are consumed by your anger;
by your wrath we are overwhelmed.*

*8 You have set our iniquities before you,
our secret sins in the light of your countenance.*

*9 For all our days pass away under your wrath;
our years come to an end like a sigh.*

*10 The days of our life are seventy years,
or perhaps eighty, if we are strong;
even then their span is only toil and trouble;
they are soon gone, and we fly away.*

*11 Who considers the power of your anger?
Your wrath is as great as the fear that is due you.*

*12 So teach us to count our days
that we may gain a wise heart.*

*13 Turn, O Lord! How long?
Have compassion on your servants!*

*14 Satisfy us in the morning with your steadfast love,
so that we may rejoice and be glad all our days.*

*15 Make us glad as many days as you have afflicted us,
and as many years as we have seen evil.*

16 *Let your work be manifest to your servants,
and your glorious power to their children.*
17 *Let the favor of the Lord our God be upon us,
and prosper for us the work of our hands—
O prosper the work of our hands!*

Years ago I read a book on time management that gave one of the most profound statements I had ever read on the subject. The author said that time management is a misnomer. We cannot manage time. Time is inexorable and is something created by our eternal God. Time is measured for us by the rotation of the earth and its orbit around the sun. Give or take a few seconds, whether or not the earth might wobble on its axis, time is the same every year. This we know by the precise measurement of atomic clocks. And so, we cannot manage time; we can only manage ourselves and how we live within time, as it rolls relentlessly along (Leas).

Most of us have electronic gadgets that promised to help us manage our use of time. Technology has made a significant contribution to our work and communication efficiency, but I'm not sure how much time it saves us. Without good time management principles and self-discipline, our time saving devices can just rob us of time.

Our psalm uses an expression that will help us get a grip on the matter of managing life in respect to time. Moses prays:

“So teach us to count our days
that we may gain a wise heart.”

Moses prays that his life might have maximum significance. He doesn't want to end his life having been victimized by squandered time. Eternal God created time and space in all of its complexity and vastness. This psalm contrasts the immortality of God with the transient nature of human life. Since the fall of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, mankind is under the sentence of mortality, a condition we share with the beasts (Ps. 49:12). God desires our life with him forever, but the result of rebellion against God's intention was death—moral, spiritual and mortal death. “The wages of sin is death,” Paul writes (Rom. 6:23), and mortal death is the last enemy mankind, including followers of Christ, will face (1 Cor. 15:26).

We are given the gift of mortal life, and for many of us, this earthly life receives many of the blessings of God. While we have these days upon the earth, we face the choice of how we should live them. The psalm reminds us that “time flies,” that our mortal lives are brief indeed. “A watch in the night” (4b) was the ancient's shortest measure of time” (Weisur).

Four years ago I attended a reunion of my high school graduating class in Columbus, Ohio. I hadn't seen most of these people in 50 years, when we were 18-year-old high school graduates. I think we were all a bit stunned to see what time had done to each other, as we were rudely confronted with the cruelty of the aging process. Possibly an underlying question running through a lot of minds, believers and unbelievers alike was “What did you do with your life?”

The psalmist expresses a lament over the trouble and sorrow that often accompanies our brief mortal life (7-11).

A few years ago, Kyle and I took his mother to the UW emergency department. While we waited with her to be taken to a room, we noted the various people brought for emergency treatment, victims of accidents, or weakened condition from age or illness. We said to each other, "Life looks very fragile and brief in this setting, doesn't it?"

Our psalm laments the brevity of mortal life, citing what was then the average life span of 70 to 80 years. Typically for young people, the thought is "I'll live forever!" At least this was true for me. But whatever age we might reach, we live under the scrutiny of a holy God, who will hold us accountable for our use of our lives. Life passes quickly by and "we fly away" (10). Everyone is given mortal life and with that gift comes a responsibility. Jesus spoke of degrees of responsibility based on opportunity. As he concluded a parable contrasting faithful and unfaithful servants, Jesus said,

"From everyone who has been given much, much will be demanded; and from the one who has been entrusted with much, much more will be asked" (Lk. 12:48).

Apart from a personal relationship with God, the highest purpose and the greatest joys in life are forfeited. Life is squandered simply by spending life on lesser and temporal things. I'm not saying that for unbelievers and those who give themselves to lesser things have made no contribution to society, nor have they experienced nothing of happiness and satisfaction. Indeed, God blesses and uses various contributions for the public good, regardless of the personal beliefs of those who make those contributions.

In Jesus' parable of the rich fool, God called the rich man a fool because, even though he was a shrewd businessman, he squandered his life on the selfish pursuit of the material, oblivious to the eternal. Jesus said anyone is foolish and faces the ultimate loss of all things who does not seek to be rich towards God (Lk. 12:13-21). Did you ever see this bumper sticker? "The one who dies with the most toys wins." Some, even so-called Christians, squander their lives in pursuit of material gain, which the Bible says is absolute folly.

We're called to live our lives as stewards of God-given opportunities. Unless we live in prayerful and loving fellowship with God, seeking to know him better and follow his will, we as followers of Jesus run the risk of squandering our opportunities to deepen our relationship with him. The Scriptures speak of the judgment seat of Christ before which we all must stand and give an account of how well we have seized and used the opportunities God has given us, to know him better, to love and enjoy him deeply and serve him faithfully. We can squander God-given time and opportunities and expect to face the opprobrium of God's judgment seat (2 Cor. 5:10; Rom. 14:10).

The iniquities that God has set before his view may not be just the overt sins of our lives; not just wrongs committed, said and thought. But God is also aware of those opportunities he has given us to know and show his love each day, to share our faith in a caring, meaningful way and to seek to encourage the Body of Christ. He has

placed us all in our sphere of influence, including our neighborhoods. The family around your dinner table, the neighbors on your street, your fellow employees and students, are opportunities for us. To neglect to make a difference is to squander those God-given opportunities. And what God is expecting are not always and maybe not even mostly the big things we do, the large ministry projects, but how I am thinking and acting like Jesus, receiving and sharing his love each day. Am I daily becoming more like Jesus and allowing him to live his life of loving service through me and as me?

The first of the psalm is hymn and lament, but now the man of God, Moses, turns to prayer, that his remaining days will be invested wisely (12-17). He prays that the eternal God will teach us mortals how to live wisely within time. We're immortal souls living mortal lives, which isn't an easy fit.

CS Lewis noted how *"we are so little reconciled to time that we are even astonished at it. 'How he's grown!' we exclaim, 'How time flies!' as though the universal form of our experience were again and again a novelty. It is as strange as if a fish were repeatedly surprised at the wetness of water. And that would be strange indeed," notes Lewis, "unless of course the fish were destined to become, one day, a land animal."*

God has made us mortals as the crown of his creation and as such we have this witness of eternity, this yearning for immortality. Our new, regenerate heart of wisdom enables us to fear and love God and to share his perspective on life, time and eternity. We have a sense of the brevity and the frailty of mortal life, and realize that we are to live our days of this mortal life before God, with a sense of accountability to him as his servants, his stewards, and his children. The Apostle Paul writes that we must "be steadfast, immovable, always excelling in the work of the Lord, because you know that in the Lord your labor is not in vain" (1 Cor. 15:58).

With this God-given new heart of wisdom we can invest our days wisely living joyfully and fruitfully. Moses understands the importance of joy in his life and labor (14). When we invest our lives wisely, the result is joy. Moses remembers the days that the Israelites were afflicted in Egypt and also in their wilderness wanderings, when they experienced God's discipline that always followed periods of their rebellion. He prays that the Lord will now make them glad for as many days as he afflicted them (15). As Old Testament scholar Derek Kidner writes, this modest prayer is "outrun" by the Apostle Paul:

"For this slight momentary affliction is preparing us for an eternal weight of glory beyond all measure." (2 Cor. 4:17).

Even in life's greatest difficulties and challenges, and perhaps particularly during these tough times, God is at work shaping us into the restored image of Christ, drawing us deeper into his true joy, and showing more of his glory to the world around us. And all of this will result in our greater glory in the new heaven and earth.

The prayer ends with a petition that the favor of the Lord our God will rest upon us and that he will establish the work of our hands for us (17). We all would like to think that our life's work and the living of our days have significance and will not end with

our funeral. And the promise of the Lord is that what we do for him will endure the judgment and will be an everlasting memorial and glory to God (1 Cor. 3:10-15).

You and I have to make tough choices with our time, shuffling schedules to give the right priorities: worship, spiritual formation, kingdom service, which begins first with our own families. He will enable us to attend to our real priorities.

The Great Awakening evangelist and founder of the Methodists, John Wesley, said simply and profoundly, "Our people die well." No doubt he meant they lived well and in such hope that they gladly faced death, which they were confident would usher them into the presence of Christ.

Two of our dear, long-time and faithful church members, Ruby Meyer and Mary Towne, who both seem near the end of their mortal lives, I'm confident will also die well. That's because they have become sweet, godly people of a strong and blessed hope. Instead of fearing death or regretting their lives, they are praying that the Lord will release them from their constant pain and welcome them into his arms in Paradise.

As you know, Mary has lost almost all of her speaking capacity, and must communicate mostly with her phone keypad. When I asked her if she was looking forward to being with Jesus, she raised her little hand and gave a "thumbs up." She has no regrets and has a glorious eternity ahead, because she's lived well, having become a sweet and Christlike child of God.

Lord, teach me to live wisely and so count my days.