

“It’s About Time”

July 26, 2009
The 17th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Psalm 90
John 8:12-19

“Teach us to count our days, O God, that we may gain a wise heart.”

“Psalm 90 is a theological reflection on the priority of God’s activity and **the priority of God’s time to reshape human activity and human time.**”

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COUNTING OUR DAYS

It started with a conversation I was having, this past Fourth of July, with my first cousin’s husband. John is a cattleman–farmer in southwestern Ohio. How it started I cannot remember. But seemingly out of the blue he said, *“October 28, 2025!”*

“What?” I caught myself responding without thinking.

“Yep! October 28, 2025 ... that’s when I’m going to die.”

“Now how do you know that?” I asked.

“It’s in the actuarial charts... on the internet. You just plug in a few numbers like your date of birth, height, weight, whether you smoke or drink, your body/mass index and with a click of the enter button your estimated date of death appears.”

The weekend reunion with four of the seven Vance cousins went on to dozens of other subjects – as we tend to do at our periodic reunions. I thought I had dismissed the comment, but I hadn’t. On the Monday he and his wife headed back to Hillsboro, I sat down to check my email and ... and my curiosity led my fingers to the internet and to www.deathclock.com – one of dozens of such sites. I hesitated, but then I entered all of the pertinent data, clicked enter and ...

“... March 21, 1999! Congratulations,” it said, **“you have already lived nine years, 4 months & 6 days beyond the day you should have died! Good work!!** The only words that came to mind were, **“Good grief!”**

After a perfectly dismal day Vonnie convinced me that I had entered some erroneous data ... and so, I did it again and came up with a much more satisfactory date ... **and no I’m not going not going to tell you!**

If that reminder of my mortality wasn’t enough, the very next day I received in the mail my annual Social Security Statement ... the one that comes to folks my age three months ahead of their birth

month, with my lifetime earnings record and estimates of retirement income as well as reminding me that in June of next year it will time for me to apply for Medicare benefits!

I swear I heard Frank Sinatra was singing ...

*“Oh, it's a long, long while from May to December
But the days grow short when you reach September
When the autumn weather turns the leaves to flame
One hasn't got time for the waiting game.*

*“Oh, the days dwindle down to a precious few
September, November
And these few precious days I'll spend with you
These precious days I'll spend with you.”*

PONDERING OUR DEMISE

It is ironic: Our culture is both preoccupied with death and in denial of it. We dress it up shiny caskets and floral tributes yet we are loath to talk about it. Many of us won't even plan for it. Yet we mortal creatures live every moment of our lives within its perspective. Judith Viorst, in her book Necessary Losses writes,

“When I was a little girl I used to close my eyes at night and imagine the world going on and on forever. I'd imagine, with absolute terror, the world going on and on forever – and me not there. Freud writes that we are incapable of imagining our own death, but I am here to tell you that's not true. Please God, I used to pray, I know you can't take death away. But couldn't you just arrange for me to stop thinking about it?”

Psalm 90 is God's negative response to Judith Viorst's childhood prayer. It is a psalm that directly addresses human mortality, in no uncertain terms.

[O God,]
you turn us back to dust,
and say, 'Turn back, you mortals.'
You sweep [us] away; [we] 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.

Psalm 90 is a communal song of lament ... a poetic interpretation of the human predicament. As if we need reminding the preacher at the graveside simply will not let the gathered miss it, *“All of us go down into the dust.”*

The beauty of this psalm rests in its honesty. Biblical scholars see its composer as a pastor, a theologian and a liturgist rolled into one. That's why Psalm 90 is one of a handful of psalms so aptly suited for Christian funerals. It's a song of faith that speaks directly to the relationship of Creator to creature ... it's a congregational hymn that juxtaposes the "Eternal Timeless Creator over against we "time limited creatures." It speaks to the pathos of human life lived under a death sentence and the inability of human beings to match God's wisdom. It, like all of the psalms we have touched this summer is a choral litany used in the worship of God by the people of God.

REDEFINING TERMS

But there is more to this psalm than simply an emotive lament. This psalm more than any other reminds us of the value of the time given to us, and our God given choice to redeem it ... to snatch it out of the snares of meaninglessness ... to remember who we are in God's economy and to use the time we have been given well.

*"The days of our life" sings the psalmist,
"are seventy years,
or perhaps eighty, if we are strong;
even then their span is only toil and trouble;
they are soon gone, and we fly away."*

Psalm 90 is the only Psalm in the Psalter directly attributed to Moses. As such it is designed to take the reader back to the time of Exodus, before the people occupied the land, before the Temple, before the monarchy.

If we can imagine it as a prayer of Moses, this psalm becomes more than a communal prayer for help in the midst of the distress of human life; more even than a poetic meditation on the transience of human life. ***"Psalm 90 drives us into a deep theological reflection on the priority of God's activity and the priority of God's time to reshape human activity and human time."***

(NIB, 1044)

Our days and our years are not simply moments to be endured on the journey of human life. Seen in the light of Moses's struggle in balancing the demands of serving God and leading his people, this psalm prayer functions as a call to decision.

- What do we "do" with the time allotted to us?
- How do we respond to the eternal and faithful God, who has turned toward us in faithful love?
- And how do we imbue the times of our life with meaning, with purpose, with joy and with permanence?

We begin by redefining our understanding of time.

Alan Richardson, in his classic Theological Word Book of the Bible, tries to help us understand that biblical writers and especially the writers of the Old Testament, understood time primarily as *'realistic time,'* as in ...

²a time to be born, a time to die;
 a time to plant, and to harvest;
³a time to kill, and a time to heal;
 a time to break down, and a time to build up;
⁴a time to weep, and to laugh;
 and to mourn, to dance;
⁷a time to tear, and a time to sew;
 a time to keep silence, and a time to speak;
⁸a time to love, a time to hate;
 a time for war, and a time for peace.

“For everything,” the Preacher of Ecclesiastes writes, “there is a season and a time under heaven.” These things mark the times of our lives.

DISCOVERING THE MEANING OF LIFE

“Realistic time” did not ignore measured time, for scripture is full of days and months, new moons and years. Psalm 90 contains 12 clear references to this kind of time in the span of its 12 verses! But, chronological time was a fairly late achievement of the Hebrew mind, and it was largely borrowed from surrounding cultures (NIB, 258). **The point is this:** time for our forbearers in faith is measured by its content rather than its length; time for both the early Hebrews and the later Jews was critically connected to understanding time in terms of opportunity and fulfillment.

This Hebrew concept of time emerges in the language of the Greek New Testament as *καιρος*. It is no accident that our Lord’s first words, recorded in the Gospel of Mark are all about this kind of time:

“The time is fulfilled, and the Kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe the good news!! (1:15)

That good news? In Jesus Christ the long awaited time when God would call Messiah forth is occurring in your presence. *Καιρος* time is both fulfillment and opportunity. Such a revelation requires action; it requires a change in your life; it means it’s decision time.

Jesus Christ calls us to take the days, months and years of our lives and fill them with purpose and with meaning. In the Gospel of John, he said this to those around him,

‘I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life.’ Then the Pharisees said to him, ‘You are testifying on your own behalf; your testimony is not valid.’¹⁴ Jesus answered, *‘Even if I testify on my own behalf, my testimony is valid because **I know where I have come from and where I am going.**’*

It is no abuse of faith to say that in Jesus Christ the world of his day and ours is presented with the most coherent life ever lived; a life so deeply rooted in God, and lived in a specific place and time, that there is no distinction between the two. **In Christ we witness a life lived in such a way that it transcends time itself and is the Way and the Truth and the Life.** You and I have been invited into that Life; welcomed into that Life; and we invite all people to join us in this Life.

If time is only chronological then it really does only have to do with numbers, and it is with numbers that we count. It is with numbers that we become fixated. It is with numbers that we become distracted.

The life God has given us is so much more than that. The psalmist asks God to give him a wise heart, that he might understand the meaning and purpose of this limited life he has been given. That is our prayer too, for the world in which we live teaches its ways

That’s why such books as **Rick Warren’s Purpose Driven Life** are so popular – they address the human quest for meaning.

*“‘What on earth am I here for?’” he writes. *Life is not an accident. And although life is temporary, we can have an eternal impact as we discover our true purposes through worship, fellowship, service & mission as we grow into the likeness of Christ himself.*”*

My favorite book on the subject of time is Mitch Albom’s “Tuesdays With Morrie.” On one of those Tuesdays, as his dying time draws near the old professor tells his old student,

“So many people walk around with a meaningless life. They seem half-asleep, even when they are busy doing things they think are important. [It’s] because they are chasing the wrong things. The way you get meaning into your life is to devote yourself to loving others, devote yourself to the community around you, and devote yourself to creating something that gives you purpose and meaning.” [p.43]

At the beginning of yoga practice the teacher will say, *“Take a few moments to notice your breath, listen to it as you breathe. As you do set your intentions for your practice.”*

Psalm 90, is asking that of us. Close you eyes, listen deeply to the hymn.

Where does the meaning in your life reside?
Can you state that meaning clearly & briefly?
Against whose standard is it measured?

Set your intentions. Remember it's all about time!

AMEN!

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Resources:

Albom, Mitch. Tuesdays With Morrie. New York: Doubleday, 1997

McCann, J. Clinton. "The Book of Psalms" New Interpreters Bible: Nashville, Abindgon Press, 1996

Richardson, Alan. A Theological Word Book of the Bible. New York: MacMillian, 1957

Viorst, Judith. Necessary Losses New York: Simon & Schuster, 1986. P. 305

Warren, Rick. The Purpose Driven Life. www.purposedrivenlife.com

NIB