

## Teach Us to Number our Days

“Teach us to number our days.” That’s what Psalm 90 says. It’s the only Psalm we know written by Moses. So, the man who watched over 40 years as 603,550 men over the age of 20 died, an average of over 15,000 a year, over 1250 a month, over 41 per day, prays “teach us to number our days.” If that’s his prayer, we who are told if we eliminate the risk factors of weight, blood pressure, tobacco, and alcohol and do the positive thing of diet, exercise, and seat belts, can live forever, surely we need to be taught to number our days.

Lesson number one: death is not an ‘if’. We act like it is. The Lord knows this and so has James tell us: “Now listen, you who say, ‘Today or tomorrow we will go to this or that city, spend a year there, carry on business and make money.’ Why? You do not even know what will happen tomorrow. What is your life? You are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes. Instead, you ought to say, ‘If it’s the Lord’s will, we will live and do this or that’” (4:13-15). Where does James get the figure that we aren’t even dust blowing in the wind but water vapor? You heard it in the Introit: “Each man’s life is but a breath.” And this is the word Solomon uses 38 times in Ecclesiastes translated vanity, vapor, futile, empty. David and Solomon agree. A man’s life is no more than that vapor your breath produces on a cold window then vanishes.

Don’t you think it strange that David and Moses both pray for the Lord to teach, to show them what Cat Stevens knows? “Oh very young...You’re only dancing on this Earth for a short while.” Moses prays, “Teach us to number our days.” David prays, “Show me, O Lord, my life’s end and the number of my days; let me know how fleeting is my life” (Ps. 39:4-5). You’ve seen movies where someone trying to kill another finds out how incredibly difficult it is to kill someone. They don’t die easily. Then there is the other side. How incredibly easily Death can work.

General George Patton at 60 “had led a life of adventure, fighting in almost every major American 20<sup>th</sup> century conflict. His career climaxed with WW II, where he led corps and armies from North Africa, to Sicily, to the continent of Europe. He often led from the front, and he almost always delivered victory. His swift conquest of Sicily, his race across France, his relief of Bastogne during the Battle of the Bulge, and his drive into Germany destroyed German armies, saved American lives, and captured the collective imagination of the American public.” 8 months after peace, he was in a simple car accident. No one was injured but Patton. He had a gash in his head, but his neck was broken. He was paralyzed and died 12 days later ([www.nationalww2museum.org/war/articles/general-george-s-patton-jr-death](http://www.nationalww2museum.org/war/articles/general-george-s-patton-jr-death)). John Donne’s 17<sup>th</sup> century poem, “Death, be not proud” can indeed be spoken by a Christian, but don’t you be so proud that you forget your life is no more than a mist, a vapor, a handbreadth.

“I see dead people.” Remember that all-telling line from the 1999 film “The Sixth Sense”? The quirk was that the little girl who said it really did see dead people, and all along was telling Bruce Willis what Moses and David are praying to learn from God. The child psychologist, played by Willis, was dead already. “Dead man walking” is a 1995 film about a death row inmate. The expression is how they refer to who’s up next to be executed. Thomas Hardy has a 1909 poem “The Dead Man Walking”. This is about a man who dies “yet more” as friend and kinfolk passed “through the Last Door” before him and left him alone standing. And when his heart’s love turned to hate he died “one more degree.” Till finally “though whiling/ The time somehow/ In walking, talking, smiling,/ I live not now.” Hardy’s death is that of the angst teens and college-aged kids go through and generally grow out of into life. It’s just this that Moses and David pray about: Don’t think that by passing out of that existential angst about living, you have triumphed over death.

We are ‘dead men walking’. Since the Fall, that’s how it has been for all born from the fallen Adam. God didn’t lie. He told Adam, and it is only to Adam He speaks, which you can tell if you read it in the King James. God’s Word to Adam in Genesis 2 is, “Of every tree of the garden thou mayest freely eat: But of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, thou shalt not eat of it: for in the day that thou eatest thereof *thou shalt surely die*” (15-17). God does not lie. On the very day that Adam ate of the fruit of that tree he died. And all descendants born of Papa Adam did too. We are all born through “death like pain” to teach us we’re born to death.

“Teach us to number our days.” Death is not an if but a when. Animals shot through the heart can go on running, flying, jumping, until the false hope that they are still alive catches up to them. That’s us. It’s a waypoint of sorts in our growing-up. It can happen young or old, but suddenly it hits you that a parent’s death isn’t a ‘maybe’ or even an ‘if’ but a ‘when’. I was 31. Called out of a church meeting in Detroit that my father had a heart attack and was in ICU 100 miles away. I left immediately. Just outside the city limits I had to pull over. I felt so nauseated I thought I would be sick. Death had jumped from if to when and it looked realer and truer than life.

Back to the Patton point. Moses dies at 120, but Scripture makes a point of telling you he doesn’t die of old age. “Moses was a 120 years old when he died, yet his eyes were not weak nor his strength gone” (Deut. 34:7) Death is not an if but a when, and the when is solely in God’s hands. Ecc. 8:8 is quite clear. “No one has power over the day of his death.” And what does David conclude based on his life being a mere breath or mist? “My hope is in You” Lord. And what about the rest of the prayer Moses taught us: “Teach us to number our days aright, *that we may gain a heart of wisdom.*” Wisdom that knows for fallen mankind Death has never been anything other than a ‘when’ because we start out dead in our sin and sinfulness.

**You know these passages. David says, “I was sinful from the time my mother conceived me” (Ps. 51:5). Our natural condition from conception on says Paul is to be spiritually blind (1 Cor. 2:14); to be spiritually dead (Eph. 2:1), and yet to go on fighting against God as our enemy like the walking dead (Rom. 8:7). Those of us taking a back by almost 2 years of fearmongering based on sicknesses, shortages, politics, and life are hamstrung by the fact that we’re trying to deal with reality with blind eyes, dead bodies, and hostile minds. Why are we so surprised by the state of things when Paul in Gal. 1:4 calls today “this present evil age”? What do you expect will happen in an entire age that is evil? Or what light did you hope to see in this life that Paul in Eph. 6:12 calls “this present darkness”?**

**You really ought to go home and read those last 2 passages. The Gal. passage mentions “this present evil age” in the context of Jesus redeeming us. Jesus “gave Himself for our sins to rescue us from this present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father.” Down, down, down into this fallen reality where only dead men are walking, came the living God the Son. Though neither blind, dead, nor an enemy of God, the Son was hounded, arrested, tortured, damned, and killed to save us from this present evil age. Death stalks us threatening us, fearing us with the end, when in reality that end is the end of a sinful nature that has weighted us down with blindness, deadness, and hostility to God our Savior. Yes, go home and read Gal. 1:4. Then go to Eph. 6:12. Paul mentions “this present darkness” in the midst of a passage dwelling on how strong we are “in the Lord and in His mighty power.” We have the full armor of God that we may stand against the Devil’s schemes: Stand we must with the buckle of truth, the breastplate of holiness in Jesus, the gospel of peace with God, the shield of faith, the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Word.**

**We face the last enemy, that’s what Paul calls Death, in I Cor. 15, like a fully equipped soldier. We face that monster Death in the sure knowledge of Heb. 2:14-15 which some of us sorely need to memorize. “Since the children have flesh and blood, Jesus too shared in their humanity so that by His death He might destroy the devil who holds the power of death and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death.” This grandiose truth, too good to be believed, gives us the courage to sing such craziness as “It is not death to die” (TLH 602). And “I would not live always” (TLH 588). Such craziness was too much for the Missouri Synod. She left both hymns out of her last two hymnals. But this is no new teaching or even New Testament. Didn’t you hear it in Isaiah?**

**Over 2,500 years ago the Lord tells us: “My righteousness draws near speedily, My salvation is on the way, and My arm will bring justice to the nations. The islands will look to Me and wait in hope for My arm. Lift up your eyes to the heavens, look at the earth beneath; the heavens will vanish like smoke, the earth will wear out like a garment and its inhabitants die like flies. But My salvation will last forever, My righteousness will never fail” (51:5-6).**

**You’ve been taught that saving faith has 3 parts knowledge of who Jesus is and what Jesus did. Assent to those facts. Trust that He did them for you. Before Pietism infected 17<sup>th</sup> Lutheranism, think non-denominational, Baptist, any of the feeling based churches, the 4<sup>th</sup> part of saving faith was certainty. No, more than you want the toddler you toss in the air to doubt you will catch him, does your Lord want you to doubt the arms of Christ crucified will catch you. They catch you in life as you fall into Sacred Water, into Holy Words, into Sacred Wine, and they will catch you in Death. When those in Christ fall in death, they fall upwards. Amen**

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