

Number Our Days

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[0 : 0 0] Church, turn with me in your Bibles to Psalm 90. If you're looking in one of the Pew Bibles, that is page 465. Psalm 90. Let me read that. I'll read the whole psalm for us this morning.

A prayer of Moses, the man of God. Lord, you have been our dwelling place in all generations.

Before the mountains were brought forth, or ever you had formed the earth and the world, from everlasting to everlasting, you are God. You return man to dust and say, return, O children of man. For a thousand years in your sight are but as yesterday when it is past, or as a watch in the night. You sweep them away as with a flood. They are like a dream, like grass that is renewed in the morning. In the morning it flourishes and is renewed.

In the evening it fades and withers. For we are brought to an end by your anger. By your wrath we are dismayed. You have set our iniquities before you, our secret sins, in the light of your presence. For all our days pass away under your wrath. We bring our years to an end like a sigh. The years of our life are 70 or even by reason of strength 80. Yet their span is but toil and trouble. They are soon gone and we fly away. Who considers the power of your anger?

And your wrath according to the fear of you. So teach us to number our days that we may get a heart of wisdom. Return, O Lord, how long have pity on your servants? Satisfy us in the morning with your steadfast love that we may rejoice and be glad all our days. Make us glad for as many days as you have afflicted us for as many years as we have seen evil. Let your work be shown to your servants and your glorious power to their children. Let the favor of the Lord our God be upon us and establish the work of our hands upon us.

[2 : 3 8] Yes, establish the work of our hands. Well, once again, we're approaching the end of another year. And this year is also the end of a decade. By this time next week, the second decade of the 21st century will be history. That doesn't happen that often. Think for a moment about where you were a decade ago at the end of 2009. Some of you weren't even here.

Or two decades ago, anticipating Y2K. Remember that? Now, for many of us, this week between Christmas and New Year's is a time when we get a break.

We get a little break from the normal routines of school or work. Maybe it's a time where we visit with loved ones or at least call or write to them from afar. But I think it's also an appropriate time as we prepare to begin a new year and a new decade to take stock of where we've been and where we're going.

Sometimes I think we can get so caught up in the day-to-day things that we can lose our spiritual focus. We can lose sight of our priorities and purpose and perspective. This week, I looked over the last 12 months of my Google Calendar.

That doesn't encapsulate all my life, but it reminded me of a lot of things that I had done over the last year. It gave me many things to be thankful for, a longer list of things than I would have remembered on my own.

[4 : 05] It helped me to begin thinking about how do I want to invest my time? What are my priorities going into this coming year? Well, this morning and next Sunday, we're going to look at two psalms that can help us to close out another year and decade and begin a new one by looking to our ever-present and ever-faithful and everlasting God.

This morning, we'll look at Psalm 90. Next week, we'll look at Psalm 147, a song of praise. And then in the second week of January, we'll begin a new sermon series in the end of Luke's Gospel, Luke 19 to 24.

Last year, we looked at the middle of Luke's Gospel. This year, we'll be looking at chapters 19 through 24. So you can look forward to that in the new year. But today, we're looking at this psalm, Psalm 90.

Now, you can organize or structure this psalm in a couple of different ways. You can see it in terms of past, present, and future. Verses 1 to 2, look back on the past.

Verses 3 to 12, face up to the present. And verses 13 to 17, look forward to the future. And that's a valid way of seeing the psalm. And we'll sort of see that progression as we walk through it. But another way of seeing the psalm is as a stairway.

[5 : 20] Now, if you open up your bulletin to the center page, to the sermon notes page, you'll see a diagram that looks like a stairway going down and then back up again.

So the psalm begins, as it were, on top of a mountain. And then it leads us down into a dark valley. And then it leads us back to the mountaintop. And so this morning, I want to lead us through this psalm together.

For each section, for each step on the stairway, I'll point out a key word from the psalm. Now, let me speak for a moment to all the children who are here. I have a challenge for you.

I want you to listen for the key word in each section of the psalm and write it down on the stairway in your bulletin. Now, if you can't write yet, when you hear me say the key word or the next step on the stairway, you can nudge one of your parents and say, write it down.

All right? And your goal is to get all seven of the key words, one on each step of the stairway, by the end of the sermon. All right? And then you can show it to your parents at the end of the service, or show it to me, or whatever you want.

[6 : 33] But that's your challenge, all right, for this morning. And when we get to number seven, when we go down the stairway and get back to the top, then the sermon's almost over. All right? So, here's the first one.

You get the first step on the stairway right away. Verses one and two. You notice the first step on the stairway is above. It says V1-2. That means verses one and two. The key word is God.

And the main point of these verses is God has always been there. Now, this psalm is a prayer of Moses. Most likely, Moses wrote it in his old age, after he had led the Israelites through the wilderness for many years.

There are some similarities between this psalm and the last words of Moses recorded at the end of Deuteronomy in chapters 32 and 33. So, for example, the psalm begins, Lord, you have been our dwelling place.

And Deuteronomy 33, 27, Moses says, the eternal God is your dwelling place. Same word. And underneath are the everlasting arms.

[7 : 38] That's a wonderful thing to think about. God is our home and holding us up by his everlasting arms. But I want you to think about Moses' life for just a minute and what it would mean for him to say God has been our dwelling place.

Think about how much of Moses' life he had spent as a homeless man or as a wanderer or as someone who was in between different places.

Right? So, as a young child, Moses was adopted. Now, he had a wonderful adoptive mother, the daughter of Pharaoh himself. He was well taken care of, but he was separated. And he knew he was separated from his biological parents and from his relatives.

And many of them were enduring great hardships. Then, as a young adult, he did something very foolish and immature. And it was impulsive and he had to flee.

He had to run away for his life. And he spent many years in the land of Midian as a foreigner. And then he goes back and, you know, leads people out of Israel. But then where does he lead them to?

[8 : 42] They're wandering in the wilderness. You know, most of Moses' life was spent displaced, homeless, or wandering. But Moses came to know and rest in the eternal God as his true home.

Through all of his wandering, through all of his homelessness, through all of his being displaced and being in between, he came to know my true home is found in the Lord.

Several years ago, I was talking to an older man who had become homeless. He had lived in the Columbus house for several months. And he said, during the time that I was homeless, I learned what it means when the Bible says that God is a shelter.

He said that, you know, I'd known that, I'd known about that all my life, but that took on a new meaning for me when I, through my experience. Now, I wonder if you can look back on your own life.

You know, maybe you've never been homeless, or maybe you have been homeless, but can you see through all the changes and chances and all maybe the ways you've had to move from one place to another?

[9 : 53] Maybe you feel sort of in between, not really settled here. Can you see that the everlasting God has always been there?

Let me use a pulpit mic. So that's where Moses begins this song.

By looking back on God's sheltering care over him. And, not just over him, but over the people of Israel as a whole. Lord, you've been our dwelling place.

He's speaking to the people. You've led us through the wilderness. You've been the one constant in a constantly changing world. And he looks back even before, not just on his own life, not just on the people of Israel's experience, but he looks back all the way to the creation of the world.

Before the mountains were brought forth, wherever you had formed the earth and the world, from everlasting to everlasting, you are God.

[10 : 55] From eternity past, God has always been there. And that's where Moses begins in this wonderful psalm with God. But then Moses goes on.

He takes a step down the stairway. And he goes on to the next section. And the key word in verses 3 to 6 is dust. People are dust. You return man to dust.

So if verses 1 to 2 look back into the past upon God and his eternity, verses 3 through 6 look squarely at the present, at human mortality and transience.

Or you could say if verses 1 and 2 look back to the creation of the world in Genesis 1 and 2, verses 3 to 6 look back to the consequences of the fall in Genesis 3.

The phrase translated children of man in verse 3 could just as well be translated children of Adam. That word man is Adam.

[11 : 56] And of course in Genesis 3 God says to Adam, after he and Eve have sinned, you are dust, and to dust you will return. So this psalm is reminding us of the consequences of our fallen condition.

Now verse 4 goes on and says a thousand years in God's sight are like yesterday or even like less than a day. A watch in the night.

Now Genesis tells us of a few human beings who lived extraordinarily long lives. But even the man who lived the longest, Methuselah, did not make it to a thousand.

969. You see, Moses' point here in verse 4 is that even the longest human lifespan, is only a drop in the giant stream of time.

Verses 5 and 6, Moses uses three metaphors to describe the shortness and how quickly human life changes. He says, our lives are swept away as in an overwhelming flood.

[13 : 04] Our lives are like a dream that vanishes when morning comes and is quickly forgotten. Our lives are like grass that quickly flourishes and just as quickly perishes.

Human life is constantly being renewed, but it's also constantly fading. And you know, the longer you live on this earth, I think the harder it is to deny or avoid these realities.

Yes, the world is constantly being renewed and sustained, but at the same time, it's constantly decaying and wearing out. Our fresh ideals will often be frustrated, our new clothes will eventually wear out, even our very names will one day be forgotten.

You know, the vast majority of people who have ever lived on this earth, their names, their life stories have been completely forgotten. We may go around thinking that we are so important and so indispensable, but the reality is we will all one day die.

And the world can go on without us. And all of our proud delusions of grandeur and self-importance will die with us. And as we come to the end of another year, it's very important for us to face this fact.

[14 : 21] We don't really like to face this fact in our society today, but the Bible confronts us and speaks very plainly to us that we are mortal, we will all die, and life is transient.

That means it will change very quickly. Those are some of the most obvious and undeniable facts about the human condition. All right, we live in a world that emphasizes statistics and evidence-based outcomes and information, but have we reckoned with the most consistently verified statistic of all?

Every single human being whom we have ever seen or interacted with, including ourselves, will one day die. We are dust. And to dust we shall return.

So that's the second step. But then Moses goes on to the third step, the next section, verses 7 to 11, and he takes us one step further and he says, why? Why is human life so fleeting and fading?

Why is our existence so tenuous and transient? Why are we constantly wearing down and wearing out? And the key word in verses 7 to 11 is sin.

[15 : 36] We are dust because we are sinners. And our sin calls forth God's wrath.

Now, that is not a very popular idea. The idea that we are sinners and that our sin calls forth God's anger and righteous judgment against us is not something you will necessarily hear today.

But the psalm over and over says that it's true. Verse 7, we are brought to an end by your anger. By your wrath we are dismayed. Verse 9, all our days pass away under your wrath.

Verse 11 asks a question, who considers the power of your anger and your wrath according to the fear of you? It's a rhetorical question.

In other words, verse 11 is saying most of us don't face this reality. Most of us don't consider the power and the justice of God's wrath against sin.

[16 : 43] Most of us don't want to deal with that. We don't have the resources to deal with that. And so we just try to not think about it or deny it somehow. But again, the Bible confronts us with this reality.

Now, what is God's wrath? We need to define that word. God's wrath is not an arbitrary fit of rage. His wrath is not just like all kinds of human anger.

No. God's wrath is his righteous displeasure at our moral corruption. In other words, God looks at the world. He looks at how human beings deceive and oppress and vilify one another.

He looks at our greed and pride and self-centeredness. He sees our illusions and our idolatries. And God is not pleased with what he sees.

And God sees not just the appearance, but God sees on the heart. And God is not, God will not simply enable us to go on and on and on and on in our present state.

[17 : 51] verse 8 tells us that God sees not just our obvious sins, our iniquities, he also sees our secret sins.

Which means not just the sins that we hide from others, but also the sins that we hide from ourselves. You know, most of us are at least partially blind to our greatest weaknesses and flaws.

You want to know how I can prove that? look at almost any marriage. Almost inevitably, one spouse will identify significant flaws and weaknesses in the other spouse.

Some spouses, I see, are laughing because you get the point. Which the other spouse hardly recognizes at all. This will happen sometime in your marriage if it hasn't happened already.

The question is how will you deal with these things when they come to light? Will you harshly throw them in your spouse's face? Or, will you be conflict avoidant, turn away, pretend they're not really there, but you sort of know they're there, but you don't want to deal with them?

[19 : 03] Or, will you lovingly and respectfully express them to your spouse? And then, when they come to light, when they come to the surface, will you respond with denial and indifference?

or with some soul-searching and seeking to grow? You see, the way you deal with these things will either strengthen or strain your marriage.

See, marriage is intended in part to be a high-definition mirror that reveals the darkest depths of your own soul. Why?

Because God designed marriage to be a pale reflection of the presence of God, the all-knowing, all-seeing, ever-present other. Now, marriage is also intended to be a window into the steadfast love of God.

Right? That's also what spouses are to embody to one another, is not only someone who can call a spade a spade and tell it like it is and can point out the weaknesses and flaws that you're blind to, but can also stay with you and love you through them.

[20 : 20] You see, marriage, like this psalm, is intended to help us face our deepest flaws, face our most troubling realities in the presence of someone who loves us with unfailing love.

That's what this psalm is doing too. Right? We've gone from the mountaintop looking back on God and his eternity down into the valley of our present human condition that we are dust because we are sinners.

And so in verse 12, we come to the bottom of the valley and to the central prayer of this psalm. So teach us to number our days that we may get a heart of wisdom.

The key word here in verse 12, wisdom. Moses prays for wisdom. And Moses is showing us that we can only gain true wisdom when we face our mortality, that is our own, that we'll die someday, and our transience, or not just transience, and our sinfulness, our mortality and our sinfulness.

Right? These are the most unpleasant realities of our human condition, but they're also the most undeniable realities. Tim and Kathy Keller put it this way in their devotional on the Psalms.

[21 : 36] They say, if we do not face these things, we will not be wise. We will be constantly shocked by what people, including ourselves, are capable of and by how life swiftly takes away everything we love.

We will trust in our own abilities too much, and we will seek satisfaction in things that we will inevitably lose, face, sin, and death, or be out of touch with reality.

Those are strong words, but according to the Bible, wisdom is getting in touch with ultimate reality. And so this psalm leads us from the mountaintop down into the valley of the shadow of death so we can get in touch with reality, that we can become truly wise, that we can see the reality about God and about ourselves.

But you know what? The good news is the psalm doesn't end here. Psalm 90 doesn't leave us down in the valley of the shadow of death.

And if we only read up to verse 11, we might think that this psalm is just a downer. And we might even be tempted to despair. But once we've gone all the way down into the valley, once we've faced our mortality and our sinfulness, the path begins to look up once again.

[22 : 59] Why? Because the God of the Bible is not only a God of truth and righteousness and even wrath, but he's also a God of mercy and steadfast love and hope.

The Bible talks frankly about death and sin, but death and sin do not have the first or last word in the Bible nor in this psalm. So we go on to the next section, verses 13 and 14, and the key word of this section, step five, the key word is mercy.

God has mercy. Return, O Lord, how long have pity or have mercy on your servants. Satisfy us in the morning with your steadfast love.

Now these verses, verses 13, 14, and 15, echo and respond to verses 3 through 11. You see the steps going down sort of correspond to the steps going up. It's not an arbitrary structure.

So verse 3, God says to humanity, return to dust. But here Moses cries out in verse 13, return, O Lord. Return, O Lord, to your people and have mercy on your servants.

[24 : 13] In verses 5 and 6, the grass is renewed in the morning, but by evening it fades and withers. But look at verse 14. Moses says, satisfy us in the morning with your steadfast love.

And God's steadfast love does not wither and fade in the evening. God's steadfast love endures not just for a day, not just for a lifetime, but for all eternity. And then in verse 9, Moses says, our days pass away under your wrath and our years come to an end like a sigh.

But then in verse 15, Moses prays that we would have joy for as many days as you've afflicted us, for as many years as we have seen evil. You see, Moses believed that the one true God could somehow reverse the cycle of death and sin that human beings had fallen into and can't get ourselves out of.

And Moses believed that God would hear and respond when his people cried out to him. But you know, today, we can see something that even Moses couldn't.

We can see how God responded to his people's cries and we can see how God intervened to reverse the cycle of death and sin and wrath.

[25 : 36] Right? We just celebrated the Christmas, we're in the middle of the Christmas season. And what do we celebrate? God has come to us with mercy.

In the person of his son, Jesus, he has entered into the darkest valley of our human existence. He did not just speak to us from the mountaintop like he did at Mount Sinai in the Old Testament.

He has entered into our darkest valley. God became a real human being, Jesus Christ. He embraced our mortality. and our transience.

He experienced hunger and thirst and weariness and pain. And even more than that, he faced the reason why we, our lives were mortal and transient.

He faced, he bore the burden that we could never bear of our sin and God's wrath. God's life. He died on the cross offering his life as a perfect sacrifice, as an obedient sacrifice.

[26 : 41] And he endured God's righteous judgment in our place on our behalf so that we could be set free from it. So that he could, he came to meet us in our darkest valley so that he could bring us back up to the mountaintop of eternal life and joy with God forever.

That's what Jesus came to do. He came on a rescue mission. And he calls all of us to repent, that is to forsake our sin, to leave behind our self-centeredness and to cling to him, to trust in him and look to him.

And he promises that for everyone who turns to Jesus, that our sins will be removed as far as the east is from the west. You see, through Jesus we can be brought out of the valley of death and sin, raised with him to new and everlasting life with God.

And that's our hope. Have you turned to Jesus? You can turn to him today and know his mercy. Praise God for his mercy.

God's mercy lifts us up. And then verse 15, God's mercy continues, brings us to the next step and the key word is joy. God's mercy gives us joy.

[28 : 02] Satisfy us in the morning with your steadfast love that we may rejoice and be glad all our days. Make us glad for as many days as you've afflicted us, for as many years as we've seen evil.

Brothers and sisters in Christ, as we look ahead to this coming year and even to the coming decade, we have a reason to rejoice. Why? Most of all because of the unchanging gospel of Jesus Christ.

God demonstrated his own love for us in this, that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. And his love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit whom he has given to us.

Paul says, since we've been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. Christ. We have access by faith into this grace by which we stand and, Paul goes on to say, we rejoice in the hope of the glory of God.

Not only that, but we rejoice in our sufferings. You see, even amidst our sufferings, we can experience joy.

[29 : 15] Because when we experience our sufferings in union with Jesus, our sufferings aren't in vain. When we walk with Jesus through affliction, he promises to produce in us endurance, character, and hope.

Maybe you're going through afflictions right now. Whether it's relational conflicts or financial burdens or physical illness or emotional weariness or trouble at work or trouble at school, almost all of us will face afflictions, difficulties, trials, in some form or other in this coming year.

It's just part of human life. They're almost unavoidable. I mean, they are unavoidable. anyway, at some level. But think about it.

Are you experiencing your afflictions in union with Jesus? That means, are you asking Jesus to do his good work in you despite and even through the afflictions you're experiencing?

Right? Sometimes we're tempted when we're going through afflictions just to sort of be like a snail, right, that retreats into its shell, right, and doesn't want to come out.

[30 : 28] Right? Sometimes we're tempted to sort of draw back from the light and the love of Jesus. And the invitation is to draw near to him because he is near to us.

He is walking with you through these afflictions. You are not alone. He even feels for us in our sufferings. And he promises that he can work despite and even through them to accomplish his good purposes.

Martin Luther once said, Affliction is the best book in my library. Now, Martin Luther read a lot of books. Some of us like to read a lot of books.

And that's good. But Luther says afflictions, more than anything else in this world, can teach us to become wise if we walk with Jesus through them.

Well, that brings us to our last key word, verses 16 and 17. The key word is hope. God's mercy brings us joy and that joy fosters hope.

[31 : 39] Now, the word hope doesn't actually occur in the psalm, but these last verses express a confident expectation and anticipation for the future. Let your work be shown to your servants and your glorious power to their children.

Let the favor or the beauty of the Lord our God be upon us. And then twice, the psalmist repeats the last line. He says, Twice, establish the work of our hands.

You see, the first half of the psalm, that stairway down, focuses on our human limitations in light of God's greatness. And it leads us to humility. Our life is fleeting and fading.

We will all one day die. We are far more deeply flawed than we ever dared to admit, and we deserve God's righteous judgment. Those are all humbling truths. And God knows that we need to be humbled.

But the second half of the psalm focuses on the transforming power of God's love, God's mercy that brings us joy and hope, hope for eternity and hope for each day.

[32 : 47] You see, the downward part of the stairway is meant to humble us, but the upward part of the stairway is meant to give us hope, even when we're down in the darkest valley.

Hope for each day. The apostle Paul wrote, 1 Corinthians 15, 58, Therefore, my beloved brothers and sisters, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labor is not in vain.

Now, Paul says this at the end of an entire chapter about our future hope. He talks about the bodily resurrection of Jesus and especially the future bodily resurrection promised to believers at the end of the age.

But then he brings that hope into the present day. At the end of the chapter, he says, remember, your labor in the Lord is not in vain. You know, sometimes we can look at the world around us, especially if we spend a lot of time reading news headlines, and we can be tempted to throw up our hands in frustration.

We see decay and decline, and we are just annoyed by it. Or sometimes we look at ourselves, we look at our own lives, we see the years passing by, perhaps longings yet unfulfilled.

[34 : 09] Perhaps our bodies are growing weaker, or our future prospects are growing dimmer. Maybe we look back with some regret or disappointment.

But those are opportunities to look to Christ and find hope in him. An old hymn says this, swift to its clothes ebbs out life's little day.

Earth's joys grow dim, its glories pass away, change and decay in all around I see. But then the hymn writer says, O thou who changest not, abide with me.

And then he goes on and says, I need thy presence every passing hour, what but your grace can foil the tempter's power, who like thyself my guide and stay can be through cloud and sunshine, Lord, abide with me.

And then he goes on to a verse of triumphant confidence in the face of uncertainty. He says, I fear no foe with thee at hand to bless.

[35 : 12] I'll have no weight and tears no bitterness. Where is death's sting? Where grave thy victory? I triumph still if thou abide with me.

Right? If we are remaining with Jesus, if he is abiding in us, then our labor in the Lord is not in vain and we can look to the future and to eternity and to each day with hope.

Charles Spurgeon wrote this, God will never suffer this world, which has once seen Christ's blood shed upon it to be always the devil's stronghold. Christ came here to deliver this world from the sway of the powers of darkness.

One day, men and angels shall unite to cry, hallelujah, hallelujah, for the Lord God omnipotent reigneth. What a satisfaction it will be in that day to have had a share in the fight, to have aided in winning the victory for our Lord.

Happy are they who trust this conquering Lord and who fight side by side with him, doing their little in his name and by his strength. Someone sent me that quotation this week and he added this, blessed to be able to do some of our little in his name together.

[36 : 25] Isn't that why God has put us here as a church? Sometimes it seems like a little thing, our efforts seem small and our successes seem modest, but God says he is with us.

And he has called us together to labor side by side for Christ's sake and to do our little in his name together so that his work might be shown to our city and his glorious power to our children and his favor would rest upon us.

And by his grace he might establish the work of our hands. Jesus promised that if we abide in him that he will enable us to bear fruit that will last. To the glory of the Father.

So brothers and sisters may we end this year and begin a new one with humility and with hope. Let us pray. God I'm going to close by reading the prayer for the new year that's written in the bulletin.

This was written a couple of hundred years ago and expresses the humility and the hope that we see in this psalm. So as I lead us in prayer let's take this opportunity to entrust ourselves and this coming year to our good and faithful Savior.

[37 : 37] Oh love beyond compare you are good when you give when you take away. When the sun shines upon me when night gathers over me you have loved me before the foundation of the world and in love you redeemed my soul.

You love me still in spite of my hard heart in gratitude distrust. Your goodness has been with me another year leading me through a twisting wilderness in retreat helping me to advance when beaten back making sure headway.

Your goodness will be with me in the year ahead. I hoist sail and draw up anchor with you as the blessed pilot of my future as of my past.

I bless you that you have veiled my eyes to the waters ahead. If you have appointed storms of tribulation you will be with me in them. If I have to pass through tempests of persecution and temptation I shall not drown.

If I am to die I will see your face the sooner. If a painful end is to be my lot grant me grace that my faith fail not. If I am to be cast aside from the service I love I can make no stipulation.

[38 : 52] Only glorify yourself in me whether in comfort or trial as a chosen vessel always fit for your use. We pray these things in Christ's name.

Amen. Amen.