

Teach Us to Number Our Days

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[0 : 00] So today we begin a study based on this book, Remember Death by Matthew McCullough. In case you decide to get yourself a copy, please know that while I will follow the outline of the book for the most part, I also intend to take some liberty.

If you will, in your Bible, go with me to Psalm 90. Psalm 90. You'll see this psalm is referred to as a prayer of Moses.

You can really imagine him praying these words as the Israelites reach the border of the promised land. I don't know if that was really the case, but that's how I picture it in my mind, because this is a prayer of reflection in large part.

So while Moses looks ahead to the fulfillment of God's promises, he can't help but to reflect on the past. It has been a long, hard road to get to where they were.

Moses says,

[2 : 32] Notice the stark contrast in this psalm.

On the one hand, we have God who is from everlasting to everlasting. Verse two. Before the mountains were brought forth wherever he had formed the earth and the world.

He was God. For a thousand years in his sight are but as yesterday when it is past. Verse four. As Peter would later write, one day with the Lord, one day is as a thousand years and a thousand years is as one day.

God is greater than time itself. He's the creator of time. So he has dominion over time, not the other way around. On the other hand, we have humanity.

The rest of us. Whom God returns to dust and says, return, O children of man. Verse three. Moses says to God, you sweep them away as with a flood.

[3 : 53] They're 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. Pretty simple picture to get in your mind.

Isaiah seems to allude to this psalm when he says, the grass withers, the flower fades. When the breath of the Lord blows on it, surely the people are grass.

God is from everlasting to everlasting while humanity is like the grass that fades and withers after a relatively short span of time. If that comparison makes us feel a little small and perhaps a little helpless, I believe that's the point.

Moses is clearly stamping an expiration date on us. At best, he says, the years of our life are 70 or by reason of strength, 80. Yet, their span is but toil and trouble.

They are soon gone and we fly away. So, Moses essentially concludes in verse 12, teach us to number our days that we may get a heart of wisdom.

[5 : 06] Teach us to number our days. That's a euphemistic way of saying, teach us to remember death. Teach us to remember that we will die. Help us to never forget that our lives are short and fleeting.

As James says, what is your life? For you are a mist that appears for a little time and then vanishes. Remember, you will die.

How's that for a cheerful start to your Sunday morning? Out of necessity. I'm afraid it gets worse before it gets better. But please understand, I'm not really trying to do anything the Bible doesn't.

Which is, directly and boldly confront us with our mortality. You will die. The Bible reminds us of this over and over again.

In fact, it's on nearly every page of scripture. Directly or indirectly, from Genesis to Revelation, scripture confronts us with our mortality on nearly every page.

[6 : 10] It will not let us forget that we will die. And you can't unsee it either. Now that I've mentioned it to you, you'll notice it every time you read your Bible. You will die.

You will die. You will die. Why does scripture confront us with our inevitable deaths so often? Moses tells us here. Teach us to number our days that we may get a heart of wisdom.

Now we'll eventually talk more about what that means to get a heart of wisdom. But for now, let's focus on that teach us to number our days part.

Evidently, getting a heart of wisdom comes only after we've truly numbered our days. In other words, that wisdom comes only after we've learned to accept death for what it is.

And furthermore, personalize it. Realize that this applies to us. This is relevant to us. Now as most of you know, I work for a funeral home.

[7 : 13] I'm a chaplain, which means I preach funerals for families who maybe don't have their own pastor. I also double as what we call a pre-need advisor, which means I sit down with people who want to make their own arrangements ahead of time.

So everything's already planned out and possibly even paid for. But that's not really how I started in this line of work. When I was still in North Carolina, a funeral director friend of mine asked me to come work for his funeral home.

They needed somebody to retrieve bodies outside of normal business hours. So when the office closes and someone dies, usually at night, it was my job to go get the body and bring it back to the funeral home.

Now prior to this job, I did not have a whole lot of experience with death. I had been to a few funerals, including the funerals of my grandparents, but that was pretty much it.

I remember my soon-to-be employer asking me, do you think you can handle this? To which I replied, I guess we're going to find out. I don't know. So I'd like to share with you some of the surprises in particular that I faced in those early days.

[8 : 33] First, I was surprised by the sheer volume of deaths. The volume of deaths. I had entered into a world that is completely foreign to most of us.

It was certainly foreign to me. Thankfully, most of us don't frequently encounter death. We do, but not frequently. But all of a sudden, I was thrust into this unseen world where people die every day.

It was not uncommon for me to be retrieving a body at night when a second call would come in. There were some nights when I would retrieve three, four, or even five bodies in a single night.

Those were some long nights. And while most people were comfortably asleep in their beds, of course, I was driving all over Raleigh to pick up dead people.

The funeral home in North Carolina averaged something like 650 deaths a year. Where I work now, we average something like 450 deaths a year, and I think you can do the math on that.

[9 : 43] That is more than one death a day for a single funeral home. Keep in mind, there are approximately 20,000 funeral homes in this country alone.

And I believe the average daily death count in the United States is somewhere between 150,000 and 200,000. Maybe a little bit higher than that now.

Now, I didn't need to work for a funeral home to know those statistics. No one does, of course, but it certainly helped to put those numbers into perspective.

When you see the bodies, the literal, physical bodies, one after another after another, it becomes pretty hard to ignore the harsh reality of death.

For most of us, it's not something we encounter too often. But someone does. Someone always does. Every minute in this country alone, more than 130 people will die.

[10 : 51] 130 people every minute. Every minute, more than 130 families will be devastated because someone they love has just died. Death may not impact you this very moment.

It may not impact me, but it's wreaking havoc on people all around us all the time. We just don't see it. And therefore, it's a little bit out of sight, out of mind.

But more to the point, we can't escape it forever. We will lose people we're close to, and we ourselves will die. It is appointed for man to die once, and after that comes judgment.

Hebrews 9.27. Again, James writes, Come now, you who say, today or tomorrow we will go into such and such a town and spend a year there and trade and make a profit, yet you do not know what tomorrow will bring.

What is your life? For you are a mist that appears for a little time and then vanishes. Instead, you ought to say, if the Lord wills, we will do this or that.

[12 : 00] As it is, you boast in your arrogance. All such boasting is evil. Not only will every last one of us die, it may very well come sooner than we think.

It usually does. It may come tomorrow. It may come today. Only God knows. I may not walk out of this sanctuary this morning, and according to James, if I am under any illusion that I'm in control of that, that is evil.

That is arrogant. Now, if you think that sounds depressing, let me read to you from the 17th century philosopher Blaise Pascal, which McCullough quotes in his book, as he describes how he perceives the human condition.

He writes, Imagine a number of men in chains, all under sentence of death, some of whom are each day butchered in the sight of others.

Those remaining see their own condition in that of their fellows and is looking at each other with grief and despair as they await their turn.

[13 : 12] This is an image of the human condition. So he tells us to imagine we're standing in a row. We're all bound by chains. We can't escape. We're stuck there.

We have no choice but to watch one after another of our fellow prisoners be executed down the line from us as that executioner moves closer and closer to us, one by one by one, and we all know it's coming.

We're all looking at each other, realizing pretty soon it'll be my turn. Now, that sounds pretty dark, doesn't it? And even so, there's some truth to it.

Blaise Pascal, his perspective may be a little cynical, may be lacking some hope, but it's true nonetheless. Until, unless Christ returns, we will all die.

We will all face that executioner, if you will. And this is what the Bible tells us over and over again. Remember how I said you won't be able to unsee it now that I've mentioned it.

[14 : 13] For example, you've likely read the many genealogies of the Bible. And people ask, why are they here? Well, I can give you one reason. You know, you read it, so-and-so begat so-and-so who begat so-and-so who lived 900 years and he begat so-and-so.

How long did so-and-so live? He lived for a fixed period of time and no longer. As much as biblical genealogies are a record of families and lifespans, they are also a record of deaths.

The deaths, the days of Adam, we're told, after he fathered Seth, were 800 years and he had other sons and daughters. Thus, all the days that Adam lived were 930 years. And we're so impressed by those numbers, we can hardly fathom it, but catch the last part.

And he died. When Seth had lived 105 years, he fathered Enosh. Seth lived after he fathered Enosh 807 years and he had other sons and daughters.

Thus, all the days of Seth were 912 years and he died. And on it goes. You understand my point.

[15 : 27] We all know death is inevitable. We all know it happens all around us, all the time. That was made quite clear throughout 2020 whenever we turned on the news, right?

People are dying. Yet that doesn't necessarily mean we've learned to number our days, which leads to the second surprise of my work with the funeral home.

Second, I was surprised to learn the variety of deaths. Would you believe me if I told you not everyone dies at 90 years old peacefully in their sleep?

That's actually kind of rare. Sometimes it was a 90-year-old who died in a sleep. And sometimes it was a 45-year-old mother who was making breakfast for her family one morning while her kids played in the living room and she just dropped dead right there in the middle of the kitchen.

Sometimes it was a cancer patient in a hospice facility. Sometimes it was a teenager who flipped his car and didn't quite make it to the emergency room. Sometimes it was a baby that I had to literally pry from his mother's arms.

[16 : 48] And sometimes it was an elderly person who seemed to die with a smile on his face. I've seen that. I've seen every age. Just in the few short years I've been doing this, I've seen many causes.

I've seen people who died surrounded by family and I've seen people who died all alone only to be discovered a month later. Thinking back to Blaise Pascal, the thing that strikes me most about the passage that I read was perhaps his empathy.

As he hears others being executed or perhaps sees them down the road from him, he doesn't think to himself, Well, I'm sorry for that guy. Instead, he immediately recognizes he's no better or worse.

He's in the same situation. Sooner or later, he'll come to the exact same end. And so there's a certain camaraderie between him and the fellow prisoners. Moses shared that same kind of empathy, I think, here in Psalm 90.

You sweep them away as with a flood, he says in verse 5. But the thought of their deaths only leads him to pray, so teach us. That is, myself included, to number our days.

[18 : 01] Like Pascal, as Moses thinks about the deaths of others, he doesn't detach himself from their circumstances. He personalizes it. He recognizes.

As Solomon says in Ecclesiastes 7, this is the end of all mankind. And the living will lay it to heart. The living will lay it to heart.

As a pre-need advisor with a funeral home, I'm in a position where I often ask people if they would like to pre-plan their funeral arrangements. They'd like to make those in advance.

And would you like to guess the number of people who decline because they say, I'm not old enough for that. I have had people in their 80s tell me, I'm not old enough for that.

Some will say they're too healthy. Some just say, I've always got time. But if working at a funeral home has taught me anything, no one is too young and no one is too healthy.

[19 : 08] Most of the funerals I preach are for people I've never met. And I hope this will not come across as callous on my part.

But generally when I preach these funerals, I'm not overly emotional. I can be emotional, but not like if I knew the person. There was one time, however, I wasn't quite sure whether or not I was going to make it through the service.

The guy in the casket was my age, off by about one year. He died very unexpectedly from an undiagnosed heart condition.

No one knew he had. He didn't know he had it. But what got me the most was his two young children sitting in the front row right in front of me.

Even now, it kind of chokes me up a little bit. But every time they would glance over at the casket, they would just sob.

[20 : 12] And they sobbed like I have never seen anyone in my life sob. And so I had a really hard time.

I had to pause a lot. I was afraid that the next words would not come out of my mouth. And to be candid, I was just afraid of losing it in front of everyone. Because I thought to myself, first of all, that could be me in that casket.

And second, and worse yet, in my mind, those could be my children. The third thing that surprised me when I went to work for the funeral home was the shame and the horror of death.

The shame and the horror. One of the first removals I went on was for a fairly prominent woman in the community. She lived in a nice home. She died peacefully, surrounded by family at a relatively old age.

And I remember she was wearing a relatively nice, recently purchased pair of pajamas. Because her family made a comment about them. I also remember taking this woman back to the funeral home.

[21 : 24] Wheeling her into the embalming room and sliding her cold, lifeless body onto a steel embalming table.

Then, as the job required, I had to remove those nice pajamas and lay a sheet over her. And I remember thinking, So this is what it comes down to.

This is the end of all mankind. Even the affluent among us will eventually find themselves lying on a steel table like this, with a thin sheet to cover them, only a thin sheet, stripping them of all pretense and modesty.

This is the end of all mankind, I thought. And the living will lay it to heart. Not push it from our minds, but lay it to heart. Teach us to number our days.

That's an example of the shame I've witnessed. As for the horrors, I think I'm going to spare you most of those details. I have been on death calls where police officers were vomiting into trash cans.

[22 : 38] More than once I've had a nurse on scene say to me, I don't know how you do this every day. Of course, I'm thinking the same thing about her. I don't know how you do what you do every day, but I don't know how you do this every day.

And I'll be honest with you, there have been days when I've thought to myself, I don't know how I do this every day. Death is violent. It is destructive.

It causes tremendous pain. Furthermore, it actually begins wreaking havoc on us long before we die. The Apostle Paul says our outer self is wasting away.

And that's an accurate assessment of the human condition. As sinners, we are wasting away. We like to think of ourselves as climbing a ladder throughout life. You know, rung by rung, we get higher and higher.

But the truth is we're not climbing higher. We're wasting away because we are perishable, mortal beings. We're not living beings. And we have all of the ever-increasing aches, pains, and gray hairs to prove it.

[23 : 39] Whenever I see the lifeless body of an image-bearer of God laying on a steel table, or I walk into a room full of sobbing, heartbroken people, I think to myself, this is not the way it's supposed to be.

This is not how it's supposed to be. This is not what God intended for his creation. And it's not. It's not. Go back to the beginning. God gave us life.

He gave us abundant life. But we chose to take it for granted. We chose to sin. And the just wages of sin is what?

Death. Romans 6.23. God warned Adam, you may surely eat of every tree of the garden, but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat.

For in the day that you eat of it, you will surely die. So if not for the horrors of sin, we would never know the horrors of death.

[24 : 43] Keep that in mind. As you know, though, we live in a fallen world where sin exists and death is inevitable.

Yet we don't like to talk about it, do we? We don't like to think about it. Even now, the number of times I've used the word die or death this morning even makes me feel a little uncomfortable, and we'll get to that.

Why would that be? Well, in recent years, Western culture has gotten very good about pushing death as far out of sight and out of mind as possible.

We don't like to talk about it. We don't like to think about it intentionally, and perhaps sometimes unintentionally. The world has tried to remove what Paul called the sting of death.

But they're trying to do it apart from Christ. And that doesn't work. It's not possible. You know, it's a bit ironic because our culture is obsessed with death.

[25 : 46] We see it all around us, but it's only a detached, kind of fictionalized version of it. For example, we see death every time we watch television or see a movie.

Some character always dies. Sometimes the whole show is about death. There are entire genres of music built around this strange fixation on death, almost a celebration of it in a way.

People get symbols of death tattooed on their bodies or stitched on the back of their jackets or whatever. But none of that truly represents death.

None of it truly represents death. That's why I have seen grown men with skulls and bones tattooed on their arms come to the funeral of a family member or friend and completely lose it.

They fall apart. They weep and they wail. You'd think they'd be prepared for this. I mean, these are guys that love horror movies and listen to death metal music.

[26 : 58] Skulls and bones tattooed right on their skin. And so what happens? Well, everything that they were fascinated with regarding death up to that point was all detached.

It was impersonal. It wasn't real. They had never truly confronted the real horrors of death. There was a time when a family member would die and their bodies, believe it or not, would lay in the living room for days.

Children playing all around. People walking in and out. Everybody would gather. Then the family themselves would be responsible for going out, digging a hole in the property and burying that body.

Can you imagine doing that today? Can you imagine doing that today? Even the youngest children would witness it all, be right there in front of it. Today, however, we often die in hospitals and nursing homes behind closed doors.

Then the funeral home takes it from there. And increasingly, with the popularity of cremation, many families never see their loved one's body. They never witness death at all.

[28 : 14] People just vanish. There was a time when life expectancy was much shorter. Parents could very well bury half of their children. In his book, McCullough gives an example of a man who had 14 children.

14 and only one outlived him. Only one. In the past, people accepted death in a way that we don't because they confronted it so often.

Today, we have the crutch of modern medicine, right? While I'm thankful to God for all of those medical advancements, I fear that some people are under the illusion that we're just one breakthrough away from conquering death completely.

It can't happen. You know, I often hear people in the funeral home, they're angry at doctors or the hospital because their loved one died. Why didn't they do more?

It's as though their hope was entirely in medicine. That's a sad place to be. Today, we're prone to think we can always prolong the inevitable.

[29 : 22] We can always get another year out of life and perhaps another and perhaps one more. Today, death may happen all around us, but we don't see it. It occurs behind closed doors in hospitals and nursing homes and hospice facilities.

The closest most of us come to witnessing death is at a funeral home when we attend a funeral. And that is only after morticians have gone to great lengths to make the deceased person look as much alive as possible.

You see someone in a casket, that's not what death looks like. You understand that? They have many tricks of the trade to reconstruct the face.

They dress the body in nice clothing. They add color to the skin with cosmetics. Behind the scenes, they do several other things that I'm not going to mention because of their graphic nature, but there's a lot of work that goes into making someone who is deceased look like they are not deceased.

Then they lay the body in what appears to be a very comfortable casket with soft lining and a pillow to give the appearance that that person is merely resting, just resting.

[30 : 34] And the end result is that no one who attends the viewing or the funeral will really see death as it is. In fact, many people don't attend funerals anymore.

Assuming a body is even present when you go to the funeral home or to the church, we don't refer to the service as a funeral quite like we used to. It's a celebration of life.

We're just here to celebrate a life. Listen closely and you'll also discover that no one died. They passed. They passed. Even at a funeral home, we avoid confronting death.

I work at a funeral home and I told you, I feel a little uncomfortable using the word death so often. Why is that? Because I'm trained not to. Don't remind them. In his book, Matthew McCullough elaborates on the reasons why we avoid death, but I don't think it's a great mystery, is it?

Specifically, he cites the culture's obsession with happiness and our natural tendency to avoid all things terrible. Obviously, if the world feels they have no hope of deliverance, death is just too unpleasant.

[31 : 45] It's too horrible to acknowledge. Here's the thing, though. Here's the thing, though. Believers in Christ are prone to treat death as taboo as everyone else at times.

We can be just as guilty. As McCullough points out, we seek medical miracles as aggressively as anyone, don't we? We, too, pursue happiness on the same material terms.

How else could the prosperity gospel gain such prominence? Lastly, McCullough points out something that I've seen through my own experience. Even at a Christian funeral, we avoid talking about death.

Even at a Christian funeral, we say, he or she is in a better place. He or she is finally free. He or she is in heaven. And all of that is true. But as Solomon says, it is better to go to the house of mourning than to the house of feasting.

Why? Because this is the end of all mankind. And the living will lay it to heart. What does he want us to do? He wants us to confront mortality there.

[32 : 56] At a Christian funeral, you will sometimes hear someone say, so-and-so isn't here any longer. He or she is not in the casket.

The real him or her has escaped that body and is in heaven. Now, I understand what they're trying to say, but I don't entirely agree with that sentiment.

He or she is not here. God created Adam to be body and soul. He created us the same.

In fact, our bodies are significant enough parts of our identities that Christ promises to return and raise them and restore them. That body is a part of us.

When Lazarus died, Christ didn't say, don't worry, folks. He's in a better place. He escaped that old useless body. That's not what he said. No, according to John 11, Jesus wept.

[34 : 02] And I believe he wept at a number of things there at the death of his friend, not to mention the pain it clearly spread through his family and friends. I'm afraid we in the church are often guilty of an over-realized eschatology, if you will.

For instance, Paul writes, For Christ must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. The last enemy to be destroyed is death. The apostle John writes, He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more.

Neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away. Wonderful, wonderful promises. But these promises have not yet been realized.

Right? They've not yet been realized. Even so, we may find ourselves using them as a quasi-excuse to minimize the harsh realities of death.

Let's not think about death. There's nothing to see here. Let's talk about what God promises. McCullough says this posture is no tribute to God's promises.

[35 : 14] Just the opposite, in fact. When we act like death is no problem, we are not just being dishonest about the world as it is. We not only join our culture in denial and enable our collective self-deception, we also diminish what Jesus came to offer us and rob ourselves of the perspective from which his promises come alive.

So think about that. The secular world wants to pretend death doesn't exist, or at the very least, maybe, just maybe, we can eradicate it apart from Christ.

In the church, we tend to minimize it. You know, we say, we would rather be away from the body and at home with the Lord. What do we have to lose? Obviously, there's some truth to that.

But, let me ask you this. What's so great about eternal life? What's so great about it?

Why do we rejoice to think of Christ rising from the grave and conquering death? If death is no big deal, why would we be so excited to see Christ return, to see the resurrection of our bodies, to see the ultimate defeat of death and the creation of a new heaven and a new earth where people no longer die?

[36 : 41] Why does any of that matter if death is no big deal? Quoting McCullough once more, if death is not a problem, Jesus won't be much of a solution.

The more deeply we feel death's sting, the more consciously we will feel the gospel's healing power. The more carefully we number our days, the more joyfully we'll hear that death's days are numbered too.

And the more we allow ourselves to grieve the separations death brings to our lives, the more fully we will long for the world in which he will wipe away every tear from their eyes and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore.

And that is why we study the subject of death. That's why we meditate on this. That's why we pray, Lord, teach us to number our days that we may get a heart of wisdom.

We'll continue this next week. You're dismissed.