

Teach Us to Number Our Days

Psalm 90 (NIV)

A prayer of Moses the man of God. ¹ Lord, you have been our dwelling place throughout all generations. ² Before the mountains were born or you brought forth the whole world, from everlasting to everlasting you are God. ³ You turn people back to dust, saying, "Return to dust, you mortals." ⁴ A thousand years in your sight are like a day that has just gone by, or like a watch in the night. ⁵ Yet you sweep people away in the sleep of death—they are like the new grass of the morning: ⁶ In the morning it springs up new, but by evening it is dry and withered. ⁷ We are consumed by your anger and terrified by your indignation. ⁸ You have set our iniquities before you, our secret sins in the light of your presence. ⁹ All our days pass away under your wrath; we finish our years with a moan. ¹⁰ Our days may come to seventy years, or eighty, if our strength endures; yet the best of them are but trouble and sorrow, for they quickly pass, and we fly away. ¹¹ If only we knew the power of your anger! Your wrath is as great as the fear that is your due. ¹² Teach us to number our days, that we may gain a heart of wisdom. ¹³ Relent, LORD! How long will it be? Have compassion on your servants. ¹⁴ Satisfy us in the morning with your unfailing love, that we may sing for joy and be glad all our days. ¹⁵ Make us glad for as many days as you have afflicted us, for as many years as we have seen trouble. ¹⁶ May your deeds be shown to your servants, your splendor to their children. ¹⁷ 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.

Apologies up front that I'm going to get morbid with you today. In preparing this sermon, I found online something called the "World Death Clock," which calculates in real-time the estimated number of people dying in the world. It's almost 2 people every second, 110-120 people per minute, and 178,000 people every day. It's the reality of God's words through Moses written in this Psalm: "You turn people back to dust, saying, 'Return to dust, you mortals.' ... You sweep people away in the sleep of death — they are like the new grass of the morning: In the morning it springs up new, but by evening it is dry and withered." (verses 3, 5-6)

But those numbers don't give the weight of how quickly life is fleeting until you have a name and a face to go with them. We've had a number of prayers this year for people losing loved ones to death. So, I know some of you, if not all of you, are thinking specifically about a person who is being counted on that World Death Clock. For me, the truth of this psalm hit home a little more than two weeks ago when Pastor Nate Seelow, one of our pastors in our district, a guy about 2 years older than me, a guy I hung out with during our April conference, died due to complications from COVID-19. He leaves behind his wife and 4 children, the youngest of which just turned 1. How quickly and unexpectedly we pass away!

How do you go forward from that? While I don't know exactly how Megan and her children are dealing with this, I do know that they are making the Lord their dwelling place, that they spent and are spending day after day trusting in him to deliver them from this life of death. At the same time, many people are showering them with God's promises and assurances, with care as their congregation is collecting gifts for them and have 4 months of full compensations support built it to their church constitutional by-laws. We've been praying for them both here in worship and through our prayer chain.

Pastor Seelow's death is forcing me to number my days. Death will come to us all, and we don't know when. It's like there is a clock out there that only God knows where we are at on it. How are we numbering the days, preparing for the fleeting mortality of life?

My wife and I have had this honest conversation of what we would do in the event that one of us passes away suddenly. And so we started making a will, a trust for the kids' education, funeral planning, but then we stalled out. We stalled out because there are things we don't know the answer to and require research. We stalled out because it doesn't seem like an immediate need, that there are other, more important and more pressing things going on. It's as if we think we have a peek in to that locked room with our death clock and know how long we have.

Moses thought that way too. "Our days may come to seventy years, or eighty, if our strength endures..." (verse 10a) We expect a certain amount of time of life on earth. So, me, being just on the higher side of 30, I have time, right? Maybe Moses thinks he has more time when writing this, but he asks God to teach him to number his days, understanding that "the best of [our days] are but trouble and sorrow, for they quickly pass, and we fly away." (verse 10b)

How are you numbering your days? Do you have a plan in place if you were to die today or do you keep putting that off because it won't happen to you yet - you're in good health; no one would expect you to die? Or do you not have any plans in place because it's too sad to think about these losses, that thinking about death — yours or a loved one's — drives you into a depression and that's why there is no will, no concrete funeral plans?

Let's be honest with ourselves. We may say that we can go at any time, but do we actually live prepared for that? Are we making use of our days in a way that says that I know God can call me home at any moment? Does it scare you the prospect of dying and meeting your Maker and being judged today? Are there things that you have left undone? Are there secret sins that you continue to commit but put off confessing and turning away from because you think that you have more time? Do you have a clear conscience regarding all your relationships? Do you live as if today may be the very last time you are worshiping in this church, receiving his grace, his unfailing love, his sacrament?

It's tempting to think that we know the number of our days, that we always have one more. And so reconciliation can be put off one more day. We are tempted to think it's fine to skip church when I don't want to go or don't feel like it because there's always next week. We put off prayer, connecting with God in his Word, partaking in his Supper because we have another week, right? But do we? Is this kind of an attitude numbering our days with his wisdom by making God our dwelling place?

Yes, it's morbid to put before you that you can die today and that you can't count on having a tomorrow. And maybe when you hear that, you think pastor is trying to control you with fear and make you do things you don't want to do. The truth is that we are afraid to die because when we do our lives will be totally and completely exposed before our Maker and Judge. This terrified Moses: "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." (verses 7-8)

Are you prepared to answer God today, if you were to die? Will you say that your secret sins were really not that bad, that they didn't really harm anyone? For the times that you neglected God's Word and his sacraments, will you defend yourself by saying that you still believed, so what's the big deal if I skipped church or stayed away from Bible study or didn't pray or didn't read your Word for myself? We can give these excuses to ourselves and to other people, but we know that they will not fly with God. He will call me out and there's nothing I can do then to make it right. Who, then, can be saved? How can I number my days properly with a heart of wisdom?

So, Moses prayed, recognizing that our death clock is ticking and we don't know when it will be up, a prayer we can imitate: "Teach us to number our days, that we may gain a heart of wisdom. 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, for as many years as we have seen trouble. May your deeds be shown to your servants, your splendor to their children." (verses 12-16)

The beautiful thing is that the Lord has already answered this prayer. It's not possible for us to make ourselves right with God, not with all our secret and public sins. But God had compassion on us and gave us himself. He stood in our place and took the punishment that our sins deserved. He endured God's wrath so that he would relent. He lived a perfect life so that we would be covered with his perfection. He gave us faith to believe that he paid the price and filled us with his perfection. He gave us heaven. This is the unfailing love of God who is everlasting to everlasting. This is his unfailing love that satisfies us and comforts us in the face of death. God has brought us to him as our dwelling place. He has done the impossible for us. Making him our dwelling place every single day is numbering our days with his wisdom.

When God is our dwelling place every day, we know what will happen when our days are over and we stand before our Maker and Judge. Every day we will point to Jesus as to the reason for him to welcome us to heaven. He paid the price, made us right with God. Because of him, we are forgiven and covered in his perfection. Then we can number forever the days that we are glad, satisfied with God's unfailing love, singing joy day after day in heaven. With God as our dwelling place every day, we know that when our death clock strikes zero, a new clock begins as we dwell with God in heaven. That clock counts up to infinity, never ending, joy everlasting.

We ask God to help us number our days with his wisdom and establish the work of our hands. Help us to use the time we have now to be reconciled to him and others, to share his eternal and unfailing love that satisfies us and our souls every single day. Help us to spend purposeful time with God through his Word and sacraments, never neglecting them. Help us to finally plan out our funeral and make that will so that it gives a clear confession of God and what he have done for us and for all people. Teach us to number our days with your wisdom, Lord, making you our dwelling place every day. Amen.