

20260614 Teach Us To Number Our Days

(Psalm 90, NKJV)

Last month, Rosie and I went to China. My 90-year-old mother-in-law was critically ill and had been admitted to the cardiac ICU. Right next to the ICU was the maternity ward. Every time we visited her, along the same corridor we would see two sharply contrasting pictures. At one moment, there were critically ill patients going in and out of the ICU, extremely weak, as though overshadowed by death. A little later, there were newborn babies, beautiful lives just beginning, as though the whole journey of life lay before them, full of hope. The images struck me and made me reflect: all beautiful lives on earth will eventually grow old and face death. Then what is the meaning of each of the days that we live? What value is there in its laughter and tears, in our hopes and in our struggles? That is why I would like to share with you this morning from Psalm 90, under the title: “Teach Us to Number Our Days: Contrasts and Meanings.” Together, we will consider how to look at our earthly lives from the perspective of eternity.

The title of Psalm 90 is “A Prayer of Moses, the Man of God.” Scholars believe it may be related to Moses’ prayer after the incident with the golden calf. It reminds the people of Israel that even in suffering and failure, they can still return to God, they can still experience restoration and still live meaningful days.

Poetry is an important literary genre in the Bible. Through poetry, God speaks not only to the mind, but to the whole person. The Psalms do more than convey rational truth; they awaken the imagination, they arouse the emotions, and they direct the will.

The Psalms speak to us primarily through emotions and feelings. The emotions God creates are like a thermometer of the soul, revealing the state of our relationship with God and the condition of our lives. John Calvin said, “The Psalms dissect and lay bare every part of our soul; there is no emotion within us that does not appear in the Psalms. The Psalms are like a mirror that reflects our inner life.”

To understand the Psalms, we need to slow down and ponder over the images and metaphors that can be found in the book of Psalms. We also need to notice the emotions and the feelings in our hearts: the joy of being loved by God, the security of being sheltered by Him, the loneliness of wandering from Him, the fear that rises when we lose our sense of refuge, and so on. Through these emotions, God draws us into a deeper knowing of Himself and His heart, and in this way, He brings us back into His presence.

Today, I will use some images alongside the text from Psalm 90. I invite you to look at these images and prayerfully ask the Spirit to inspire you, so that as the images are revealed in your hearts you become aware of the emotions within you – these might be feelings

Psalm 90 A Prayer of Moses the man of God.

¹*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,
Even from everlasting to everlasting, You are God.*

³*You turn man to destruction,
And say, “Return, O children of men.”*

⁴*For a thousand years in Your sight
Are like yesterday when it is past,
And like a watch in the night.*

⁵*You carry them away like a flood;
They are like a sleep.
In the morning they are like grass which grows up:*

⁶*In the morning it flourishes and grows up;
In the evening it is cut down and withers.*

⁷*For we have been consumed by Your anger,
And by Your wrath we are terrified.*

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

⁹*For all our days have passed away in Your wrath;
We finish our years like a sigh.*

¹⁰*The days of our lives are seventy years;
And if by reason of strength they are eighty years,
Yet their boast is only labor and sorrow;
For it is soon cut off, and we fly away.*

¹¹*Who knows the power of Your anger?
For as the fear of You, so is Your wrath.*

¹²*So teach us to number our days,
That we may gain a heart of wisdom.*

¹³*Return, O Lord! How long?
And have compassion on Your servants.*

¹⁴*Oh, satisfy us early with Your mercy,
That we may rejoice and be glad all our days!*

¹⁵*Make us glad according to the days in which You have afflicted us,
The years in which we have seen evil.*

¹⁶*Let Your work appear to Your servants,
And Your glory to their children.*

¹⁷*And let the beauty of the Lord our God be upon us,
And establish the work of our hands for us;
Yes, establish the work of our hands.*

of reverence, confidence, comfort, sorrow, hope, or a deeper longing for God. May the Lord speak to our whole being and transform us when we contemplate Psalm 90.

Psalm 90 can be divided into four sections, which include two sets of striking contrasts: eternity and brevity, suffering and renewal. It leads us to view our brief lives in the light of God's eternity.

I. Eternity in God

¹Lord, You have been our dwelling place in all generations.

*²Before the mountains were brought forth,
Or ever You had formed the earth and the world,
Even from everlasting to everlasting, You are God."*

This is Moses' shout of praise to God. Leading Israel through the wilderness toward the promised land, Moses saw in his heart an even more glorious dwelling place — God Himself. He had seen God's glory in the tabernacle and had heard God promise to dwell with His people. So amid every hardship, Moses looked to God's eternal love and praised Him: "Lord, You have been our dwelling place in all generations." This is the eternal home of God's people.

As New Testament Christians, we now dwell in God through faith in Christ. This image reminds us that we, too, should respond with praise. The psalmist portrays God as becoming the dwelling place for His people, God who transcends time and created all things. He is our dwelling place, our home. Can you see in your heart that beautiful, glorious image? Are you shouting out praises like Moses?

The image on the screen is an 1868 oil painting by the American artist Albert Bierstadt. It depicts the majestic mountains and rivers of the American West, reflecting the Creator's greatness. As you contemplate this painting, notice the emotions it stirs within you. You may also close your eyes and imagine an even more magnificent and radiant scene in your heart. Most importantly, ask yourself, what do I feel when beholding the glorious image? Is it awe and worship? Or a safe home that you can rest in, a longing deep in your heart...? Ask yourself, have I sometimes felt the same way during my prayer or meditation before the Lord? This is the feeling of being home, the home in eternity.

II. Brevity of the Earthly Life

But when Moses turns his gaze from eternity to the people in the wilderness, and when we ourselves return from prayerful meditation to the realities of life, another sharply contrasting picture comes into view. It is the picture of earthly life in all its brevity and emptiness.

*³You turn man to destruction,
And say, "Return, O children of men."*

*⁴For a thousand years in Your sight
Are like yesterday when it is past,
And like a watch in the night.*

*⁵You carry them away like a flood;
They are like a sleep.
In the morning they are like grass which grows up:*

*⁶In the morning it flourishes and grows up;
In the evening it is cut down and withers."*

Verse 3 takes us back to Genesis 3. After Adam sinned, God pronounced the sentence: "For you are dust, and to dust you shall return." From that moment on, the shadow of death fell over humanity — and it also fell over the heart of the psalmist. The psalmist further uses the terms "a thousand years," "yesterday," and "a watch in the night" to contrast eternity in God and the brevity of earthly lives. Then he uses the image of grass to help us see the emptiness within that brevity that is found in our earthly life.

If we prayerfully invite the Spirit to help us see the image vividly in our hearts — the beauty of the grass in the morning and its withering in the evening— and help us check our hearts by asking ourselves, "How do I feel?" Is it a sense of loss, helplessness, or frustration? Did I ever feel something similar? ...That feeling reminds us: this is not my

home; life was not meant to be this way. Even though Rosie's mom lived 90 years, which was a good age, it's still not what God meant for us. We were created for eternity.

We looked at the first set of contrasting images: eternity and brevity. The psalmist shows us the second contrast: suffering and restoration.

III. Affliction in Life

*⁷For we have been consumed by Your anger,
And by Your wrath we are terrified.
⁸You have set our iniquities before You,
Our secret sins in the light of Your countenance."*

In Hebrew, the word "anger" carries the sense of "breathing through the nostrils," while the word "wrath" suggests "heat" — an intense, burning emotion. Hebrew often uses them together, and the phrase literally means "hot breath of the nostrils"; figuratively, it describes God's emotions of grief and wrath. God grieves and is angry when His people wander away from Him, when we try to hide our sins, and suffer as a result of this separation. In the midst of your own suffering, have you heard God's heavy breathing and felt His aching heart? By His anger and wrath, we are terrified. And it's not just our being terrified,

*⁹For all our days have passed away in Your wrath;
We finish our years like a sigh."*

Here, "wrath" is another Hebrew word that carries the sense of "overflowing" or "bursting forth." When God's wrath is poured out, it overwhelms us. Trapped in the broken world, our very lives become meaningless and we feel helpless. No wonder the psalmist says, "We finish our years like a sigh."

The images on the screen show us the hardship in people's lives. The running woman is a food delivery worker I saw in Beijing. In Beijing a one-minute delay in delivering her consignment could mean a receiving a penalty — she might not be paid for her current delivery, and she could also lose her next delivery call. After twelve hours of work, she barely earns enough to survive. About 44% of the workforce in China is in that situation; they have to run and run and so many feel that they are running on empty as it is. Here in New Zealand many also have a hard time finding a job; they face living-cost pressures. As you see this picture, can you hear God's heavy breathing? Can you hear the sighs of the people?

*¹⁰The days of our lives are seventy years;
And if by reason of strength they are eighty years,
Yet their boast is only labor and sorrow;
For it is soon cut off, and we fly away."*

This is a general description of the human lifespan in Moses' time. Today, the strong may live beyond ninety. That is still brief in light of eternity. But often we don't even think about the brevity. Like many others, when I was young, I felt as if endless years lay ahead of me, and I never concerned myself with aging or death. Yet earthly years will eventually bring these realities before us. For those of you who are still young, imagine what you would be like when you are in your nineties. Gaze on that aged face, that frail body. What do you feel — unease, upset, or is this a picture that you would much prefer to just sigh over and then quickly forget?

But this is not the end of the story. God allows us to experience frustration and difficulties in life so that He can draw us back to Himself. The psalmist turns to prayer,

*¹¹Who knows the power of Your anger?
For as the fear of You, so is Your wrath.
¹²So teach us to number our days,
That we may gain a heart of wisdom."*

"To number" doesn't merely mean to count; it means to evaluate or to weigh the meanings of the days before God. The "wisdom" means knowing God and walking in the way of life. If we truly knew the weight of God's anger, we would not take sin lightly or waste our lives. We would live with reverence before Him.

The answer to brevity and affliction is neither to escape them nor to cling more tightly to this world. It is to receive wisdom from God, through “evaluating and weighing” our days. Every suffering, every sigh, and every tear has its meaning. God makes Himself known to us through them, and He calls us to return to eternal life from the brevity.

This prayer for wisdom is the turning point in this psalm. Our earthly home is brief and broken. The unrest in our hearts drives us to the grace of God. From here, the psalmist begins to move toward restoration.

IV. Restoration by God

*“¹³Return, O Lord! How long?
And have compassion on Your servants.”*

“How long?” This is the cry of those who suffer. It also reveals the difference between God’s view of time and ours. In suffering, time feels long and heavy; in God’s eyes, “a thousand years are like yesterday when it is past.” What, then, is the meaning of this long waiting?

The psalmist goes on to cry out:

*“¹⁴Oh, satisfy us early with Your mercy,
That we may rejoice and be glad all our days!
¹⁵Make us glad according to the days in which You have afflicted us,
The years in which we have seen evil.”*

Here, “mercy (חַסֵּד)” means God’s covenantal unfailing love. It is most powerfully revealed in human failure. After Israel worshiped the golden calf and fell under God’s discipline, God declared to Moses: “The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness.” These words came not after Israel’s obedience, but after their grievous fall. Human rebellion runs deep, but God’s unfailing love runs deeper. So even our days of weakness, sin, and suffering can become days in which we know His holiness and experience His love more deeply. That is why the psalmist prays, “Make us glad according to the days in which You have afflicted us, the years in which we have seen evil.”

The psalmist continues,

*“¹⁶Let Your work appear to Your servants,
And Your glory to their children.”*

He is praying for God to let him see His work, which is His glory revealed in the lives of His people.

Being satisfied with God’s unfailing love is the source of rejoicing; turning to God in suffering is the path of growth; and experiencing God’s glorious work in life is the result of knowing Him. This is the meaning of our brief lives on earth.

In these verses, we also see God restoring us from brevity and emptiness to eternity and gladness. No longer is life merely something that “flourishes in the morning and withers in the evening.” God’s blessing lasts “all our days” and extends “to our children”. We are being transformed back toward eternity.

The psalmist ends with this prayer:

*“¹⁷And let the beauty of the Lord our God be upon us,
And establish the work of our hands for us;
Yes, establish the work of our hands.”*

He asks the Lord to bring His people into God’s glory and make them live a meaningful life on earth – and he asks that the Lord would establish the works of His people so that their works would be meaningful and fruitful.

To enter God’s glorious presence and live in Him is the purpose of salvation. It is also the direction of our lives. Jesus accomplished all this by His sacrificial death. He Himself also prayed for us: “Father, I desire that they also whom You gave Me may be with Me where I am, that they may behold My glory which You have given Me; ...And I have declared to them Your name, and will declare it, that the love with which You loved Me may be in them, and I in them.” (John 17:24–26).

Jesus brings the brevity back to eternity and restores us from affliction to joy in the Lord. Through Jesus, we live in God. God has been and will forever be our dwelling place.

Conclusion

Psalm 90 teaches us to live our days with our eyes fixed on God, our dwelling place in eternity. Whatever situation you may be facing, the psalmist invites you to reflect and honestly assess your emotions, for they are a thermometer of the soul, revealing whether you are living a life pleasing to God. The feeling of emptiness is a sign of being trapped in brevity and affliction. No matter what, turn to God, cry out to Him, and ask Him to truly know your days and grant you wisdom to run back to Him. He will restore you from emptiness to fullness, from brevity to eternity.

May the prayer of Moses also become our prayer:

“TEACH US TO NUMBER OUR DAYS, THAT WE MAY GAIN A HEART OF WISDOM!”