

Teach Us to Number Our Days

Psalm 90:11–12

Introduction

As you look at the world around you, life seems to go on. Yes, there are interruptions here and there (like a pandemic which causes people to stay home in fear). But overall, people continue on with their lives. As a Christian, it is hard to see so many people (many of whom are loved ones) continue with their lives without any regard for their spiritual state. Indeed, we cannot conceive that people would refuse the offer of the gospel. How could someone *not* want to trust Christ given Bible's clear gospel call?

Yet people persist in their refusal to come to the cross. Why is that? Why do people refuse to acknowledge their need for Christ? The answer is that people are blind to the fact that they need Christ. They do not see the wrath of God. They are dead in their trespasses and sins (Eph. 2:1). *But what if they see the truths of the Bible with their own eyes?* you may wonder. Jesus answered that very question when he said:

Luke 16:31 But he said to him, 'If they do not hear Moses and the prophets, neither will they be persuaded though one rise from the dead.'"¹

And as Matthew 28 describes, even when the soldiers witnessed the angel come to roll away the tomb stone from Jesus' already empty grave they still accepted bribes of money to propagate a lie instead of acknowledging the resurrection of the Son of God.

Moses has described with great detail and clarity the immense contrast between the eternal, transcendent God and finite, frail man. And with the contrast of the glory of God with the sinfulness of man firmly established in vv. 3–10, Moses now comes to vv. 11–12 with a climactic truth: You would be wise to remember the immense, righteous wrath of God and to recognize your transient life by learning from God's wise instruction.

Psalm 90:11–12 Who knows the power of Your anger? For as the fear of You, *so is* Your wrath. So teach *us* to number our days, that we may gain a heart of wisdom.

You would be wise to remember:

Preview Outline:

- 1. God's Righteous Wrath**
- 2. Man's Proper Petition**

¹ Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture quotations taken from the New King James Version.

Moses continues his somber picture of the righteous wrath of God. He exhorts people to remember the truth of—

1. God's Righteous Wrath (v. 11)

As we have seen in the previous verses, God is glorious. He is the One who has created (“brought forth”—a metaphor for giving birth) the earth and all of creation (v. 1). He is the One who is from everlasting to everlasting (v. 2). God is glorious and holy. Consider several verses:

Psalm 93:5 Your testimonies are very sure; holiness adorns Your house, O Lord, forever.

Psalm 96:9 Oh, worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness! Tremble before Him, all the earth.

Isaiah 6:3b “Holy, holy, holy *is* the Lord of hosts; the whole earth *is* full of His glory!”

God is the thrice holy God. Moses no doubt recognized the glory of God and His holiness because of His experience in observing God's glory on two separate occasions (cf. Ex. 3:2–6; 33:18–23). When God's glory and holiness are on display, it contrasts sharply with the sinfulness of mankind. And the contrasts helps us understand the just nature of God's wrath towards sin.

“*Who knows the power of Your anger?*” — This question is rhetorical. That is to say, the answer that Moses is looking for is obvious: *no one knows the power of God anger.*

The word for “knows” (Heb. יָדָעַ) means “to know, to understand.” He will use this same word in v. 12 (English “teach”). In essence, Moses is asking “Who knows *with complete understanding* the power of God's anger?” Of course Moses and the people of Israel knew aspects of God's anger because they had seen it expressed on various occasions. One such occasion is found in the book of Numbers:

Numbers 11:1 Now *when* the people complained, it displeased the Lord; for the Lord heard *it*, and His anger was aroused. So the fire of the Lord burned among them, and consumed *some* in the outskirts of the camp.

Not only did they see and experience the anger of the Lord but they were also warned of it:

Deuteronomy 6:13–15 ¹³ You shall fear the Lord your God and serve Him, and shall take oaths in His name. ¹⁴ You shall not go after other gods, the gods of the peoples who *are* all around you ¹⁵ (for the Lord your God *is* a jealous God among you), lest the anger of the Lord your God be aroused against you and destroy you from the face of the earth.

Deuteronomy 7:1–4 “When the Lord your God brings you into the land which you go to possess, and has cast out many nations before you, the Hittites and the Girgashites and the Amorites and the Canaanites and the Perizzites and the Hivites and the Jebusites, seven nations greater and mightier than you, ² and when the Lord your God delivers them over to you, you shall conquer them *and* utterly destroy them. You shall make no covenant with them nor show mercy to them. ³ Nor shall you make marriages with them. You shall not give your daughter to their son, nor take their daughter for your son. ⁴ For they will turn your sons away from following Me, to serve other gods; so the anger of the Lord will be aroused against you and destroy you suddenly.

No one truly understands the immense power of God's anger.

“*For as the fear of You, so is Your wrath.*” — This phrase is somewhat challenging to translate and understand, but I think that what Moses is saying is captured in another translation quite well: “*Your wrath is as great as the fear that is due you.*”² Sinful man is required to fear the name of God. As one commentator put it, “the greatness of God's wrath should evoke fear, and that fear should be

² New International Version.

commensurate with God's wrath."³ Even when presented with the truths of Scripture, where we can see the power of God's anger, people still ignore it. Take, for example, God's judgment and fury on Sodom and Gomorrah. God's anger and fury were unleashed on those two wicked cities with immense power and destruction (Gen. 19:12–29). The Lord mercifully preserved Lot and his daughters from the destruction that came but no one else escaped, including Lot's wife:

Genesis 19:24–29 ²⁴ Then the Lord rained brimstone and fire on Sodom and Gomorrah, from the Lord out of the heavens. ²⁵ So He overthrew those cities, all the plain, all the inhabitants of the cities, and what grew on the ground. ²⁶ But his wife looked back behind him, and she became a pillar of salt. ²⁷ And Abraham went early in the morning to the place where he had stood before the Lord. ²⁸ Then he looked toward Sodom and Gomorrah, and toward all the land of the plain; and he saw, and behold, the smoke of the land which went up like the smoke of a furnace. ²⁹ And it came to pass, when God destroyed the cities of the plain, that God remembered Abraham, and sent Lot out of the midst of the overthrow, when He overthrew the cities in which Lot had dwelt.

Moses saw the wrath of God on the sons of Korah. In fact, the fact that man is completely unaware of the wrath of God is own clear display in Numbers 16. There, the sons of Korah rebel and the Lord determines to destroy them:

Numbers 16:20–21, 31–35 ²⁰ And the Lord spoke to Moses and Aaron, saying, ²¹ "Separate yourselves from among this congregation, that I may consume them in a moment." . . . ³¹ Now it came to pass, as he finished speaking all these words, that the ground split apart under them, ³² and the earth opened its mouth and swallowed them up, with their households and all the men with Korah, with all *their* goods. ³³ So they and all those with them went down alive into the pit; the earth closed over them, and they perished from among the assembly. ³⁴ Then all Israel who *were* around them fled at their cry, for they said, "Lest the earth swallow us up *also!*" ³⁵ And a fire came out from the Lord and consumed the two hundred and fifty men who were offering incense.

Even when they had seen the power of God's fury on rebels *only the day before*, the people of Israel still provoked God to anger with their sinfulness:

Numbers 16:41–46 ⁴¹ On the next day all the congregation of the children of Israel complained against Moses and Aaron, saying, "You have killed the people of the Lord." ⁴² Now it happened, when the congregation had gathered against Moses and Aaron, that they turned toward the tabernacle of meeting; and suddenly the cloud covered it, and the glory of the Lord appeared. ⁴³ Then Moses and Aaron came before the tabernacle of meeting. ⁴⁴ And the Lord spoke to Moses, saying, ⁴⁵ "Get away from among this congregation, that I may consume them in a moment." And they fell on their faces. ⁴⁶ So Moses said to Aaron, "Take a censer and put fire in it from the altar, put incense *on it*, and take it quickly to the congregation and make atonement for them; for wrath has gone out from the Lord. The plague has begun."

Moses of all people clearly understood what it meant to ask the question "who knows the power of your anger?" He had on many occasions interceded on behalf of the people of Israel. And lest you and I should "think of ourselves more highly than we ought" (Rom. 12:3), Peter reminded his believing readers that to embrace sin (which is an offense against God) is to forget the salvation that they had received:

2 Peter 1:5–9 ⁵ But also for this very reason, giving all diligence, add to your faith virtue, to virtue knowledge, ⁶ to knowledge self-control, to self-control perseverance, to perseverance godliness, ⁷ to godliness brotherly kindness, and to brotherly kindness love. ⁸ For if these things are yours and abound, *you will be* neither barren nor unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. ⁹ For he who lacks these things is shortsighted, even to blindness, and has forgotten that he was cleansed from his old sins.

The New Testament describes every person as under the wrath of God before trusting Christ:

³ VanGemeren, William A. *Psalms*. In *The Expositor's Bible Commentary* series. Vol. 5 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1991): 596.

Romans 1:18–19 ¹⁸ For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who suppress the truth in unrighteousness, ¹⁹ because what may be known of God is manifest in them, for God has shown *it* to them.

Ephesians 2:1–3 And you *He made alive*, who were dead in trespasses and sins, ² in which you once walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, the spirit who now works in the sons of disobedience, ³ among whom also we all once conducted ourselves in the lusts of our flesh, fulfilling the desires of the flesh and of the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, just as the others.

Every person deserves the righteous judgment of God because as sinners we are the object of God's just wrath. The question of "how can a loving God send people to hell?" is the wrong question to ask; the question should be "*how can a just God let sinful man live?*" The answer to that question is this: *because God is rich in mercy* (Eph. 2:4ff). Even in His wrath, God remembers mercy (cf. Hab. 3:2).

Coming back to Psalm 90, Moses is asking "who truly understands God's wrath and fears Him appropriately" (v. 11). The answer is nobody can in the fullest sense know the extent of God's wrath against sin. A person, however, will recognize the vast difference between holy God and sinful man and appeal to God for forgiveness.

Application: Have you trusted Christ as your Savior? Have you recognized the immense and just wrath of God towards your sin and turned to Christ (Rom. 10:9)? When you recognize the glory of God, your sinfulness is easy to see. Embrace Christ by faith today.⁴ As a believer, have you forgotten the condition you were in before Christ (2 Pet. 1:9)? As Pastor Gordon Dickson says, are you entertaining yourself with the very sins for which Christ died? If so, you may have forgotten that the immense and totality of God's wrath towards your sin was put on Christ at the cross. Demonstrate your fellowship with Christ by continually confessing your sin (1 John 1:9). In doing so you will evidence your true saving faith.

Not only should you remind yourself of God's righteous wrath against sin, but you should also remember that your life is transient. Every moment must be lived with the recognition that you will soon be gone.

2. Man's Proper Petition (v. 12)

Moses now comes to the verse that most of us know well. It is the pinnacle of this psalm and especially of vv. 7–11. Here, Moses appeals to God for instruction.

"*So teach us to number our days*" — As mentioned earlier, the word in our English translations rendered "teach" is the same word as "know" in v. 11. The idea of this word is that God would cause us to know how frail our lives truly are. So to cause someone to know is to teach. When you "number your days" you are acknowledging your transience (i.e. the brevity of your life). This concept is not foreign to the Psalter:

Psalm 39:4 ⁴ "Lord, make me to know my end, and what *is* the measure of my days, *that* I may know how frail I *am*. ⁵ Indeed, You have made my days *as* handbreadths, and my age *is* as nothing before You; certainly every man at his best state *is* but [vapor].

James states something similar:

James 4:14 whereas you do not know what *will happen* tomorrow. For what *is* your life? It is even a vapor that appears for a little time and then vanishes away.

⁴ Please see the GRACE Gospel presentation on the Calvary Baptist Church website: <https://www.cbcfindlay.org/im-new/>

The short life that man has is a stark contrast to the everlasting God (v. 2). God is eternal; man is not. God knows man's days. He not only numbers the hairs on your head (Matt. 10:30) but He numbers your days (Ps. 90:10). Thus, people who are wise will "redeem the time" (Eph. 5:16; Col. 4:5).

"that we may gain a heart of wisdom" — Moses now gives the purpose behind desiring that the Lord would cause use to know the number of our days. The word *apply* (KJV) is better understood as *gain* (NKJV).⁵ We learn from God to number our days so that we *gain* a heart of wisdom. The phrase "heart of wisdom" hearkens to the call for wisdom in the book of Proverbs:

Proverbs 1:7 The fear of the Lord *is* the beginning of knowledge, *but* fools despise wisdom and instruction.

Proverbs 2:2–6 ² So that you incline your ear to wisdom, *And* apply your heart to understanding; ³ Yes, if you cry out for discernment, *And* lift up your voice for understanding, ⁴ If you seek her as silver, *And* search for her as *for* hidden treasures; ⁵ Then you will understand the fear of the Lord, *And* find the knowledge of God. ⁶ For the Lord gives wisdom; From His mouth *come* knowledge and understanding;

Wisdom comes from God. So in order to gain a heart of wisdom, one must submit to and obey the Lord. One commentator wrote "Wisdom begins and ends with the Lord, as the wise man seeks the Lord in all his ways (cf. Prov. 1:7), and true wisdom begins with the petition for revelation and illumination: 'teach us.'"⁶ A wise person who longs to honor the Lord with his or her life will learn from the Scriptures (and thus from the Lord Himself) to number his/her days and to gain from it a heart of wisdom.

Conclusion

So what about you? Will you be a wise person who recognizes this sinful frailty and submit to the Lord? Will you learn to recognize the immense wrath God has towards unrepentant sinners who refuse His offer of the gospel? Or will you continue to refuse to see the wrath of God against sin and persist in rebellion? The call could not be more clear. You would be wise to remember the immense, righteous wrath of God, and to recognize your transient life. In so doing, you may

⁵ The Hebrew word *בוֹא* means "to enter, to go, to come." The Treasury of Scripture Knowledge notes that the Hebrew could be literally rendered "to cause our hearts to come." The idea that we would "enter/come to a heart of wisdom" seems awkward to us in modern English. It is better to understand the word as "gain" or "receive" which makes sense with the fact that we are being instructed by God and thus should receive the blessing that comes with such divine instruction.

⁶ VanGemeren, *Psalms*, 596.