

Teach us to Number our Days

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Date: 22 September 2024

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- [0:00] Well, it'd be great if you could grab your Bibles and turn back to Psalm 90. Well, in life we all face frustrations, don't we?
- From those telemarketer calls, they're frustrating, aren't they? To the rising costs of living, to trying to paint a wall, only to come home and see that the kids have gotten into the paint.
- That's frustrating. To going camping on Fraser Island, going for a walk and then coming back to find your car sunken in the sand. That would be frustrating, wouldn't it?
- Or yesterday I was talking with someone from the camp down at Phillip Island who went in for a standard hip replacement, but the surgeon didn't leave specific enough instructions for the nurse, and so the nurse accidentally turned her the wrong way and tore the tendon away from her new hip.
- And so she had to get it reattached, but the damage now means she has a permanent limp and has to use a walking stick, what should have been a straightforward hip replacement. That's frustrating, isn't it?
- [1:17] Or the recent typhoon that hit parts of Vietnam and Myanmar. I still haven't heard from Ronald, actually, to see if he's okay. But in Vietnam, it's claimed 292 lives, 232,000 homes, 270,000 hectares of crops, not to mention livestock.
- The government has estimated the total loss at a cost of more than \$2 billion U.S. That's frustrating, isn't it? And so what's the solution to the frustrations we face in life?
- Is it to despair at them? Is it to live in denial of them? Or is it to live determined to prevent all of them? Because how do we live wisely in the face of frustration?
- Well, this psalm teaches us. It's the only psalm of Moses, which is what inspired me to kind of have a look at it for my own quiet times, and I thought it would be helpful to do as a one-off today.
- And it's a prayer for wisdom. At the heart of it is perhaps the best-known verse from it, verse 12, which says, So teach us to number our days that we may gain a heart of wisdom, which will mean, as we'll see, accepting our reality, but also resting in God for help to live this life, and looking to God for hope of a better life.
- [2:47] As the great hymn says, O God, our help in ages past and our hope for years to come. And so Moses begins this prayer by praising God as our secure home who gives us help.
- At point one, verse one. At Lord, it says Moses, You have been our dwelling place throughout all generations. Before the mountains were born, or you brought forth the whole world from everlasting to everlasting, you are God.
- God is our dwelling place, verse one. Our home. The place we and every generation of his people have been able to go to find refuge, rest, and refreshment, which in turn gives us help to keep going in life, doesn't it?

I mean, that's what you do when you go home to rest and recharge. That helps you to keep going the next day, doesn't it? Well, so too, when we rest in God, our home, by giving, or casting our anxiety upon him, or clinging to the promises from him, then we get to know peace and refreshment, which helps us in turn to keep going.

God is our help in ages past. But he's also our secure home, unlike our earthly homes. I mean, our earthly homes often decay. There's always something to fix.

[4 : 19] Have you ever noticed that? There's always something to fix around the house. It's never always done. Or we have to move homes. Michelle and I have moved house 14 times, I think it is, in our married lives.

Might be 15 now. That's a reasonable amount, isn't it? Others have left home in one country to live in another country. That would be daunting, wouldn't it?

And others have been forced to move house because they're no longer able to live on their own. That can be very demoralizing, can't it?

But God remains our home. A little girl's father, who was in the military and so moved regularly, said to her mum, Mum, you are my home, because you are always with me.

It's the same with God, isn't it? From everlasting to everlasting, he is God. He's always there. And so while our earthly homes do not last because we move or they break, God is everlasting.

[5 : 25] He's our secure home. He ever remains a place to find refreshment and rest, which will then help us to keep living in life.

And that's a comforting truth, isn't it? Especially in light of our sober reality, point to verse 3. Moses continues to pray, You, God, turn people back to dust, saying, Return to the dust, you mortals.

A thousand years in your sight are like a day that has just gone by or like a watch in the night. Yet you sweep people away in the sleep of death. They are like the new grass in the morning.

In the morning it springs up new, but by the evening it is dry and withered. You see, while God is everlasting, you know, such as a thousand years are like a day or a night, we, by comparison, are little lasting, aren't we?

We are like grass that springs up in the morning, but is withered and dry by evening. That is, our life is transient. It doesn't last long before we die.

[6 : 35] Why? Well, because of God's wrath at our sin. And Moses says in verse 3, You, God, turn people back to dust. Or verse 5, You, God, sweep people away in the sleep of death.

You see, Moses is likely to have written Genesis, which I think is the back of his mind. For in Genesis we read how God judges Adam because of his sin. And you get that idea of returning back to dust that we saw in verse 3.

Because of Adam's sin, by the sweat of your brow you'll eat your food until you return to the ground, since from it you were taken. For dust you are, and to dust you will return. It sounds like verse 3, doesn't it? And so our life is limited because of God's wrath at Adam's sin.

And this is made even clearer in our psalm from verse 7. Do you see verse 7? Moses says, We are consumed by your anger and terrified by your indignation.

You have set our iniquities before you, our secret sins in the light of your presence. All our days pass away under your wrath. We finish our years with a moan.

[7 : 44] Aren't you glad you came today? But you see, our life is limited in years because of God's wrath at Adam's sin.

And though, before we blame Adam for everything, don't forget verse 8. God sees our sin too. As Paul says in Romans 1, The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of Adam.

No, of people. We people are part of the problem. Though, of course, we often get caught up in the sin of others, don't we?

I mean, the people of Ukraine are not more sinful than others, are they? And so they don't deserve to be invaded, do they? And yet they're caught up in the sin of another, aren't they?

The point is, our sin in general has led to life under God's wrath in general, which means our life is limited, both in terms of quantity of years and even quality of years.

[8 : 48] Verse 10. Our days may come to 70 years or 80 if our strength endures, yet the best of them are but trouble and sorrow, for they quickly pass and we fly away.

We've actually celebrated two 100th birthdays this year. One a couple of weeks ago at our Wednesday service and John Bartholomew's 100th back in May. We have lots of people in their 80s and 90s and they're still going strong, although some of them say they're just still going.

So it's not the number that is the point here. It's that life is limited. Life is limited in quantity of years.

It's transient. But it's also limited in quality of years. It's troubled. Verse 10. The best of these years are but marked by trouble and sorrow.

Here are the frustrations we face. I mean, who has ever had a whole year, their best year, but had no trouble in it? You know, no trouble with sickness or work or money or family.

[9 : 53] Who has ever had a frustration-free year? No one. You see, our sober reality is that life in this world is transient and troubled.

We will face frustration and even death because we live in a world under God's wrath. And so what's the solution? Is it to live in denial of frustration?

Now, expecting poor health or loss of wealth never to come to us? I kind of do this. You know, life is pretty good and so when bad things happen, I'm kind of surprised by it and indignant that it has happened to me.

But we shouldn't be. We need to remember our sober reality. Part of the problem is I think we live in such a good country. We have such comfortable lives by comparison to many people in the world that we think that life ought to be always like this.

But it's not. Our Western world even denies the harsh reality of death. It calls it celebrating life, doesn't it? When death brings great grief.

[11 : 02] But to deny that we face frustration or to try and deny death by recalling it something else, it's an unrealistic expectation.

And it only sets us up for greater frustration, doesn't it? And so it's the solution then to live determined to prevent all frustration. Now, this seems to be the solution of our world with its ongoing plans and products, you know, from more medicines to exercise plans to OH&S; safety plans or reducing carbon emissions and so on.

Now, don't mishear me. It's good to limit frustrations that we face. I mean, it's good to live healthy lives to limit our sickness, for example. It's good to study, for those who are out there, we've got some in this congregation, to limit failure.

It's good to plan a trip so you don't get lost, like taking a wrong turn on your way down to Phillip Island yesterday. It's good to limit frustration. But to live determined to prevent all frustration, to be so focused on it, will only end in more frustration because we just can't do it, can we?

No matter how hard we try, we will still face it. We'll still get sick and we'll still die. And so it's a solution then to, I don't know, simply live in despair.

[12 : 27] This is our lot. Woo-hoo! Now, that's not much of a life either, is it? Now, to live in denial or despair or determination to prevent all frustration only leads to more.

And so what's the solution to live wisely in this world? Well, Moses' solution is firstly to recognize our reality under God's wrath. So point three, verse 11.

He goes on to say, If only we knew the power of your anger, your wrath is as great as the fear that is your due. People have this amazing capacity to ignore God.

I don't know if you've noticed this. To not see, not just, you know, that there could be, there must be a God who's created or the beauty we see, but also that there might be a reason why typhoons hit parts of our world, why wars continue to rage, why our bodies continue to break.

But they just don't want to know or accept that it's because we live under God's wrath in our world because of our sin. Even we Christians can sometimes feel like God's wrath is a bit excessive, can't we?

[13 : 35] But notice verse 11. In other words, it's only equal to the dishonor that God has been shown.

In other words, his wrath is fair. It is just. And if we think his wrath is excessive, then we've underestimated how much he's been dishonored. Haven't we? But here's the thing in verse 11.

If people did know, that is, if they did accept we live under God's wrath, then they might then start turning to rightly fear God. That is, treat God as God.

Which, as Proverbs says, the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. Wisdom to live wisely in this world. And so that's what Moses then prays in verse 12.

That we would know this reality and gain wisdom. Verse 12, literally starts with the word so, so teach us to number our days that we may gain a heart of wisdom.

[14 : 42] You see, he's praying that we might recognize our sober reality under God's wrath, that our days are numbered so that we might fear God rightly and gain a heart of wisdom.

Our dog, Toby, is still a work in progress. He doesn't recognize the reality that he's not the boss in our house.

He sometimes thinks he can do whatever he likes, including sitting on the good couch that is reserved for guests and Bible study groups and the like. And when I asked him to get off or demanded that he get off, instead of rightly fearing me, he just gives me this blank look like this.

You said something? That's not actually the good couch. When it was the good couch, it didn't end in a photo of him.

In fact, it didn't end well for him. And it's the same for us. If we don't recognize our reality such that we fear God rightly, it won't end well for us.

[15 : 45] We'll constantly face frustration and either despair or denial or try and be determined to prevent it all. But if we rightly fear God, then it will lead us to firstly accept our reality and then secondly, look to him as our home for help.

And even thirdly, look to him for hope of a better life to come, which is exactly what Moses prays for now. Verse 13. Relent, Lord.

How long will it be? Have compassion on your servants. Satisfy us in the morning with your unfailing love that we may sing for joy and be glad all our days. Make us glad for as many days as you have afflicted us in this world for as many years as we have seen trouble, frustration.

May your deeds be shown to your servants, your splendor to their children. May the favor of the Lord, our God, rest on us. Establish the work of our hands for us. Yes, establish the work of our hands.

You see, in verse 13, Moses prays that God might relent from his wrath and show compassion for his people. In verse 14, he prays that they may know God's unfailing love which will satisfy them in the morning, bring them contentment every day.

[17:06] Verse 16, he prays that God might show them his deeds or work. Verse 17, he prays that they might know God's favor and that God might establish their work so that it continues to have worth, that it won't be wasted in this life, which gives them purpose to keep going.

Moses prayed for God's compassion, favor, love, and deeds, all so that they might enjoy a better life, summed up in verse 15, the middle verse of these five verses.

Moses prays that God will make them glad in the future for as many days as they've been afflicted in the present in this world. Here's the hope of a better life to come, a life that comes with satisfaction and contentment, a life that comes with purpose from work that will outlast us, a life full of joy and gladness.

And the great news for us is this better life has already begun in Jesus, did you realize? And so our solution to live wisely is even better, point four.

For in Christ, God has already shown his compassion and favor towards us, hasn't he? In Christ, God has already shown his greatest deed and his greatest unfailing love for us, hasn't he?

[18:31] As we heard in our second reading, God demonstrates his own love for us in this, that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. Here is God's compassion and favor.

Here is God's greatest deed and unfailing love. And since God has already shown us these things, and then this better life Moses prayed for has already begun for us who believe in Jesus.

God's We can already know contentment from his love and the establishment of our work. We can already know joy and gladness. You see, yes, we are spiritually free from God's wrath for our personal sin if we believe in Jesus, but we will still get caught up physically in this world under God's wrath for people's sin.

And so our days will still be transient and troubled. We will still face frustration, yes, yet despite these days, God's unfailing love in Christ can still give us satisfaction and contentment such that we can face frustration and say, oh, well, it's okay.

I was visiting Olive Wilkinson, a long-term member of our church, a week ago. She's 99 years old. I think that's right, Jenny's? Yep, 99, and has had to move to a care facility because her body is failing.

[19:58] In other words, her days are transient and troubled. And of course, she preferred to be in her own home. Actually, she'd really preferred to be in God's home. And yet, when we spoke, she was content.

She could say, oh, well, it's okay, because she knew nothing could separate her from God's love in Christ, as Romans 8 says. In fact, that was the very passage that converted her, and that was the passage she wanted me to read to her.

You see, God's unfailing love for her in Christ gave her satisfaction, contentment every morning. And despite these days, God has established our work for him now through Christ.

As Paul says in 1 Corinthians, when he's talking about the resurrection of Christ, he says, our labor in the Lord is not in vain. It's not worthless. For whatever we do for God, whether speaking his words, serving his people, praying for others, pleasing him in life, all our efforts for him will be established by him.

Our work won't be forgotten or wasted, but we'll continue on for eternity. One of the things people struggle with is purpose in life.

[21 : 16] I don't know if you've felt this yourself. I see it at all stages. For the young, they don't know what to do in life. What's my purpose? And they struggle to know what to do.

For the middle aged, it's that midlife crisis you hear about. Or for the older, it's no longer being able to do what you used to do. Our transient and troubled days can make it hard for us to find purpose, can't it?

Where our work matters and will last even once we're gone. Well, if you want some purpose and work that will not be wasted, here it is.

Work for the Lord Jesus and God will establish it forever. Your work won't be forgotten, but will carry worth into eternity, which gives us purpose in the present, no matter what stage of life we're at.

For we can all pray for others, can't we? And we can all please God ourselves, can't we? And I think we can all serve others and speak his word in little ways.

[22 : 23] After all, I'm guessing most people in this room know John 3.16. You know, God so, there you go, you can all speak God's word. At 99 years old, Olive still encourages those she meets.

She pointed out to me, a retired missionary in her home as well, that she likes to talk to and they encourage each other. In fact, during our conversation, another lady politely interrupted us.

And to say how Olive had encouraged her in life. Olive couldn't remember doing it, but she was glad the lady was encouraged by it. This work still gives her purpose, even if she forgets she's done it.

And it's worth will outlast her. It will continue into eternity as the people she's encouraged continue into eternity. You see, Moses prayed for a better life where God's love would satisfy him each day and God would establish his work forever.

Well, in Christ, this life has already begun for us. How good is that? And this life will be completed when Christ returns to restore our world and raise our broken bodies so that our lives will never be transient or troubled again.

[23 : 38] In fact, that life to come will last even longer than Moses prayed for. Moses prayed in verse 15 that God will make us glad for as many days as we've known affliction, for as many days as we've lived on earth, but our life to come will last many more days than that.

It will last forever, won't it? And this gives us joy and gladness now, even amidst the days of transience and trouble. The person I spoke to yesterday about the hip went on to say that even though it is frustrating, she said, in the big scheme of things, it doesn't matter.

I'll get a new hip that will last forever. And she's right, isn't she? And so when we face frustration in this world, we're not to live in denial of it, nor live determined to prevent all of it, nor live in despair because of it.

All those ways will only lead to more frustration by the way to live wisely in the face of it, by fearing God rightly, acknowledging our sober reality, but resting in God, our home for help to keep going and enjoying our better life in Christ that has already begun and will be completed.

For then, despite these days of frustration, we will find contentment, purpose, and gladness. Let's pray. our heavenly father, we do thank you for this psalm, which is like a reality check for us to help us acknowledge our sober reality in this world, but it doesn't leave us in despair.

[25 : 15] It points us to you, our home, who gives us rest and help to keep going, and to our hope in Christ of a better life that has already begun and will be completed.

So help us, we pray, to accept our reality, but also continue to rest in you, our home, and enjoy our better life in Christ that's already begun, that we may know contentment, purpose, and even gladness in the face of frustration, we pray.

In Jesus' name, Amen.