**Being wise with time**

Text: Psalm 90:12

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Scriptures: Ecclesiastes 3:1-8; Psalm 90

Songs Chosen: [SttL] 171, 440, 90, 521, 175

**Series:** Occasional (year-end)

**Theme:** The eternity of God in contrast to the brevity of man

**Proposition:** Be wise - understand the mathematics of time

**FCF:** We naturally tend to live for the moment

**Text:** “*Teach us to number our days aright, that we may gain a heart of wisdom*” (Ps 90:12)

**Introduction**

An ancient method for measuring time was the hourglass. It comprises two [glass](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Glass) bulbs connected vertically by a narrow neck that allows a regulated trickle of material (usually [sand](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sand)) from the upper bulb to the lower one. The origin of the hourglass is unclear. Its predecessor the [clepsydra](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Water_clock), or [water clock](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Water_clock), is known to have existed in [Egypt](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Egypt) as early as the 16th century BC – that would be during the period when the Israelites were held captive as slaves.

Hourglasses may be re-used indefinitely by inverting the bulbs once the upper bulb is empty. The hourglass is a vivid picture of the relentless passage of time.

Yet unlike the sand in this ancient clock, we cannot turn time upside down and replace the years, months, weeks, days, hours, minutes and seconds which have been spent in our lives. Time only flows in one direction. Time is a commodity which cannot be purchased, gifted, borrowed, lent or replaced once it has progressed and spent. Would you agree?

Time is therefore one of the most precious resources over which the Lord has given us stewardship in our lives. As we heard from Eph 5:15a “*Look carefully then how you walk, not as unwise but as wise, making the best use of the time*”. As we were reminded from Eccl 3, there is a wise season for every human purpose:

*“There is a time for everything, and a season for every activity under heaven:*

*a time to be born and a time to die,*

*a time to plant and a time to uproot,*

*a time to weep and a time to laugh,*

*a time to mourn and a time to dance,”*

Yet people in general in our age, perhaps more than any other in the recent history of the Western world, are living for maximum pleasure in the current the moment. Making the most of today for themselves, because tomorrow “I might miss out. We live in the era of bucket lists, of ‘must dos’ before the curtain closes and time runs out. For example, the global cruise ship industry cannot get enough vessels built to meet demand at present.

Yet so many in our society are profoundly unsatisfied. More stuff, more experiences, more time spend indulging oneself. All of this does not seem to equate to more happiness, more fulfilment. Instead people are left profoundly disappointed, anxious and depressed.

Do you love mathematics? It’s no secret that I do – Although I realise that not everybody else does ☺. Yet, to have a wise understanding of time, we need to get a grip on some numbers, which we’ll do as we consider this morning from Psalm 90 under the following headings:

1. An Infinite Number

2. A Small Number

3. Working it out

1. **An Infinite Number (v1-2)**

Psalm 90 is the only psalm in the Biblical Psalter with inscription “a prayer of Moses, the man of God’. One writer wryly notes that, “*commentators who resist the clear text that this psalm was written by Moses are notably short of impressive reasons for doing so*”. In other words: it’s obvious that Moses is the author of this psalm!

Moses begins his inspired prayer with a hymn of praise: v1-2 *“Lord, you have been our dwelling place throughout all generations. Before the mountains were born or you brought forth the earth and the world, from everlasting to everlasting you are God”*

God is the Creator pre-exists His Creation. There has never been a time when God did not exist, nor will there ever be a time when he ceases to be. Moses knew God, who had appeared to him in a burning bush. At that time God described His eternal nature in the words: “*I am who I am*” (Ex 3:14). God exists outside of time and space. “*For a thousand years in your sight are like a day that has just gone by, or like a watch in the night.”*

The Divine Being does not depend on anyone or anything else. He is not subject to events, but is the cause of all that takes place, yet without sin and without in any way reducing or removing human responsibility for decisions that people like you and me make.

You might ask the question “can you explain how that works for up? You can even use mathematics if you like”. No, I can’t explain, but this does not make the truth any less true. If God is a higher being than man, we would therefore logically expect there to be aspects of his person and work which we cannot fully comprehend.

Unlike all creatures in His Creation, God is truly independent from all else, from all people, as reflected in His name “I AM”. He is “*from everlasting to everlasting” (v2).* For God, time is infinite, for God there are no temporal bounds. God is never late, never in a hurry. He does not age as we do.

In mathematics if you divide any number by 0 the result is infinity…. a theoretical number which our minds cannot fully grasp. **Rev 1:8** *"I am the Alpha and the Omega," says the Lord God, "who is, and who was, and who is to come, the Almighty."* The Lord Godhas no beginning and no end. He is infinite in power, glory, knowledge and wisdom.

Yet He has chosen to be in a relationship with a finite people. He is the God of finite humans, of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. By grace, brothers and sisters in Christ, He is our God. He Himself was the ‘dwelling place’ the refuge for Moses and the Israelites he led.

At this time through the wilderness where they had no cities, no houses, just temporary tents pitched in a large camping place. On the move for 40 years in the area of the Sinai Peninsula.

“You are God” (v2)– is a confessional statement which Moses made of the Lord who delivered him and guided him. “You are God” is a confessional statement which we too make. We know God, the invisible, eternal God not only through the experience of a burning bush, the plagues on Egypt, or the parting of the Red Sea buy so much more through Jesus Christ, the Son of God who said: "*I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. If you really knew me, you would know my Father as well. From now on, you do know him and have seen him*." (John 14:6-7)

We who are finite, have seen the infinite because God took on flesh in the person of His Son. Jesus is the image of the invisible, infinite, God. Why did He come to this finite earth? So that He could show us the infinite love of the Father

Do you know this great love? As this year comes to a close do you sense your own finitude, the brevity of your life? The relentless passage of time as the grains of sand inexorably fall? Moses did.

Which brings us to our 2nd point

1. **A Small Number (3-11)**

As we’ve seen, Moses praises the infinite, eternal, personal God. Then in contrast, v3-11 is a lament, a series of sombre reflections, over the brevity of life; the smallness of the number of days allotted to a human life. Remember that those who wandered the wilderness under the leadership of Moses who were adults when the left Egypt, did not enter the promised land in their lifetime, they died in the desert. All except believing Joshua and Caleb.

So Moses watched a generation perish, before he himself died in the land of Moab, having seen the land from afar, but never setting foot there himself. **Deut 34:7** “*Moses was a hundred and twenty years old when he died, yet his eyes were not weak nor his strength gone.”* The adults he had led through the Red Sea went into the ground in the desert (v3). The minerals from their bodies still there today. “*You turn men back to dust, saying, "Return to dust, O sons of men."* Having escaped the converging waters in the Red Sea they are swept away in the flood of death in the desert (v5).

A human lifespan passes so quickly –it’s like a dream (v5) here for a fleeting moment and then gone. Like new grass which shoots up in the early morning dew when the air is cool only to quickly wilt in a hot dry climate as the sun brings scorching heat “*though in the morning it springs up new, by evening it is dry and withered*” (v6). The number of our days on this earth is relatively short…v10 “*The length of our days is seventy years-- or eighty, if we have the strength; yet their span is but trouble and sorrow, for they quickly pass, and we fly away.”*

Why is life so brief? Why do we fade and die like grass? Why do our days pass so quickly and vanish like a mist?

Moses knew why the people of Israel had died in the desert without ever reaching the goal of the promised land. It was because of their unbelief, God had said: Numbers 14:23 “*not one of them will ever see the land I promised on oath to their forefathers. No one who has treated me with contempt will ever see it.”* Numbers 14:34 “*For forty years-- one year for each of the forty days you explored the land-- you will suffer for your sins and know what it is like to have me against you.'*

Moses acknowledges that the lives of his people ended because of God’s wrath. Sins – both public and private are fully known to God. Nothing is hidden from his eternal, penetrating gaze: **90:8** “*You have set our iniquities before you, our secret sins in the light of your presence.”* God sees when our hearts are covetous, hating, unforgiving, unloving even if we are able to hide these things from others.

Even though the Israelites had the law…given at Mt Sinai, yet they could not escape the curse of sin. Genesis 2:17 *but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat of it you will surely die."* Here is the mathematical equation of the fall: sin=death. Sin and the small number of days and years of this life are connected. There is a sadness to this life because our days are cut short due to sin. Moses writes: **v10b** “...*their span is but trouble and sorrow, for they quickly pass, and we fly away.”*

We experience plenty of sadness in our short lives. For many growing up with imperfect parents, an angry dad, a distracted mum, rivalry with brothers and sisters; struggling to do well at school, sit exams, gain entrance to uni/polytech, an apprenticeship, find a husband/wife, cope with singleness, have and raise your own children. There are financial pressures, church commitments; helping to guide older children in their study/work/choice of spouse. As someone has said “yesterday “small children, small problems”, today “big children, big problems”; Dealing with disappointment, depression, cancer, weakening physical strength; Accepting loss of mobility/strength; downsizing housing, vehicle, having less influence in the world; sickness of a husband or wife. Then after all the struggle… “*Life ends with a sigh...*”

Depressing/discouraging? It can be, but Beloved Brothers and Sisters in the Lord – it does not need to be so for us!!! There is a better way! Yes, our years end like theirs, but in Christ…our days do not pass away under God’s wrath. Romans 8:1 “*Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus*”. We are NOT consumed by God’s anger and need no longer by terrified by His indignation. (v7) BECAUSE when the time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under law (Gal 4:4).

The bad news is sin=death. But the gospel is our sin = sin placed on Christ. Therefore, no sin= no death. The gospel is Christ’s righteousness placed on us, Therefore life! Life now and life later, life eternal, life infinite. The small number of our days on this earth becomes an incredibly big number in the earth to come! A short life transformed into an eternal life! Now that’s multiplication!

The mathematics of the gospel is wonderful. It is because of Jesus Christ, who is the Faithful Witness, the Firstborn from the dead, and the Ruler of the kings of the earth (Rev 1:5), that we can pray to God and ask Him to help us work out the mathematics of His infinity and our passing frailty.

Which brings us to …3rd point:

1. **Working it out (12-17)**

The brief nature of life does not go unnoticed by the unbelieving world. Some attempt to do the calculation/computation…(SLOW): “Life is short…smile while you still have teeth”, “Life is short…eat desert first”, “Life is short….so enjoy it”

In this psalm we are given God’s wisdom to work the numbers out. In this psalm we face our insecurities; the personal reality of decay and death, the unavoidable truth of sin and God’s judgement. Verses 13-17 of this psalm are a **6-fold Prayer** for corporate (note the plurals) restoration of God’s favour:

**Firstly:** (v12) “*Teach* ***us*** *to number our days aright, that we may gain a heart of wisdom.”* This is a prayer which we can pray together as a church: “Give to us, our God your wisdom to apprehend/to comprehend the brevity of life, Wisdom=the ability to apply that God-given knowledge to the practical affairs of life, “Teach us to number”. More than just ticking off the days on a calendar and thinking about how little time is left!

Spurgeon said“men become humble as they look into the grave which is so soon to be their bed”. What would you do with the rest of this day if you knew that it was to be your last on this earth? We need a mind wise enough to sort out the balance of each day with events, responsibilities, and opportunities in order to be able to cope both with the evil and transience of human life: Eph 5:16 **“***making the best use of the time, because the days are evil*”; Col 4:5**”***Be wise in the way you act toward outsiders; making the best use of the time*”. Spurgeon also commented that “a short life should be wisely spent”.

**Secondly:** (v13) “*Relent, O LORD! How long will it be? Have compassion on your servants.”* Reflecting on the shortness of life leads us to prayer for divine compassion for unmerited favour: ‘have pity’. Prayer that God would be merciful towards those yet lost, within our families, with the church, in the world.

**Thirdly:** (v14) *“Satisfy us in the morning with your unfailing love, that we may sing for joy and be glad all our days.”* Reflecting on the shortness of life leads us to prayer for the satisfying covenant loyal love of God to bring joy and gladness during this life.

**Fourthly:** (v15) “*Make us glad for as many days as you have afflicted us, for as many years as we have seen trouble.”* Prayer for gladness in the midst of this life’s afflictions. “Give us the Lamb as well as the bitter herbs”.

**Fifthly:** (v16) *“May your deeds be shown to your servants, your splendour to their children.”* Prayer for the demonstration of God’s power to this, and to future, generations

**Sixthly:** (v17) “*May the favour of the Lord our God rest upon us; establish the work of our hands for us-- yes, establish the work of our hands.”* Prayer for eternally fruitful life. ” Frail, limited and sinful as people are, the love of God can transform what is weak to his own glory”.

Repetition at the end intensifies the request. Lord establish the work of his hands. Prayer for all deacons and elders and pastor - Lord establish the work of their hands. Prayer for us all as a church together serving the Lord with each member being equipped for works of ministry - Lord establish the work of our hands.

*“store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moth and rust do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal”* (Matt 6:20) Be wise - understand the mathematics of time. Have you lived for eternity during this year of our Lord 2018? What are your plans for 2019 in light of the wisdom of Psalm 90?

Let us pray together as a church, saying v12: ‘*Teach us to number our days aright, that we may gain a heart of wisdom.’*

*May the favour of the Lord our God rest upon us; establish the work of our hands for us-- yes, establish the work of our hands.*

AMEN