

**Sermon File # 957**

**Scripture Reading: Psalm 90**

**Sermon Title: *Numbering Our Days: the Stewardship of life***

**Manuscript written by Roger Roberts and sermon preached**

**At International Baptist Church of Brussels, Belgium**

**On Sunday morning 11 March 2012.**

**Unless otherwise noted, Scripture quotations are from the New International Version.**

**Sources cited in this manuscript are listed at the end.**

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## ***Numbering our Days: the Stewardship of Life***

### **Introduction:**

Open your Bibles with me to the 90<sup>th</sup> Psalm, as we interrupt our series from 1 John, which should be resumed after Easter Sunday. Today and next Sunday I will bring messages on the theme of stewardship. Today we'll look at the stewardship of life, next week, the stewardship of possessions, and on the 25<sup>th</sup>, Denzil Walton will share from the Word about the stewardship of the environment.

The 90th Psalm, attributed to Moses, is a corporate prayer and a group lament, "bemoaning the brevity and travail of life" (Broyles, 359). Perhaps Moses, who is described in the title to the psalm as "the man of God," is writing as an old warrior of the faith. He may have composed these lines as the Israelites prepared to cross over into the Promised Land after their long and "apparently fruitless" (Robertson, 663) wilderness wanderings. In the closing verse, Moses prays that his life spent in leading the Israelites through this difficult pilgrimage will not have been in vain (verse 17). This rather somber psalm says some vitally important things about the need to number our days if we would be good stewards of the gift of life.

Follow as I read **Psalm 90**.

Twenty years ago I read a book on time management that gave one of the most profound statements I had ever read on the subject. (Time management is still a popular subject for business seminars, magazine articles and books. Simply go to “Google” and look up “time management”!) The author of this 1981 book said that time management is a misnomer. We cannot manage time. Time is inexorable and is something created by our eternal God. Time is measured for us by the rotation of the earth and its orbit around the sun. Give or take a few seconds, whether or not the earth might wobble on its axis, time is the same every year. This we know by the precise measurement of atomic clocks. And so, said this writer on time management, we cannot manage time; we can only manage ourselves and how we live within time, as it rolls relentlessly along (Leas, 15).

In the two decades since Speed Leas wrote about time management most of us have in our possession a lot of gadgets that promised to save us time and help us manage ourselves regarding our use of time, such as computers that give us access to the Internet and e-mail, cell phones, smart phones, iPads, and Blackberries. As some of you know, I’m no techno-type person, and have encountered computer problems and caused problems for others, who gallantly try to assist me. Communication technology has made a significant contribution to our work and communication efficiency, but I’m not sure how much time it saves us. We perhaps more than ever must exercise good time management principles, or our time saving devices can rob us of time.

Even though we have benefited from the amazing technology of this computerized information technology age, and few of us would choose to live without its benefits, life seems busier and maybe even less efficient than ever. Because of this technology, more production is expected of us. And what promised to save us time and make us more efficient has equally become a nuisance and an interruption to the flow and quality of our work. Financial pressures cause businesses to expect more production from fewer workers, whose access to IT is grounds for higher expectations from employers.

Moses uses an expression that will help us get a grip on the matter of managing life in respect to time. In verse 12, Moses, perhaps joined in this prayer by other worshipers, prays:

“Teach us to number our days,  
that we may gain a heart of wisdom.”

*The Message* paraphrases this verse as:

“Oh! Teach us to live well!  
Teach us to live wisely and well!”

Moses prays that God will graciously enable his life to be lived wisely that his days on earth, his living, leading, serving and working, will have maximum significance. He doesn’t want to end his life having been victimized by poor time management, or I should say, the management of his life against the passing of his fleeting days.

I believe I'm speaking to a lot of you here today when I say that managing our days and learning to number our days before God is a huge problem. You may be feeling the crunch of time pressures on your life and are struggling with how to order the priorities of your life and accomplish all that's expected of you, from your employer, your spouse, children and also your relationship with God, who asks that we give him the first-fruits, the priority of our time.

The 90<sup>th</sup> Psalm doesn't give us specifics, such as how much time to give to job, family, personal and kingdom concerns and goals, but it has some vitally important things to say to us about the significance of time, our days that we are to take seriously and number, i.e. arrange in proper order. These words from Moses, the man of God, are vitally important in our understanding of the significance of our lives in respect to time and how by managing ourselves we can gain the most significance from life. I doubt if anyone would regard Moses' life as a failure or insignificant to any degree. So, let's look at what he leads us to pray and what he says about numbering our days and the stewardship of life.

First he says in this prayer that...

### **Our days are a gift from the eternal God (verses 1-6)**

This first stanza of the psalm is a hymn in praise of the eternal God, contrasted with mortal mankind, with our brief and fragile earthly existence. Moses gives this hymn of praise to...

#### *The everlasting God*

This psalm reflects upon God's eternity. He is the almighty Triune God, who is complete within himself and is without beginning or end. Try as you may, you and I cannot comprehend God's eternity, the fact that he has always existed, because our small, mortal minds are conditioned to time and space, things that have a beginning and an end.

Simon Peter, in his second epistle, wrote about the coming Day of the Lord, when he will end history as we know it and consummate his kingdom with the final judgment and with the inauguration of the consummated kingdom. Quoting from our 90<sup>th</sup> Psalm, Peter responds to scoffers, who argued that the Lord's delay in his return is evidence that his promises are void:

"But do not forget this one thing, dear friends," writes Peter. "With the Lord a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day." He goes on to explain that the Lord is patient until the ingathering of his elect, "not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance" (2 Peter 3:8f).

God is an eternal God, who created time and space, in all of its complexity and vastness. In Psalm 8 and 139, among others, we see the majesty of God and his incomprehensible creation. God is greater than his creation, and comprehends history as one "event" in the context of eternity. If we could travel to a remote planet in the universe, we could see events taking place in our past. If we travel in a time

machine and stand on a planet just 66 light years away, and have a telescope powerful enough, we could observe my birth in Baptist Hospital in Louisville, Kentucky. If we were some 2,000 light years away, we could see a much more significant event—the birth of Jesus of Nazareth and, of course, his crucifixion and resurrection. And, obviously, God can see it all together. He's not limited, as we are, to seeing history as sequence but he can see it all as one and even simultaneously. God could see all of our sins for which Christ was suffering and dying on the cross.

The psalm holds forth the greatness of the immortal God and in the context of worship we are reminded of...

### *The gift of mortal life*

This psalm contrasts the immortality of God with the transient nature of human life. Since the fall of Adam and Even in the Garden of Eden, mankind is under the sentence of mortality, a condition we share with the beasts (Psalm 49:12). God desires our life with him forever, but the result of rebellion against God's intention was death—moral, spiritual and mortal death. "The wages of sin is death," Paul writes (Romans 6:23), and mortal death is the last enemy mankind, including followers of Christ, shall face (1 Corinthians 15:26).

We are given the gift of mortal life, and for many of us, this earthly life receives many of the blessings of God. While we have these days upon the earth, we face the choice of how we should live them. The first stanza reminds us that "time flies," that our mortal lives are brief indeed. "A watch in the night" (4b) was the ancient's shortest measure of time" (Weisur, 598). As we daily watch the almost unbroken sequence of natural disasters and social unrest, warfare and worldwide human suffering, we are made to realize just how blessed we are with the gift of life relatively free from much misery and pain and filled with opportunities in life.

Several years ago, I attended a reunion of my high school graduating class in Columbus, Ohio, USA. I hadn't seen most of these people in 45 years, when we were 18-year-old high school graduates. I think we were all a bit stunned to see what time had done to each other, as we were rudely confronted with the cruelty of the aging process. Being a class leader, I was voted by the student body as the graduate "Most Likely to Succeed." I doubt if everyone agreed that I achieved their predictions and expectations. The underlying question running through everyone's mind, believers and unbelievers alike, was "What did you do with your life?"

From the hymn of the opening verses Moses' psalm moves into a lament that says, in the second stanza, that...

### **Our days can be squandered foolishly (verses 7-11)**

These verses express a lament over the trouble and sorrow that often accompanies our brief mortal life. There is definitely a melancholy tone in these verses that remind me a lot of the tone in *The Book of Ecclesiastes*. There isn't a lot of hope in these verses to cheer the human heart over the prospects of life on earth. It's much

like the perspective in *Ecclesiastes*, which has also a perspective from “under the sun,” that is, from a purely human viewpoint without the benefit of faith and hope.

Macbeth expressed a similar lament, which I memorized in my Shakespeare class in college, before I was old or wise enough to appreciate the message:

*“To-morrow, and to-morrow, and to-morrow,  
Creeps in this petty pace from day to day  
To the last syllable of recorded time;  
And all our yesterdays have lighted fools  
The way to dusty death. Out out, brief candle!  
Life’s but a walking shadow; a poor player  
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage  
And then is heard no more. It is a tale  
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,  
Signifying nothing.”*

It seems that Shakespeare wrote these words with the 90<sup>th</sup> Psalm in mind. This psalm indicates the likelihood that many will live their mortal lives...

#### *Careless of the wrath of a loving God*

This lament speaks about the brevity of mortal life, with an expected life span of 70 to 80 years. This is significantly shorter than the 120-year allotment God granted before the Flood (Genesis 6:3). Life expectancies vary from time to time and culture to culture, and according to health, environmental and genetic factors. But the bottom line is, mortal life is very short. How easy it is to live these mortal lives, oblivious to how fragile and how short they are.

Early in my ministry, while pastor of a small mission congregation during my seminary student days, I was called upon to preach the funeral of a young member of our congregation who was killed in a motorcycle accident. My text, preached before a large congregation of his high school friends, was that comment from young David to his friend Jonathan from 1 Samuel 20:3. Noting that his life was in constant danger from Saul’s treachery, David said, “As surely as the Lord lives and as you live, there is only a step between me and death.”

Our psalm seems to imply that even though we live under the scrutiny of a holy God, who judges sins and who will some day hold us accountable, we are oblivious to this day of reckoning and life passes quickly by and “we fly away” (verse 10). Although we are meant to live with the fear of the Lord, we often fail to give him the fear and reverence that are due to him. Even when we experience trouble and sorrow, which should be a wake-up call to us (Luke 13:1-5), we continue to be careless of the wrath of God who wants to draw us to himself. We know that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ is a God of perfect love. Although he knows all of our sins, he has made provision for our cleansing and complete forgiveness. And the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom (Proverbs 1:7). We fear him because he loves us and wants to bring us to himself. And we should fear the one who will finally judge those who reject his great love, mercy and grace. But God is also holding us, his saved children, accountable for our use of time.

Thus we see that with a careless disregard of God's wrath there follows...

*Wasting life's opportunities*

Everyone is given mortal life and with that gift comes a responsibility. Jesus spoke of degrees of responsibility based on opportunity. As he concluded a parable contrasting faithful and unfaithful servants, Jesus said,

"From everyone who has been given much, much will be demanded; and from the one who has been entrusted with much, much more will be asked" (Luke 12:48).

Mankind is blessed with the gift of life from our creator and the offer of eternal life through Jesus Christ. "God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life" (John 3:16). This is God's great gift to the world. Yet, many who learn about this gift live and spend their lives oblivious to it. The greatest opportunity of all is wasted.

Apart from a relationship with God, the highest purpose and the greatest joys are forfeited. Life is squandered simply by spending life on lesser and temporal things. I'm not saying that for unbelievers and those who give themselves to lesser things have made no contribution to society and experience nothing of happiness and satisfaction. Indeed, God blesses and uses various contributions for the public good, regardless of the personal beliefs of those who make those contributions.

Your doctor may be an excellent physician and God will use her life as a part of working his healing in your life and the lives of others, for example. But for that doctor to not have regard for God and for her to not acknowledge his existence and serve for the glory of God and his kingdom, is for that doctor to fall short of the joy, meaning and purpose her life could have. And so, the greatest joy and purpose, even in this mortal life, are squandered.

In Jesus' parable of the rich fool, God called the rich man a fool because, even though he was a shrewd businessman, he squandered his life on the selfish pursuit of the material. Jesus said anyone is foolish and faces the ultimate loss of all things who does not seek to be rich towards God (Luke 12:13-21). This reminds me of a bumper sticker (Americans like to put stickers with slogans on the rear bumpers of our cars) that was popular in the US: "The one who dies with the most toys wins." Some, even so-called Christians, squander their lives in pursuit of material gain, which the Bible says is absolute folly.

And we who were given the opportunity to hear, understand and respond to the gospel and are given the privilege of knowing God personally through faith in Christ, we are particularly blessed. We are blessed with eternal and abundant life in him (John 10:10). Now we have the inestimable privilege of living in relationship with God as our Father and Christ Jesus as our Lord and Savior. We are called to live our lives as stewards of God-given opportunities. Unless we live in prayerful and worshipful fellowship with God, seeking to know and follow his will, we as followers of Jesus run the risk of squandering our opportunities. The Scriptures speak of the judgment seat of Christ before which every Christian must stand and give an account

of how well we have seized and used the opportunities God has given us, to know him better, to develop our gifts and to serve him faithfully. As Christians and as church leaders, we can squander God-given opportunities and expect to face the opprobrium of God's judgment seat (2 Corinthians 5:10; Romans 14:10).

The iniquities that God has set before his view may not be just the overt sins of our lives; not just wrongs committed, said and thought. But God is also aware of those opportunities he has given us to show his love each day, to share our faith in a caring, meaningful way and to seek to encourage the Body of Christ. He has placed us all in our sphere of influence, including your neighborhood here in Belgium. The family around your dinner table, the neighbors on your street, your fellow employees and students, are opportunities for you. To neglect to make a difference is to squander those God-given opportunities.

This prayer of Moses, the man of God, gives me pause to reflect on what I have done with my 66 years, and what I am doing today and day by day with the precious time I have remaining. And what God is expecting are not always and maybe not even mostly the big things we do, the large ministry projects, but how I am thinking and acting like Jesus, as I live each day in step with the Holy Spirit. Am I daily becoming more like Jesus and allowing him to live his life through me and as me?

From lament, Moses moves into prayer in the final verses that should become our prayer. Instead of squandering our days foolishly...

### **Our days can be invested wisely (verses 12-17)**

The first of the psalm is hymn and lament, but now the man of God, Moses, turns to prayer, that his remaining days will be invested wisely...

#### *Seeking and receiving a heart of wisdom*

Moses prays that the eternal God will teach us mortals how to live wisely within time. Although we are mortal and conditioned to live in time and space, we also are immortal souls, created in God's image. As such, we cannot be reconciled to time, but we long for eternity. This is what "The Teacher" says in Ecclesiastes:

"He has also set eternity in the hearts of men; yet they cannot fathom what God has done from beginning to end" (Ecclesiastes 3:11).

CS Lewis noted how "we are so little reconciled to time that we are even astonished at it. 'How he's grown!' we exclaim, 'How time flies!' as though the universal form of our experience were again and again a novelty. It is as strange as if a fish were repeatedly surprised at the wetness of water. And that would be strange indeed," notes Lewis, "unless of course the fish were destined to become, one day, a land animal" (page 138).

God has made us mortals as the crown of his creation and as such we have this witness of eternity, this yearning for immortality. And when we are reconciled with God by faith in Christ, we are born again to eternal life. We receive the Holy Spirit,

who is our guarantee of eternal life and is the foretaste of our everlasting glory. We have the solid hope of the resurrection of our bodies, with the assurance that Jesus' resurrection is the first-fruits of ours (Romans 8:23; 1 Corinthians 15:20, 23). When we receive the gift of eternal life and the presence of the re-creating, renewing Holy Spirit, "we have the mind of Christ" (1 Corinthians 2:16b). Now we can see and understand things from God's perspective, even though we don't possess his full perspicacity as the omniscient God.

But this new, regenerate heart of wisdom enables us to fear and love God and to share his perspective on life, time and eternity. We have a sense of the brevity and the frailty of mortal life, and realize that we are to live our days of this mortal life before God, with a sense of accountability to him as his servants, his stewards, and his children. We understand that we have the gift of eternal life that begins immediately and will find its fulfillment in eternity in the new heaven and earth. And even now, upon this unredeemed yet to-be-redeemed earth, we are to invest our lives in the causes of the everlasting kingdom.

In concluding his great resurrection chapter, Paul writes that we must "stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain" (1 Corinthians 15:58).

With this God-given new heart of wisdom we can invest our days wisely...

### *Living joyfully and fruitfully*

Moses understands the importance of joy in his life and labor (verse 14). When we invest our lives wisely, the result is joy. In fact, the objective of our life is joy in the Lord and the joy of the Lord. As the Westminster divines said in the Shorter Catechism, the chief end of man is to glorify God and to enjoy him forever. When we order our time and priorities rightly/wisely, the result is the joy of the Lord. When we live as God created us to live, the result will be joy, the sensing of his pleasure, to use the phrase of 1924 Scottish Olympian Eric Lytle.

Contrast this joy in, from and with the Lord with the world's pursuit of satisfaction. I have never before sensed such widespread discontent that people today feel with their jobs and careers. Job satisfaction is at an all-time low, even among those with ostensibly enviable and lucrative positions. I dare say that I could survey our congregation and would have trouble getting the majority to say you are happy with your job and that you find meaning and satisfaction in your work.

Maybe the problem is, we're seeking fulfillment in the wrong places, such as approval from our bosses and colleagues, or tangible results from our work production, or even a raise in our income and position of authority. As followers of Jesus, we must bring all of our life under the Lordship of Christ. We must, as the apostles remind us, do everything, not to please others, but to please the Lord himself (Ephesians 6:5ff; 1 Peter 2:13ff, passages which in our culture we read "employer" instead of "master," and "employee rather than "slave"!)). We all have a vocation that transcends and encompasses our jobs, and that is to live our lives before the Lord and seek to glorify him in all that we do. We ask him to use our

employment, our earnings, our influence at work, to bring honor to him through our witness and our care for our families and our service in his kingdom.

Moses remembers the days that the Israelites were afflicted in Egypt and also in their wilderness wanderings, when they experienced God's discipline that always followed periods of their rebellion. He prays that the Lord will now make them glad for as many days as he afflicted them (verse 15). As Old Testament scholar Derek Kidner) writes (331), this modest prayer is "outrun" by the Apostle Paul:

"For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all" (2 Corinthians 4:17).

Even in life's greatest difficulties and challenges, and perhaps particularly during these tough times, God is at work shaping us into the restored image of Christ, drawing us deeper into his true joy, and showing more of his glory to the world around us. And all of this will result in our greater glory in the new heaven and earth.

The prayer ends with a petition that the favor of the Lord our God will rest upon us and that he will establish the work of our hands for us (verse 17). We all would like to think that our life's work and the living of our days have significance and will not end with our funeral. And the promise of the Lord is that what we do for him will endure the judgment and will be an everlasting memorial and glory to God (1 Corinthians 3:10-15).

You and I have to make tough choices with our time, shuffling schedules to give the right priorities: worship, spiritual formation, kingdom service, which begins first with our own families. We need to make allowance for balance in our lives, and must not forget the sacredness of a Sabbath, a day of rest when we can reorder the priorities of our lives that get messed up by all the demands upon us. We must also learn to live in the Spirit and by the word, as we prayerfully and constantly allow the Spirit to direct our paths and shape our lives to conform to the word and will of God, which is the life of Christ in us. He will enable us to attend to our real priorities, which include personal and corporate worship, attending to the needs of our families, doing our work in the context of a higher vocation, living as faithful witnesses, seeking to influence the public square with kingdom values, and giving enough time to rest and recreation that renew body and spirit. All of these and more make up what we call our lives, the days that we need to wisely number, that is, to live and invest intentionally and never squander carelessly.

To number our days means that we will live our days and spend our time in a relentless pursuit of God's agenda. We will seek to be focused on him. Yes, we can benefit from time-saving electronic devices, but as Gerald Kennedy reminds us, we can easily be distracted and deterred from this pursuit by the allurements of lesser things.

To illustrate this, Kennedy tells about a concert pianist/entertainer named Oscar Levant (1906-72), who performed a concerto in a high school auditorium one evening. He was greatly disturbed when a telephone began to ring in an office just off stage (Today, the interruption would likely be from a cell phone). Kennedy continued saying that "nobody answered it (the phone) and it continued to jangle.

When he (Levant) came to a quiet place in the concerto, he leaned toward the audience and without missing a note said, 'If that is for me, tell them I'm busy.'" Kennedy added, "The Christian is one who in the present disregards the jangling notes which are sometimes supposed to be modern" and is "too busy for the noisy clanging symbols of the day" (Kennedy, 157).

We need grace and wisdom, God's wisdom, to busy ourselves with our relationship, our conversation, our walk and our work with him, so that we won't have time to be interrupted by the world's time-wasters.

### **Conclusion:**

I've already spent most of my mortal life, and God alone knows how much of it I have squandered and how much I've invested. And only that which has been lived wisely, i.e. according to God's will and for his glory, has been a good and eternal investment. I'm grateful that our God is gracious and merciful and that he can redeem time. He is able to take the part of our life that we have squandered, perhaps when we did not yet know the Lord, and use that part of our life as well. He enables the wasted years to take on significance by including them as part of our testimony of God's saving grace. I love the promise of the Lord who told a nation devastated by a plague of locusts, "I will repay you for the years the locusts have eaten" (Joel 2:25a). The eternal God can restore temporal time by giving new opportunities.

And when we live in step with and being filled with the Spirit, we are given grace to redeem the time, to make the most of our time, and use the time we have remaining for his glory. Remember, Jesus is Lord of our past as he is of our present and future. He sees our lives as a vital part of his story of redemption and as an important role in his everlasting kingdom. And so Paul admonishes us:

"Be very careful, then, how you live—not as unwise but as wise, making the most of every opportunity, because the days are evil. Therefore do not be foolish, but understand what the Lord's will is. Do not get drunk on wine, which leads to debauchery. Instead, be filled with the Spirit" (Ephesians 5:15-18).

The Lord, through the leading of the Holy Spirit, teaches us to number our days and to be good stewards of life, living our days and redeeming our time wisely. Maybe a time management (better: "life management") course would be helpful in a practical way, learning to organize our schedules and to be aware of time wasting habits that eat away precious time. But the ultimate solution to wasted days and a wasted life is to give our lives fully to the Lordship of Christ Jesus. And then we offer our lives and the days and time of our lives to God, presenting our bodies as living sacrifices, made holy and acceptable to him (Romans 12:1). As we live ordered, prayer-directed lives, God will enable us to seek first his kingdom and righteousness, adding all the other things, including time for other things, as well (Matthew 6:33).

May God help us to number our days, to live well and wisely, as faithful stewards of the gift of life!

**Thoughts and questions for personal reflection and/or group discussion:**

1. Why do you think people's lives seem more hurried than ever before?
2. Why have devices that were invented to save us time become time wasters?
3. Why do you think that time seems to "fly" and that as mortals life seems to us to be so brief?
4. In what ways are our lives accountable to God for the way we spend our days/years?
5. What is the meaning of Moses' prayer in verse 12?
6. What is the most important priority in our use of time?
7. What does it mean to you for God to "establish the work of your hands" in verse 17? Turn verses 12 and 17 into your prayer.

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