

# Productivity and Futility

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Preacher: Wayne Schuller

[ 0 : 00 ] Please be seated. And I'll tell you about John. John was a good husband, a faithful and hard-working husband, loyal to his wife. And though caring toward his wife, he never really told her that he loved her.

And maybe if he did sort of mumble it on the odd anniversary, he never told his wife why he loved her, what it was about her that he loved. He never gave her those details.

And though he was happy with his wife, he just didn't articulate it. That was John. And when he was down or upset, he never shared that with his wife either.

In short, John never really opened his heart to his wife, even though they married many decades, you know, with a good marriage. And he had a shrewd pastor, and his pastor sort of maybe got this hunch and said to John, John, God gives you permission to show your vulnerabilities to your wife. And John said, really? And they talked about it. And by the end of the conversation, the husband was convinced that God did give him permission to share those emotions and express and articulate those vulnerabilities with his wife.

[ 1 : 19 ] So a few months later, the pastor caught up with John again and said, how has your marriage been changed? You know, and what's changed in your life with your wife?

And John said, nothing. The pastor said, well, I don't get it. Didn't you start? Didn't I show you that, you know, you could, you know, God gives you permission to share your heart with your wife?

And John said, well, yes, pastor, you help me to see that God does indeed give me that permission, but I just didn't feel like doing it. And the pastor said to him, John, God commands you to share your vulnerabilities with your wife.

He doesn't just give you permission. He commands you. So don't wait until you feel like it. Obey God and just do it out of obedience to God. So John went away and thought about it and pastors are busy and he forgot to follow it up.

Well, friends, that parable is something of what I think the Psalms are to the Christian believer. I think that's a great analogy of what the Psalms mean to us as the redeemed church of God.

[ 2 : 35 ] What God has given us are these great book of prayers, 150 covering every emotion and every context and every situation of life from joy and gladness, praise and thanks to the darker parts of life in times of contrition, confession, lament, complaint.

All in this great book that God has given us. Some prayers, I think that we would just be too lazy to pray, you know, detailed, adoring God with detail.

When do we ever do that? So, you know, God gives us permission to do that. And some bold prayers of complaint that maybe we would be not brave enough to pray.

And so clearly in the Psalms, God is giving you permission to pray those prayers. But that's, I think we are like John, aren't we?

We know God has given us permission to exercise an intimacy with him. He's given us the words to use to express that intimacy with God.

[ 3 : 44 ] And yet, I don't know why. Do you know why? For some reason, we don't exercise it. And actually, God is doing more than just giving us permission, isn't he?

He's commanding it. I wonder if sometimes we treat the Psalms like a kind of a museum of prayer. How people once prayed, you know, and it's just, it's a historical piece.

It's theoretical. But we don't actually exercise them. But I think God commands us to exercise them. Whenever you're stationed, you're in, there is a Psalm that will help you pray. And God commands us to use the Psalms. It doesn't just give us permission, but commands it. In the New Testament, it says, in Colossians, let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom.

And as you sing Psalms, hymns and spiritual songs, with gratitude in your hearts to God. Now, there's probably more than Psalms involved in that, but we are at least commanded to pray and use and exhort and sing the Psalms.

[ 4 : 54 ] So, friends, may you be like that and not like John. Well, in Psalm 90, it's a great Psalm. And it's a humbling, humbling, humbling Psalm for us.

It's a prayer of Moses, the man of God. I think it's the only prayer of Moses in the whole book. Therefore, it's the oldest Psalm in the whole book. And Moses is praying, I think, in this Psalm, in his great role as intercessor, pleading with God for the people and pleading the station and context of the people and asking God to help and to humble and then to give joy to God's people.

This is how he begins. He says, always start with God in prayer. Always start with adoring God. He says, Before the mountains were brought forth, or ever you had formed the earth and the world, from everlasting to everlasting, you are God.

He begins with God, the eternal God. God has always been his people's dwelling place, their security. God has always been there for his people.

God has always been everlasting God. Unlike us, God never runs out of time. God never has to say, I didn't do that because I didn't have enough time.

[ 6 : 17 ] God is never pressured, never rushed. God is eternally, constantly victorious as God. In contrast to us, we are nothing like that.

And Moses turns his attention from the eternal God to what it is like to be mortal. And he says, God, you turn us back to dust.

And you say, turn back, you mortals. For a thousand years in your sight are like yesterday when it is past, or like a watch in the night. As God made man from the dust of the earth, he sends us back to dust.

And he determines and calls the time and says, return, I mortal. The words here echo the curse on Adam in Genesis 3.

By the sweat of your face, you shall eat bread until you return to the ground. For from it you are taken. You are dust, and to dust you shall return.

[ 7 : 22 ] God is everlasting, eternal. We are dust, and to dust we will return. Our days, a thousand years, which is a long time for us, we celebrate millenniums in a big way.

That's just like yesterday to God. It's like a watch in the night, a couple of hours. God sweeps us away, verse 5, you sweep them away, they are like a dream.

Like grass, it is renewed in the morning. In the morning it flourishes and is renewed. In the evening it fades and withers. We have early years of strength, and then at the end we fade and wither. It's just like a grass over a day.

It happens very, very quickly. Our life is fleeting. Our life is ephemeral, Moses says. Our life is like a dream. People have said to me, I've probably shared this before, but it's always being said to parents, and it's true, enjoy your kids because it goes quickly, and they grow up quickly.

And that's true, and I take that to heart, and I treasure my kids. But I actually think that's not just true of parenting, it's true of all of life. Life goes very, very quickly.

[ 8 : 32 ] I've spoken with people very close to death, and just talking to them about their childhood and whatnot. And it's funny how they can stop a conversation in a reflective moment and say, where did that last 60 years go?

And it's just like a dream, and it happened so quickly. It's gone so quickly. That is how we are compared to the everlasting God. Now, why are we like that?

Does God enjoy kind of toying with us and giving us such a limited time? Well, we actually like that because of Adam's curse, because of we're all sons of Adam.

In effect, we're all objects of God's anger. That's what Moses goes on to talk about. And this is really tough. Verse 7, For we are consumed by your anger.

This is God's anger. By your wrath, we are overwhelmed. You have set our iniquities, our rebellion, our wrongdoing before you, our secret sins, in the light of your countenance.

[ 9 : 34 ] Our secret sins, the sins of the heart, sins of the mind, the sins that no one has seen us do. They're right in God's face, and his anger overwhelms us, shortens our life.

The days of our life are 70 years, or perhaps 80 if we are strong. Even then, their span is only toil and trouble. They are soon gone, and we fly away.

Our lives are ephemeral, and they're full of trouble, because we are part of a fallen human race. We are not as God made us to be, loving him with all our heart, obeying him with all our heart. We are under his discipline. We are under Adam's curse. And so death is God's judicial sentence against sinners like us.

It is actually, in God's wisdom, it's actually his way of limiting our arrogance, and limiting the damage that we can do in his world.

[ 10 : 38 ] I mean, imagine if we live, you know, a thousand years. Imagine what damage we would do to the world. But it is also God's judgment. Some people say, I'm not a sinner. Well, I'd say to you, don't die then.

If you die, God obviously thinks differently. God owes us nothing. And even if he, by his mercy, gives you the, what Moses says, the 70 or 80 years, if you're strong, they'll be full of trouble, Moses says.

And you'll end with a sigh. It will end with a sigh. So friends, we need, Moses wants us to be very wise about our attitude to death, very open about it, and not foolish about it.

It is true that when death takes a loved one, we can feel a sense of being robbed. We can feel a sense of frustration, and even anger towards God. And there are psalms that allow us to express that to God in faith.

But, the psalms do not allow us to conclude with rage against God, that, God, you're unfair. God, you're unjust. God, you're not righteous for doing this.

[ 11 : 50 ] The psalms do not give us permission or command that. The psalms actually humble us and say, when God sweeps you away, when God says, return to dust, that's his judicial sentence, that's his wrath against sinners.

We can never say, God has acted unfairly, or unwisely, or unrighteously. We do not deserve the time we have.

I'll plug a book. This is a great book on suffering by an American, I think he's Canadian actually, Baptist Doncaster, and How Long, O Lord, Reflections on Suffering and Evil.

It's a very meaty and rich book. It takes slow reading, but it's an excellent, humbling book about how to handle suffering as a Christian, and how to handle death, and how to handle the suffering in the world with faith.

And I'll just quote you from this book, what Don Carson says, and he shares in the book how he himself was diagnosed with a life-threatening disease, and what that did to his faith. And this is what, now fortunately, he didn't die, and he's lived on and written more books.

[ 13 : 02 ] This is what he says, Death is not simply something that happens to me. It happens to me because I am a sinner. In that sense, I have caused death.

I am death's subject, not just its object. In my transgression, I have attracted the just wrath of God. And that wrath is not merely the outworking of impersonal principles, but God's personal and judicial reaction to the transgression in which I have responsibly indulged as a person.

And that's a mouthful, but you get the spirit of it. It's the Psalm 90 humbling that we are to see God's judicial anger in death, in our own death.

It's to actually make us run to Christ and to seek grace and forgiveness before that day and to die in Christ, to die well with faith in Christ.

There's no denying it, friends. We will all die. Every one of us will die. Have you thought about your own death? Have you thought about how you want to die? Who considers the power of your anger?

[ 14 : 16 ] Verse 11. See, no one considers the power of God's anger. We think God owes us. Actually, not many people think about God's anger.

Your wrath is as great as the fear that is due to you. I've visited Christians in hospitals who have demonstrated great faith, great openness to what they were facing and trusting in Christ.

They submitted to what God, the lot that God had given them. I've also visited Christians in hospital who are in absolute denial.

And I'm trying to encourage them and say, we're looking after your wife and she'll be okay. And they're saying, it's okay, I'll be home soon. And that could be in palliative care.

And they're talking as if they'll be home soon. They're in denial. Psalm 90 is to humble us so that we meet death head on, submitting to God's sort of discipline in it and trusting in Christ.

[ 15 : 20 ] It's not right to be in denial about death. It's not right to even just be ambivalent about death and ignore it. We are to face it head on as God's judicial sentence, trusting in Christ.

Now, this is so counter-cultural. Let me share, I think it's quite a funny quote really, but it's tragic about the attitude of Kerry Packer before he died.

You know, the great media mogul, one of Australia's richest men before he died. This is what a writer said about him when he died. Few Australians have loitered so long at the brink of death as Kerry Packer and perhaps none at so ambivalently.

That's a key phrase. Perhaps none so ambivalently. Tens of millions of dollars were lavished on the campaign to prolong Kerry Packer's life. He was saved first by timely defibrillation, then by a transplanted kidney from his helicopter pilot, and finally by a constant cycle of surgery and steroids trailed everywhere by the best minds in clinical care.

But, heedless of the medical consequences, Packer was resolved to make no changes in his life whatsoever. The addiction to junk food remained unaltered by diabetes.

[16:43] The smoking continued unabated despite six coronary angioplasties. He once famously told a prominent cardiologist, light my cigarette, son.

See the arrogance? Upbraided for his lifestyle by a specialist at the Cornell Medical Center, he made his priorities perfectly clear.

And I have to censor this quote because Packer swore a lot. This is what he said to this sort of best surgeon in the world who was upbraiding him and telling him about what, to change his diet and exercise.

He said, all right son, you've given me the lecture. Now are you going to fix me up or aren't you? And of course he had the money.

He knew he had the money and of course they would. Where is Kerry Packer now? Well he's died and he's facing the judgment throne of Christ with no money, no lawyers, no resources.

[17:46] Was he warned? Yes. Was he ready? I don't know. But it doesn't look good, does it? Now the issue here is not, you know, we should eat well and listen to our doctors if that's true.

The issue here is how ambivalent Kerry Packer was about death, how foolish he was. He did not follow the advice of Psalm 90. He did not follow this key verse which is the verse of the Psalm, verse 12.

Lord, teach us to count our days that we may gain a wise heart. That is the highlight verse of this Psalm. That's the turning point of this Psalm.

After this, the Psalm's going to move from thinking about death to thinking about joy in God. But the juncture, the turning point is this command, teach us to number our days, O Lord, that we may gain a heart of wisdom.

Friends, what is wisdom? Wisdom is living for God, living for eternity. Wisdom is understanding what death means and understanding your death is coming.

[18:52] Wisdom is fearing God, the eternal God, knowing that your life is ephemeral. When we count our days, we actually realise there's not many days to count.

Either way, you count what's been and what's coming, there's even less days to come. But God is eternal. So Psalm 90 is saying, Lord, teach us to count our days.

Assess your life against God's measure. Assess your existence against God's everlasting, eternal permanence. Acknowledge God's wrath.

Seek God's grace. Admit that God owes you nothing and that everything is a gift. And then ask for every gift. Fear his greatness.

Live before God and under God. Be humbled by the fleeting nature of your life. It's like the letter of James where it says, what is your life? You are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes.

[19:59] So fear God. Fear God. To me, the teaching of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount where he said, seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness.

And all these things will be given to you. That's the spirit of Psalm 90, the spirit of counting your days to think, I don't have many days, I'm going to love God and I'm going to work for the kingdom in whatever I do and I'm going to live under his name.

I'm going to seek first his kingdom and his righteousness. I'm not going to get distracted and worry about the things the world worries about. Friends, make your life count.

Don't waste your life is the message of Psalm 90. Now after advising us to count our days, Moses actually gets, he moves from being under God's wrath to seeking joy in God and the change in this psalm is profound.

The tone just turns on its head and becomes almost hedonistic. turn, O Lord, how long, have compassion on your servants.

[ 21 : 07 ] Verse 14, satisfy us in the morning with your steadfast love so that we may rejoice and be glad all our days. Asking God to satisfy you, asking God to give you joy.

Make us glad, Lord, as many days as you have afflicted us, as many years as we have seen evil. I think what the psalm reflects is that when we number our days, when we, before God, count our days, something changes.

Something profound changes. When we fear the Lord, something profound changes in your outlook. When you are humbled by God, you are then directed by Moses to seek gladness in God, to seek satisfaction in God, to seek joy in God, joy in God.

By humbling us, God can take our eyes off what is temporary and on what is eternal and on joys that are eternal, not joys that will rust or wear out or fade away, but joys that are eternal in God. Today God is actually not just giving us permission, he is commanding us to seek joy in him. He is commanding us to pray, Lord, make us glad.

[ 22 : 32 ] Make us glad for as many days as you have afflicted us and for as many years as we have seen evil. people. We are to demand gladness from God and we are to demand gladness in God.

We are to demand gladness from God and to demand from him gladness in him. And I love verse 16 and I've seen verses like this all through the Psalms and if you don't look for them you'll miss them but verse 16, let your work be manifest to your servants, your glorious power to their children. So often the psalmist doesn't just pray for himself, he prays for his children and his grandchildren and the next generation and the next one after that. Psalm 78 is a great example.

There's about five generations prayed for. More than we'll ever see but the eternal God will be there and so he longs that God would bless his household.

So often our prayers are just about me, thanks for what you've done for me. But the man of God prays for his posterity and for his seed. It's a great prayer and it's there in the Bible and it must be on God's heart as well.

[ 23 : 49 ] And finally he concludes with his great exhortation, let the favour of the Lord our God be upon us and prosper for us the work of our hands.

O prosper the work of our hands. You could have read the first half of Psalm 90 and thought, my life's futile, I've been wasting my life and that might be true.

But after you count your days, we are to pray, God, prosper the work of my hands. Don't let me waste my life. Use me. Use the work I am doing.

Use my efforts for your kingdom. Use the things I'm striving for. Make them last. So many times we have a sense of failure that we haven't achieved all the things we'd like to achieve or done for God, all the things we'd like to do for God and maybe the ministry that we'd invested in hasn't worked out how we wanted to work out.

This Psalm just throws us on our knees to pray, Lord, prosper the work of our hands. Prosper the work of our hands. And God can do it. In fact, God alone can do it.

[ 24 : 59 ] In our society there's a really massive interest in productivity and organisation and personal effectiveness and I quite enjoy reading that literature and I sort of get excited by it.

There's a huge interest in living a life of meaning. Everyone wants to live a life of meaning and of purpose. But unfortunately, most people when they do that are blinkered by short-term blindness. They're myopic. They're only living for the best career or the best retirement. They're only thinking in terms of 60, 70, 80 years. Whereas God is eternal and wants us to long for the eternal.

Friends, commit to God today what fleeting days remain in your life. Even if you're young, they are not long. Commit your life to the kingdom of God.

If you sense that maybe you've fallen off the wagon and have been more interested in the things that are temporary and seen rather than the eternal unseen joys of God and of the gospel and of heaven, get back on the wagon.

[ 26 : 09 ] Let death itself be our reminder to refocus you. Work for what is everlasting with the everlasting God. It's a bit of a cliché but it's a great question to ask.

What will people save you when you die? What would you like them to save you when you die? I was thinking about that this week because I was at a funeral and just thinking about what if this was my funeral?

What would it be like? May it be said of you and me what is said of Moses in this psalm. How is he described? A prayer of Moses, the man of God.

May it be said of us, of you, that you're a man of God, a woman of God. May that be the standout feature. It's not too late to number your days and to fear the Lord and to get on the wagon and to do that with your life that, as it was said of Moses, may it be said of us.

Only by the grace of Jesus Christ can the man of God find eternal life. Only by Jesus Christ can the man of God find everlasting life.

[ 27 : 23 ] So let's come to our Lord Jesus right now in prayer. And as I pray, I'm going to invite you to, in a sense, recommit and renew your walk with the Lord.

So let's pray now. Lord God, we're sorry for being ambivalent or even in denial about death and our death.

Thank you for the reminder from Psalm 90 of the inevitability and of the shortness of the time.

Heavenly Father, we pray that we would, trusting in Jesus, be ready to meet you on the day of judgment, ready to die well.

Father, help us when we're suffering to meditate on this psalm, to use this psalm. Help us when we, when the people around us are knocked around by death, to read to them this psalm and to give them this great gift.

Dear God, in the name of Jesus Christ, we claim your mercy and we pray that we would seek first his kingdom and his righteousness and that you would use us, prospering the work of our hands, in us building eternal treasure in heaven.

[ 28 : 40 ] Amen. Do this, Father, for the sake of your name. Amen.