

Teach Us to Number Our Days

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[0 : 00] So if you care to follow along in your Bible as I read Ecclesiastes 12. Remember also your Creator in the days of your youth, before the evil days come, and the years draw near of which you will say, I have no pleasure in them, before the sun and the light and the moon and the stars are darkened and the clouds return after the rain.

In the day when the keepers of the house tremble, and the strong men are bent, and the grinders cease because they are few, and those who look through the windows are dimmed, and the doors on the street are shut, when the sound of the grinding is low, and one rises up at the sound of a bird, and all the daughters of song are brought low, they are afraid also of what is high, and terrors are in the way.

The almond tree blossoms, the grasshopper drags itself along, and desire fails, because man is going to his eternal home, and the mourners go about the streets.

Before the silver cord is snapped, or the golden bowl is broken, or the pitcher is shattered at the fountain, or the wheel broken at the cistern, and the dust returns to the earth as it was, and the spirit returns to God who gave it.

Vanity of vanity, says the preacher, all is vanity. Besides being wise, the preacher also taught the people knowledge, weighing and studying, and arranging many proverbs with great care.

[1 : 40] The preacher sought to find words of delight, and uprightly he wrote words of truth. The words of the wise are like goads, and like nails firmly fixed are the collected sayings.

They are given by one shepherd. My son, beware of anything beyond these, of making many books there is no end, and much study is a weariness of the flesh.

The end of the matter. All has been heard. Fear God, and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man. For God will bring every deed into judgment, with every secret thing, whether good or evil.

Amen. Father, we pray now for the help of the Holy Spirit as we turn to the Bible, that we might have ears to hear and eyes to see, and hearts to trust and wills to obey, that we may not simply understand, but be transformed by the power of the Holy Spirit through the instruction of the Word. For we pray in Christ's name. Amen. Now, having read from Ecclesiastes, the writer of Ecclesiastes earlier on in chapter 7 says it is better to go to a funeral than to a house of feasting, because death is the destiny of everyone, and the living should take this to heart.

[3 : 26] Death is the destiny of everyone, and the living should take this to heart. That's why at the end of his book, in chapter 12, he addresses himself to youth, remember your Creator while you are still young.

In other words, get these matters of life and death and eternity sorted out while, apparently, time is on your side.

Despite the insistence of the Bible in these matters, and it is an insistence, most of us are tempted to, and usually successful at, seeking to avoid any thought of death at all, and particularly the prospect of our own.

In fact, some people are prepared to go to all kinds of lengths in order, somehow or another, to convince themselves that they're going to manage to avoid it.

I'm quoting here from the Wall Street Journal of an earlier year, describing a couple's dreams of immortality. And I couldn't read it all to you, it's hardly worth it, but it's the account of a couple who have determined that architecture holds the key to longevity.

[4 : 44] Their work is based largely on a movement known as transhumanism. It's premised on the idea, and I'm quoting, that people degenerate and die in part, listen to this, because they live in spaces that are too comfortable.

The artist's solution is to construct places that leave people disoriented, challenged, and feeling anything but comfortable.

These people had obviously never visited the black houses on Lewis. They would have discovered that people were onto this a long time ago. They build buildings with no doors.

They place the rooms far apart. Between the rooms, the floors are bumpy, moonscape-like floors, designed to throw the occupants off balance.

And these features stimulate, apparently, the body and the mind, and thus prolong life. To these artists, eternal life is a real possibility.

[5 : 48] Quotes, This is a great chance for the human race. At least one tenant says he feels a little younger already. And he's lost more than twenty pounds, and he no longer suffers from hay fever, though he isn't quite sure whether he was cured by the architecture.

Many scientists see the couple's work as past of a futile, age-old aspiration to live forever.

Longevity salesman is the second-oldest profession. And yet, to prolong life, he recommends building spaces that lower the probability of falls, plus a healthy diet and exercise.

But, the scientist says, in the future, humans will have microscopic robots in their bodies which will be able to regenerate cells. I'm tempted to say only in America.

But I think, perhaps, it would have a reading here as well. The late Christopher Hitchens, my favorite atheist, tells how, in his own life, unlike other men, he was confronted by his mortality, not with the death of his father, which is fairly customary.

Young men say, when my father died, I realized that my name was the next one up. He says, unfilial as this may seem, that was not at all so in my case.

[7 : 08] It was only when I watched my son, Alexander, being born, that I knew at once that my own funeral director had very suddenly, but quite unmistakably, stepped onto the stage.

I was surprised by how calmly I took this, but also how reluctant I was to mention it. And he's not alone.

Why do we have to die at all? And why does the prospect come around so quickly? That question, which I acknowledge is an unpalatable question for us, is confronted by the psalm we've just read. A psalm that is routinely read at funerals, and many of you will have heard the psalm read. In actual fact, most of the time when I have been present at its reading at a funeral, it is read by leaving out the hard parts in the middle.

And so the person reads the psalm, the fairly poetic parts about the transience of life, and so on.

And when it comes to the notion of being swept away, of being confronted by the anger of God, of being assessed by God's perfection, then often that is simply set aside.

[8 : 30] And so, to the end, it goes. But in actual fact, the 90th psalm is not a funeral psalm. The 90th psalm is a psalm for those of us who are still alive.

It is a psalm for us this evening. And I want very simply to point out some of the salient aspects of what we're told here in this prayer of Moses, the man of God.

First of all, you will notice if your Bible is open, that Moses begins by affirming the fact that God is eternal.

That God is eternal. He begins by affirming who God is and what God has done. In his final blessing, Moses, before he died, to his people, reminded them in Deuteronomy 33, the eternal God is your dwelling place, and underneath are the everlasting arms.

Now, it's very, very important that we bow down underneath the instruction of the Bible in this regard, because our society in Western culture is increasingly absorbed by the notion of pantheism, the continued use, for example, of Mother Nature as a designation.

[9 : 53] Routinely, the weather people will say, let's see what Mother Nature has for us tomorrow, and so on. But in point of fact, Mother Nature is simply an abstraction that unbelieving men and women have substituted for God as my Father.

It is far easier to deal with this notion. And so, if you talk to people, if you listen to people, they will confuse the creation itself with God who created the universe.

You know your Bibles well enough to know that the universe was made by God, it is providentially sustained by God, and it is utterly dependent upon God.

God is not in any way at all dependent on the created universe, nor is he in his being to be confused with the created universe.

Before the beginning, there was no creation. The creation is not co-eternal with God. Before there was time, before there was anything, there was God.

[11 : 07] And that is where Moses begins his song. Lord, you have been our dwelling place in all generations. Before the mountains were brought forth, these amazing mountains as you move south, over in the Cullens, in the Isle of Skye, down to the miserable little campsies in the west of Scotland, up into Abbey Moor and to Cree and Larch and all these places, as you drive through the highlands and you look and you sing to yourself, I to the hills will lift mine eyes.

From whence doth come mine aid? My safety cometh from the Lord who heaven and earth hath made. He is the eternal God, the creator of the ends of the earth, and he is from everlasting to everlasting.

Now, in every generation, this needs to be taught and it needs to be affirmed. Paul himself, when he writes to the Romans and begins his great treatise on the gospel itself, starts very much along these lines, reminding his readers that what can be known about God, Romans 1, is plain to them because God has shown it to them for his invisible attributes, namely his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived ever since the creation of the world.

Atheism is a choice. Atheism is a decision. The fool, not an intellectually impoverished individual, the foolish man says in his heart, there is no God.

In the things that have been made, so they are without excuse. For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking and their foolish hearts were darkened and claiming to be wise, they became fools and wrote articles such as I have just read to you from one of the most prominent papers in the continental United States.

[13 : 07] And men and women read this kind of thing and say, you know, isn't that quite remarkable? I think I'll get a horribly lumpy carpet myself and maybe I'll put my bathroom as far away as I possibly can and maybe I will live forever too.

Their foolish hearts became darkened and claiming to be very, very wise, they were actually foolish. And in this environment, we take a hold of our Bibles, we read the ancient song of the servant of God, Moses, and he says to us, here in Stornoway this evening, understand this if you understand nothing else, that the creator of the ends of the earth doesn't faint or grow weary, that his understanding is unsearchable, and he is not like the idols of man.

No, he is the eternal God. Then he goes on to say, God is immortal and you should know that you're not.

That's verse 3. You return man to dust and you say, return, O children of man. Now, what is this? A reference to, surely, to creation itself. Go back into Genesis 3 and the formation of man. And God, who has formed man in this way, has the prerogative to deal with man in this way.

[14 : 34] I just conducted a funeral at Arlington National Cemetery in Washington, D.C. a week past on Thursday for a vice-admiral who was a member of our church and it was an amazing event and a gun carriage with the coffin and the riderless horse and the band that played and forty members of the Navy marching in procession for two miles to the grave.

But let me tell you what, the contents of that coffin return to dust. You can have any band you like play for you as you go, but this is what God does.

And the metaphors that are used in the song are clear. You return man to dust. Verse 5, you sweep men and women away as with a flood.

You don't need me to tell you about floods here. We've seen the floods earlier this week in parts of the South. People's lives just washed away like a dream.

They're like a dream. You wake up and you say to your wife or your mother, you say, was I dreaming? I think I was dreaming. But it's all gone.

[15 : 41] It seemed so real at the moment, but now it's gone. He says that's the way life is, like grass, like grass that is renewed in the morning. In the morning it flourishes and it's renewed.

And in the evening it fades. Frail as summer's flower we flourish and blows the wind and it is gone. All flesh is like grass and the glory of man like the flower of the field and the grass withers and the flower falls. But the word of the Lord endures forever.

And look at what it says. A thousand years in your sight are but as yesterday when it is past or as a watch in the night.

In other words, even if we were to live for a thousand years, it would just be like forty winks. Even if we were to live for a thousand years, it would be as if we had just taken a wee snooze in the

afternoon for twenty minutes in comparative terminology.

[16:50] How quickly life passes us by. The opportunities, the investments of our time, and the things that God has given us and made us and planned for us are set within this very limited time frame and we rage against it and we're tempted to deny it.

but we're like a morning mist. The fog came in the other day and it just blanketed everything and then you virtually you turned around and it was away again. The psalmist says in Psalm 39, Let me know how fleeting my life is.

Oh, you say to me, you come in here, you've got a whole Bible from which you can preach, you have an opportunity on a Sunday night, and you take on the one taboo subject that still exists in the entire Western world.

There is no difficulty at all about speaking about all kinds of unimaginable notions that once were taboo for any proper and refined society.

But the one thing that you mustn't do is the one thing I am now doing. You must think I have lost my mind or that I am actually on a divine assignment, that I am actually doing this because in the recesses of my own heart, 3,000 or more miles away from here, as I thought of this night and this moment and this congregation that I do not know, I said, I think I must preach on Psalm 90.

[18:26] And something inside me said, well, you shouldn't go and talk to nice people about dying. They won't like that and some of them will be getting ready to die and some of them don't believe they're going to die and so on.

But I am simply a servant of the Word. I was yesterday in one of the black houses. The man was doing the Harris Tweed and as he refused to crank the shuttle up, I was thoroughly disappointed. I wanted to hear the sound it made. I wanted to see how fast it went because I know the Bible says that our days pass faster than a weaver's shuttle. Do you know when Lennon and McCartney recorded When I'm 64, I was 14.

That was 50 years ago. 50 years ago. It never mattered to me at all. I thought it was a funny song. When I get older, losing my hair, many years from now, will you still be sending me a Valentine, birthday greetings, a bottle of wine, if I stay out till quarter to three, would you lock the door? Will you still need me? Will you still feed me when I'm 64? Well, apparently, my wife said yes because she's still feeding me and I'm not sure if she still needs me but she's still with me.

[19:47] And I am 64. But let me say to you, young people, the first time I came here was 1983. That means that was 33 years ago. Those 33 years have passed in like an instant.

I cannot believe that such time could go by. 33 more years, I can hardly do the maths. 64, 94, 97. It's unlikely that I will be back 33 years from now. I can't imagine that I'll even be ambulatory if I'm still alive. It's so strange, isn't it?

Paul Simon, one of the better songwriters of the 20th century who interacts a lot with philosophy in his writings, again wrote in his younger days, Old friends, old friends, sit on their park bench like bookends and the newspaper blows through the grass and falls on the round toes of the high shoes of the old men.

Old men, lost in their overcoats, waiting for the sunshine. Can you imagine us years from today sharing a park bench quietly?

[21:01] How terribly strange to be 70 old friends. What does the Bible say to this? Well, this is what it says.

You need to know in your finitude and in your frailty and in the brevity of your existence that you were created purposefully by the eternal and everlasting God, made in order that you might know him and love him and serve him.

You need to know also that by your very nature you run from him, you deny him, you displease him. And God is not indifferent about these things. We don't want God to be indifferent. No. God actually exercises his judgment on these things.

He sets our iniquities before him. Our secret sins are known in the light of his presence. Can you imagine for a moment if the secret sins in my heart were shone up here on a huge big screen?

[22:13] How could I possibly stand before you? Then how could it possibly be that the eternal God would have access not only to the things that I've done willfully and known and shamefully, but the secret things, the hidden things, the inadvertent things?

You've set our iniquities before you and our days pass away under your wrath. You see, that is simply God's settled inevitable response to the rebellion of men and women.

Our rebellion is revealed in our humiliation, in our predicament. our rebellion is revealed in the frustration and in the decay of our lives.

Our rebellion is revealed in the transience of our lives. Because remember, the judgment of God on sin was that on the day that you do what I've told you not to do, you will surely die.

And people say, but they didn't die. No, not immediately. But death entered immediately into the perfection of God's world. And that, in relationship to the settled response of God to man's rebellion.

[23 : 36] The truth is challenged. It's challenged tonight. That notion is fought against on every front. Not just by the people in the street tonight in Stornoway, but sometimes by the pastors in the pulpit.

Pastors, at least in my area, who will not be prepared for a moment to say these kind of things.

Well, would we have a God that is indifferent to things? Are you indifferent to the rebellion of your children?

Does it not anger you? Does it not grieve you? If your spouse was to treat you with disregard, would you not justifiably respond?

This kind of anger is, if you like, the anger of the colorectal surgeon dealing with tumorous cancers that he has found in your body, and he goes at them with a passion in order that you might be set free from them.

And the wrath of God, as it is revealed in these things, is right along that track. Again, Paul makes the correlation absolutely clearly when he writes to the church at Rome.

[24 : 43] And in Romans chapter 5 and in verse 12, Therefore, just as sin came into the world, through one man, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men, because all sinned, for sin indeed was in the world before the law was given, and so on.

But the point is absolutely clear. And here, not only are those factors involved, but you will notice that in verse 8, the fact of our guilt is unavoidable.

We're guilty. That's why we try to cover things up. That's why we try to deny things. Psychiatrists will tell us that underlying so many of the conditions, and I say this guardedly and not lightly, but underlying many of the conditions that confront them on a daily basis is an underlying sense of guilt that they cannot deal with.

A past that continually confronts them. Issues that rise up before them. It's like Macbeth, isn't it?

And she wants desperately to get these spots off her hands.

If only I could get them off my hands. If only I could externally deal with this, then internally I would be fine. And remember, Macbeth says to the physician, I can't quote it properly, but he asks him, he says, Canst thou not minister to a mind diseased?

[26 : 20] Canst thou not root out the sorrow and the madness in her mind? And the physician says to Macbeth, Therein, the patient must minister to himself.

In other words, I can do nothing for him, but she's going to have to fix it herself. And the fact is, we can't fix it ourselves. Society says again and again to us, If you have a problem that unsettles you in this way, I guarantee you it is outside of you.

And the way that you will be able to deal with it is to look inside of you. And if you look inside of you and find what a wonderful person you really are and so on, then you'll be able to deal with all of these things that are not yours really, but are outside of you.

The gospel says the exact reverse. The gospel says the problem is inside of us and the answer is outside of us. That the wrath of God that is executed upon our own sinful rebellion is answered and is met in the person of his Son.

The years of our lives are 70 or even by reason of strength 80. Well, you think about it. Some of you are in the insurance world. You're actuarial boffins. And you do these figures all the time.

[27 : 35] And you determine how much my life insurance policy costs, how much my premium costs. And you've calculated it very well. You've figured out when I'll die so that you can make as much money as possible before my wife gets the rest.

It's all mathematics. And interestingly, when you average it over time, the Bible's dead on, isn't it? 70?

Then you're in extra time. Maybe 80? If you go beyond that. Now, why does the Bible do this? Why does it have a song like this?

Is it just to be morbid? No, it's to be realistic. Look at the question in verse 11. Who considers the power of your anger and your wrath according to the fear of you?

It's a good question, isn't it? I think what is being asked there is who makes the connection. Who feels, who acts as he or she should in light of this?

[28 : 41] Who considers the power of your anger and your wrath according to the fear of you? You see, when we remove the truth of God's just judgment, when we move out from the realm of God's righteous indignation, then we see no need to fear God.

and we see no sense in the death of Jesus in the place of sinners. But when we realize our actual state before God, when we realize our accountability to God, when we realize that the underlying fear of all fears in the entire universe is the fear of death, then we must inevitably say, is there anyone who has dealt with this predicament?

Is there someone who has made this connection? Perhaps that's the inference. Who knows the fear of God? Who knows the anger of God? Well, only one person, really, namely the Lord Jesus Christ, who bore in himself the just judgment, so that then he might set free those who all their lives have been held in the fear of death.

Isn't it an amazing and a wonderful, good story? No wonder that Moses then says, So, gracious God, teach us to number our days.

Well, it's an interesting thought, isn't it? Because they reckon that 15,000 people died annually in the wilderness. It wasn't as if they didn't know that people died. I mean, 15,000 a year in the wilderness wandering, a lot of people die.

[30 : 24] That's a lot of funerals. It's just an interesting thing. Teach us to number our days. But think about it. You and I can walk up and down the street, you can go to churchyard after churchyard after churchyard and walk through the gravestones, but it doesn't necessarily make us number our days, does it?

No, we try and hasten through as quickly as we can. No, teach us, he says, that we might gain a heart of wisdom, that we might pay attention to the things that we have just read.

Someone who's always thinking about just being happy, says Ecclesiastes, is actually a fool. A wise person thinks about death. Well, here we are this evening.

I don't know who you are. I don't know your ages. But if you take the word of Ecclesiastes, and if you long for the satisfaction that is found in knowing God, then take this prayer and pray it to God. Satisfy me in the morning with your steadfast love, the covenant love of God, that I may rejoice and be glad all my days. So that even though I recognize the fading of my mental abilities, even though I recognize the disintegration of my human frame, which is just really the poetry of Ecclesiastes 12, isn't it?

[31 : 46] I mean, it's a picture there of the decay of the human frame. Grandpa is an insomniac, but he can't hear a word you're saying, and yet the birds wake him up.

You have to repeat everything three times, and he can't hear you, but apparently he hears the birds. What's wrong with him? He looks like a grasshopper when he gets up from the couch and tries to go through to make a cup of tea.

It's not a very nice picture, but it's a realistic picture. All of a sudden, we find ourselves inhabiting chemists and going up aisles in chemists that we never knew even existed, asking for things.

Do you have one of those things that helps you when you have the thing over here? Or do you have one for over here? Or do you have one for over here? Do you remember when you were young, you used to say, who are these people?

And one of those sticks that elongates for you. How amazing! How amazing! Now, in the midst of that, what does the Christian say? It doesn't start silly stuff about building a house whereby my architecture will set me free.

[32 : 50] The Christian says, this is absolutely true. I fade like summer's flower, but God in his goodness satisfies me in the morning with his steadfast love.

It is his amazing loving kindness towards me in Jesus that gives me gladness that lasts all my days. I want, gracious God, your work to be shown to me, your servant, your glorious power to be shown to my children, so that the blessings of God that rest upon us may be passed on again and again. The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases. His mercies never come to an end. They're new every morning, and his faithfulness is great.

So let the favor of the Lord our God be upon us, and establish for us the work of our hands. Yes, establish for us the work of our hands. You see, it's a matter of wisdom, isn't it?

Teach me to number on my days that I may gain a heart of wisdom. The wise heart faces up to the issues of life in terms of the revelation of God himself.

[34 : 09] Part of my reading this morning was in Matthew chapter 7, which seemed to be helpful as I close with you now. Jesus said, Everyone then who hears these words of mine and does them will be like a wise man.

Teach me to number my days aright that I may become a wise man. Well, let's hear about a wise man. Everyone who hears the words of God and does them will be like a wise man who built his house on the rock.

And the rain fell and the floods came and the winds blew and beat on the house, but it did not fall because it had been founded on the rock. And everyone who hears these words of mine and doesn't do them will be like a foolish man who built his house on the sand and the rain fell and the floods came and the winds blew and beat against that house and it fell and great was the fall of it. And when he had finished these sayings, the crowds were once again astonished at his teaching for he was teaching them as one who had authority and not as their scribes.

Tonight, we live our lives in that strange moment between time and eternity.

[35 : 26] And one day, in ecclesiastical terms, in ecclesiastes terms, the silver cord will break and I no more as now will be able to sing the Psalms.

But oh the joy when I awake within the presence of the King who is the focus of the Psalms. Well, I may never be back but here I am now.

And some of you have listened to these words for many a year. You can rehearse them but you are not resting in them. And you need to.

You need to hear the word of God and believe in order that you might be sealed with the presence and the power of the Holy Spirit. And some of you are youngsters and you're saying to yourself, well, I'll take care of that later on when I'm older, when I'm 64, when I'm losing my hair.

Can I say to you, don't do that. Don't do that. The Bible never, ever, ever gives us leeway in that regard. It always says today. It always today is the day of salvation.

[36 : 34] That now is the accepted time. Do you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord? Do you believe in your heart that God has raised him from the dead?

That, you see, is the question. And if you do, then rest in it. And if you don't, then I beseech you, receive the reconciliation that God, the righteous, just judge, has provided in the holy person of his beloved Son.

Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved. Father, thank you for the Bible. Thank you for the clarity and insistence of it.

Thank you that you do not leave us to ourselves and to our own foolishness, but that you are a loving and pursuing God. Grant that we might, as we hear your voice, not harden our hearts, for we pray in Christ's name.

Amen. We will sing it again to the praise of God now from Psalm number 25.

[37 : 55] And sing Psalms version, Psalm 25 on page 29. And we'll sing the verses from Mark 4 to 11, five stanzas.

O Lord, reveal to me your ways and all your paths help me to know. Direct and guide me in your truth. Instruct me in the way to go. You are my Savior and my God and all day I hope in you alone. Remember, Lord, your love and grace, which from past ages you have shown. Do not recall my sins of youth or my rebellious evil ways. Remember me in your great love, for you, O Lord, are good always.

Because the Lord is just and good, he shows his paths to all who stray. He guides the meek in what is right and teaches them his holy way. To those who keep his covenant laws, he shows his love consistently.

For your name's sake, O Lord, my God, forgive my great iniquity. These verses then on page 29, beginning at verse 4, to God's praise.

[39 : 04] Amen. Amen. O Lord, we will turn me your ways, and all your paths have me to know.

Thy life and guide me in your truth, and instruct me in the way to go.

You are my Savior and my God.

All day I hope in you alone. Remember, Lord, your love and grace, which compass ages you have shown.

in not recall my sins on you or my rebellious evil ways.

[40 : 51] Remember me in your great love for you, O Lord, are good always.

Because the Lord is just and good, he chose his path to all who stray.

He likes the King in what is right, and teaches them his holy way.

to Lord to keep his hand and laws, he chose his love consistently.

for your mistake, O Lord, my God, forgive my faith in equity.

[42 : 37] Now, the fellowship in the hall is stated as beginning at 8.30. we will proceed through to the hall, you can go through immediately, you can enjoy a cup of tea, meantime, we will start the fellowship as soon as possible, I think it was stated as 8.30 to allow others to come from neighbouring congregations after their service to the fellowship as well.

But please avail yourselves of the fellowship and of the tea that's available and we'll get that underway as soon as possible before half past eight if possible. Can I also say if your car is in the church car park and you're staying for the fellowship would you please make sure that your car isn't blocking anyone else in who might want to get away before the fellowship begins.

Thank you. Now may the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God the Father and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with you now and ever more. Amen.