Having a Wise Perspective on Length of Life

# Scripture: Psalm 90

# Key Thought: Being conscious of our limited lifespan helps us to make wise decisions at all ages.

# Intro:

## A moment when I was confronted with the brevity of life

When I first came home from the military, and was attending Houghton College and going to my home country church, Haskinville Wesleyan, my pastor was a man named Louis Hausele. He became one of my mentors and encouragers along the road toward pastoral service, though I didn’t realize where God was leading at the time. Pastor Hausele encouraged me to take various leadership roles in my local church.

Many years later, when I was serving as pastor at Kirkville Wesleyan Church, I heard that he had passed away at only 58 years of age. I knew that he was not a lot older than I was. His passing was a shock to me and was one of those moments in life for me when one is confronted with the fact that life is short, that the end of life is coming sooner than one thinks. It was a “Teach me to number my days” moment; a time that changes how one looks at life.

Our text for today is the verse from the Psalm 90. There are different types of Psalms. This is a wisdom Psalm that is attributed to Moses, the man of God who led the nation of Israel out of slavery in Egypt. The verse that is our text is a sincere prayer which reminds us of the brevity of life and what it means.

Teach us to number our days, that we may gain a heart of wisdom. Ps 90:12

Contrary to the way we often think about this, the message of this verse is not just for those of us who are older. Rather it is wise at whatever age we are to use the perspectives that we gain from this insight.

So, what are the perspectives that we can learn from this Psalm that can help us? It is not talking about counting our days, as in numerically, but rather about getting a proper perspective for daily decision-making that adequately considers the finiteness of our lifespan.

# Begin by remembering what is eternal.

Notice the Psalm we read for today is ascribed to Moses. Moses encourages us to begin by remembering who is eternal.

## A huge contrast

The first six verses of the Psalm contain a sharp, indeed a jarring contrast between the eternity of God and the finiteness of his human creatures. Look at the list of phrases used to describe God.

* God is the one who is there through all generations
* God is the one who was there before creation
* God is from everlasting to everlasting
* For God, a thousand years are like a day, or even a single watch of only three hours

What a great poetic picture of the eternity of God.

Human creatures on the other hand are fragile and time bound.

* They last for one generation or less
* They return to dust
* They sleep in death
* They are like grass in the desert that springs up in the morning and by evening is withered

## We are humbled by our finiteness

As humans, our natural tendency is to focus reality around ourselves. We think about our day-to-day business and we live as if life will continue forever. So, we need the reminder that this Psalm gives us. We need to remember who is eternal and that our current existence is so very finite.

Humility comes when we recognize our frailty and finiteness. We remember our accountability before God. We begin to put our plans into proper perspective. And we remember again that one key purpose of this life is to prepare for the next.

## But we are comforted in God’s promises

Yet when we think of the contrast between our everlasting God and our short lives, we can also reach out for comfort. As Christians we have comfort because we know that in Christ we are connected to the eternal, we have eternal life, and our home is forever with the eternal God. Preparation for this reality is our number one priority.

The old Country Gospel song, "I'll Fly Away, Oh Glory!" has taken the sad phrase from Psalm 90:11 which was intended to describe how quickly we die and it has turned the phrase on its head. In the Psalm, it is meant to remind us of our finiteness, of our too soon coming death. But in the song, the writer uses the metaphor of flying away to rejoice that when the day of his death comes, he will go to be with Jesus. The day of his passing will be glorious day of flying from earth into the presence of Jesus. Hallelujah!

The key is that we get wisdom by remembering to “number our days.” God is eternal. Our current existence is oh so finite.

## We can be wiser in our focus

This is one reason that the Bible tells us repeatedly that wisdom begins with the fear of God. Here are three of my favorite reminders of this truth.

The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom,
and knowledge of the Holy One is understanding. Prov 9:10 NIV

The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom;
all who follow his precepts have good understanding.
To him belongs eternal praise. Ps 111:10 NIV

 [The Lord] will be the sure foundation for your times,
a rich store of salvation and wisdom and knowledge;
the fear of the Lord is the key to this treasure. Isa 33:6 NIV

We need to remember what is eternal in order to know what values count for eternity. Being wise about eternal things gives us wisdom for everyday choices. Some things count for eternity. Some activities are destructive of eternal values. Some things are good but still not as crucial as others when we think about eternal values.

For example, physical fitness is an excellent value. It helps keep us healthier, more joyful, and especially helps us to have a better last half of our life since habits of physical fitness over our lives tend to pay off in better health in later years and in longer life too. Yet Paul reminds us that as good of a value and as important of a value as physical fitness is, we should remember that physical fitness in itself is a time-bound value. Its usefulness is limited to this earth.

Physical training is of some value, but godliness has value for all things, holding promise for both the present life and the life to come. 1 Tim 4:8

Building our character, however, Paul reminds us, has eternal significance. Some of the character development that takes place as we do physical training, such as learning perseverance and self-discipline, will outlast the physical results. Investing in the spiritual lives and character building of others has eternal significance too. God has promised to notice and reward in eternity the selfless service that we do for others.

But so many things in which our culture is heavily invested do not pass the test of "numbering our days." There is little or nothing eternal about them.

Take travel for example. Most of us enjoy traveling. But it always seems like there is another place you would like to go; something else you would like to see.

Solomon, the wise man warned us,

The eye is not satisfied with seeing, or the ear filled with hearing. Eccl 1:8 NRSV

It’s so easy to get caught up in an endless cycle of trying to go one more place or see one more thing, isn’t it. But the same principle can be applied to anything we look at. I look at my daylily gardens. Am I ever satisfied to quit looking? No. Would I stop looking at daylilies if I had twice as many? Probably not. But will it matter in eternity how many daylilies I looked at? Of course, not. And I need to remember that.

Think of some other things that our culture is fascinated with. Are they eternal values?

* Entertainment
* Pleasure seeking
* Watching videos/movies
* Watching Sports
* Collecting

You, I’m sure, can make your own list. Some of these definitely have legitimate uses in our earthly lives. Maybe we watch sports for recreation. Maybe we collect shells at the beach with friends. But remembering what is eternal will help us keep our activities in proper perspective.

# Remember that your days have a limit.

In Psalm 90:10, Moses reminds us that our lives have a limit of years. Seventy or eighty years is the life-expectancy named. The problem is that we don’t think about it.

## All ages forget about the limits

When we are young, we act like we will live forever. We dissipate our energies on things that are not useful to us or others. We neglect opportunities that would prepare us better for the future. Often we even pollute the stream of our lives with evil deeds in ways that will require major clean-up later. We are unaware that we will too soon look back and say -- "It went so fast!" "Where did the years go?" I wish I had….

When we are middle aged, our tendency is to focus on whatever successes and pleasures we have and to clone them to the greatest extent possible for as long as possible. We live day-to-day. We live for the next weekend. But we don’t think about the fact that we are forty, give or take, and statistically may well live 40 more years. What will add the same kinds of interest, joy and purpose to the rest of our life as our current success has to the first half? For most of us, it will not be the same thing, or at least, not the same version of the same thing. A vital second half will require new learning, new disciplines and new skills, perhaps related to our current work, perhaps tangentially so, or perhaps not at all. But we are not “numbering our days.”

When we are older, there seem to be two temptations. One is to try to hang onto things as they were until physical limitations absolutely prevent doing so. This can result in some wasteful scenarios. Perhaps you know an elderly person alone has been hanging on in a huge place for years as family urged them to downsize. Or maybe you are aware of someone who keeps accumulating stuff well past the time when wisdom would say, "You no longer have a reason for doing that." You might see people in their elder years stretching to maintain the expensive vacation and new car lifestyle that they once enjoyed but now cannot afford easily.

The other thing you might see in seniors is this: I heard recently about a friend not too much older than I who has apparently decided they are old and become depressed about it! Oh, I know we get lots of help with this. So much of the world appeals to youth. Our culture does not respect age as it should. Physical limitations and aches and pains can be depressing on their own. But attitude is the key factor. Getting depressed about our age does not really “number our days” well either because it does not take advantage of what God has obviously granted us. I say, God has a purpose for every day (Eph. 2:10).

Friends, I’m not saying that getting the right perspective for our age is easy. What I am saying is that unless we have eternity in view and seek to “number our days” accordingly, we will not live wisely.

## When we remember, we live with a greater sense of accountability before God

Notice here in these verses that as Moses reflected, he could not have helped but thinking about the wandering of the Israelites in the desert because they had disobeyed and disbelieved God. They were marking time in the desert and their days were indeed numbered as they waited for the forty years to pass. He is very conscious in these verses of the sins of Israel. And they kept disappointing God.

Certainly, we also disappoint God. And we also do so repeatedly. It is typical of fallen human nature. But the more conscious of God we are, the more we live with eternity in view, the more we also live with greater a sense of accountability before God.

## When we remember, we use our time more profitability

Another big practical difference that it makes in our day-to-day lives when we “number our days” is this. We make better use of our time for higher purposes. We realize that our time is given to us to use for eternal purposes, not just to fritter away for pleasures of the moment. This doesn’t mean that we can’t have any fun. God wants us to live lives full of joy and recreation helps us be joyful and able to work productively. But the more purposefully we live, the more joyful we are likely to be.

# Enjoy the gifts of each day; live in God's grace.

## The Psalm prays for joy and God’s favor

The lines of this last section of the Psalm, vv. 13-17 are so full of meaning that was not obvious to the Psalmist—Moses. It contains key words or concepts that God would fill with meaning in Israel's history and finally in Christ--steadfast love, compassion, joy, favor, for examples.

I think of this Psalm as arising out of the time when the Israelites were wandering in the wilderness under Moses leadership. For the nation of Israel, forgiveness had to be purchased the hard way, the way a criminal atones for their transgressions by serving their sentence. Israel wandered in the wilderness for 40 years at God’s command. In this Psalm Moses prays for the day when the sentence would be shortened. In verse 13 he prays that God would have compassion, mercy, upon his servants. Moses looks for the day when it would be said as the prophet predicted in Isaiah 40,

Comfort, comfort my people says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and proclaim to her that her hard service has been completed, that her sin has been paid for…
Isaiah 40:1, 2 NIV

On one level the prayer of Moses for comfort and gladness was answered when the nation of Israel, under the leadership of Joshua his successor, entered the promised land.

## True favor and Joy come through Jesus

But in another sense, the coming of the true favor of God awaited the coming of Christ.

When the angels celebrated the announcement of the birth of Christ, they rejoiced with these words:

Glory to God in the highest heaven and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests. Luke 2:14 NIV

The true day of God’s grace had dawned. So, the apostle Paul wrote to people:

 [God] says,
“In the time of my favor I heard you, and in the day of salvation I helped you.”
I tell you, now is the time of God’s favor, now is the day of salvation. 2 Cor 6:2 NIV

Moses’ prayers are answered for us as we live in the grace, the joy, and the blessedness that is our inheritance through Jesus Christ our Lord.

# Conclusion

Grace Givers “Answered Prayer at the Fair” p. 139