

Learning from the Psalms: Live Until You Die

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Psalm 39: 4 - 8

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Quite a few of you around here have committed yourself to a weekend Prayer Retreat. Almost all of you are committed to praying every day. But I'll bet you a dollar not one of you has ever set out to pray this particular prayer of the Psalmist, which began our lesson this morning: "LORD, let me know what is the measure of my days; let me know how fleeting and frail is my life span." [v 4] "O God, I'm praying, I'm begging You, please remind me I'm going to die soon."

Why do we not pray this prayer? All the time?

I suppose because we figure we don't need to be reminded any more than our sagging tummies and fading eyesight and receding hairlines are already reminding us every day. (Believe me: I am not bringing up this subject of growing old and dying this morning because I am getting older, or just because the last time I visited my family in Palo Alto the first thing my brother said was, "I think it's official: you now have more salt than pepper up there." Since that observation came from my brother who has few enough hairs left of any color, let the record show, I took it more as a compliment than a putdown. Nor am I bringing this up because of the annoying number of my former classmates, at my last college reunion, who had themselves lost enough hair and enough of their eyesight, that they failed to recognize me...)

But it's healthy to talk about death. It's good for us, good for our children. Psychologist Eric Erikson says, "Healthy children will not fear life if their elders have integrity enough not to fear death." It's a good thing for us to be realistic now and then—especially in a culture which persists in trying to defeat or even deny the reality of death. A huge percentage of the personal efforts and anxieties of a lot of people—not to mention of our federal budget—is spent trying to create the illusion of a safe and secure existence.

And yet our own national rates of depression, anxiety, cynicism, and prescription drug consumption keep soaring even as the safety apparatus keeps expanding. Suicide rates are highest in nations with a larger government presence and comparatively small in developing nations—could it be that economically-advanced nations have forgotten how to deal with the reality of death?

"O God, You have made the span of my life but a few handbreadths. I am but a puff of wind..." Still, some of us are uncomfortable to be reminded that life in this

world is not forever. So how do you like this fantasy of an anonymous author? He writes, "Life is tough. It takes up a lot of your time, all your weekends, and what do you get in the end?...I think the life cycle is all backward. You should die first, get it out of the way. Then you live twenty years in an old-age home. You get kicked out when you're too young. You get a retirement party, then you go to work. You work forty years or so until you're young enough to enjoy your retirement. You go to college; you party until you're ready for high school; you go to grade school; you become a little kid; you play. You have no responsibilities. You become a little baby; you go back into the womb; you spend your nine months floating; then you finish up as a gleam in somebody's eye." (Doesn't sound too bad, right? I'll bet you've known a few people, especially around what's called "mid-life," trying to manage life this way.) But the Psalmist is right: our life is but a few handbreadths, going from birth to death.

I One reason it's healthy for us to pay attention to the reality of our dying is that it helps to clarify the great distinction between a life of trust in God or a life of despair. For you in this church, people of faith, this means that paying attention to the fact that you are going to die is a strong reminder to keep trusting in God.

When we think about our end, it brings into clarity the biggest questions. For all our technological advancements, we cannot guarantee tomorrow. We are all creatures whose span of life depends on factors we cannot control. My life is not my own possession, to dispose of however I please. Life is a gift from Someone else. Or is it?

This is the question, isn't it? Is our existence all one long, losing struggle in the dark, or is each of us resting in the hands of One greater than we?

One of the most effective and passionate seminary professors I learned from was Dr. Ben Campbell Johnson. He had his Ph.D. and all the official credentials, but still he taught as if following Jesus, offering the control of his life each day over to God, was of highest importance. He writes of his own wrestling with this big question—is life, essentially, a matter of despair or a matter of trust?

"The question of my future confronted me at the age of nine when I walked alone across the highway at my Uncle John's near the very spot where my great-grandfather had

been hit by an automobile and fatally injured. Suddenly death became very personal. As I walked across that road, the question impacted itself on me: What will happen to me when I die?

“I could not deal with it. Though the weather was sultry, I shivered as the chill awareness of my own death paralyzed my mind. Often, after that marker day, the reality of my death confronted me. Because I did not then have a religious background, I had no notion of a loving God who would be with me even in death. My only way of coping with this disturbing reality was to put off thinking about it until I grew older; but try as I might, I could not escape the continuing awareness that I am dependent on another for my life and that one day my life as I now know it will end.”

There is no escape. If pondering the question of your own death does not disturb you, thank God! The loving Creator God we have seen in Jesus the Son has created you; God does know you and love you. The hour of your death is not a dark, frightening, unknown to be put off and procrastinated and dreaded. If pondering the question of your own death does disturb you, I encourage you, together with the Holy Spirit, to struggle to keep “going there.” Whether primarily in prayer, or with your mentor, with your pastor, in your safe small group. The living God will meet you in your fear, in your questioning, in your courage. God does not want any of His children living in denial or fear. (Christ has already defeated the power of death. He is not afraid and you do not need to be.) God will meet you at the point of your doubt and your courage.

We children of God can be pretty clever about how we live out our fears, how we live in a false security. Picture two different retirement dinners honoring two professionals whose careers have been long and distinguished. The first man is asked to make a few comments near the close of the evening in his honor. He speaks in a self-effacing way, alluding to some of his dreams for the coming years. He still hopes to be of some use to the company, in a limited way, doing some consulting work. He’s always wanted to try some entrepreneurial activity, so he believes he’ll work on publishing an independent newsletter aimed at those who might gain from his professional experience. He hopes to do some traveling with his wife, but also has in mind a few new endeavors. Finally, he will have some time to learn the scuba diving and growing the prize orchids he never had time for. He was aware he had not been involved in civic affairs as he would have liked to, and now with time on his hands he expects to become active in local politics—perhaps, even, to run for office.

The woman being honored in the second party is also

invited to say a few words. She says she plans to change the course of her life considerably. She says she has one main goal for the coming years: to learn how to die. This means to her, for one thing, fewer possessions. She quotes Cicero: “Can anything be more absurd in the traveler than to increase [her] luggage as she nears her journey’s end?” She says she has some reading to get to. She wants to learn more deeply the practice of prayer. She says she wants to begin each day with words like these: “Forbid, Lord God, that I should be this day be preoccupied with the world’s passing show... Grant instead that I may each day do something to increase my hold upon the unseen world, so that as the end of my earthly life draws ever nearer I may not grow to be a part of these fleeting earthly surroundings, but rather grow more and more conformed to the life of the world to come.”

If you were a friend attending each of these dinners, what would you see? What would you think? The second talk might be met with polite but baffled silence by the corporate attendees. The first retiree might be congratulated for his energy level and his resolve not to “go gentle into that good night.” But if you wanted to learn wisdom from one of these, who would you approach? Would you suspect maybe a bit too much ambition and frenzy in the plans of the first guy—as if maybe all that activity is trying to hide some fear that his number might come up with some desire still unsatisfied? Is all his anticipated action maybe trying to cover up a restless heart which will only find its true rest when it quits looking for peace in yet more and more doing? [Scenario adapted from Gilbert Meilander] (I’d only be guessing, and God knows I have my own blind spots...what do you think?)

(I have begun lately to become aware of my own inability to manage my schedule as a fundamental lack of trust in God. I may not be the only one here this morning who has trouble prioritizing my schedule so that I find a healthy balance? I’m always aware that I should get some exercise more often each week: I don’t have time. I’d like to reorganize and clean out my study. I don’t have time. I’d like to spend more time with Trish—just hanging out. I don’t have time. I would really have liked to spend more time with my children when they were still at home. I guess I just didn’t have time.

But of course this excuse is bogus! I have the same 24 hours each day everyone else has. I have become aware that my pattern of feeling constantly too busy is really a question of not being faithful. It’s hard to feel very responsive to opportunities God may be bringing if I feel my daily or weekly schedule is wall-to-wall booked up. At some level all my trying to do more stuff and be more conscientious is simply my fear wearing its dress-up

clothes. The Spirit has been reminding me lately that the hours of my life are not my own to overbook. (God is not done with me in this project—we're just getting started.) Is God maybe trying to get your attention as to how you utilize the time you are given each day?

All this to say that the hours of our day, the days of our lives, are fleeting and finite. They are scarce, and so they are dear. Each minute is a gift from God. How you handle the gift of time is a spiritual matter, in the end. A question of faithfulness before God. As Paul writes to the Ephesians, "Redeem the time—that is, make good use of every minute. Do not be foolish, but understand and grasp what the will of God is for you."

II "Show me how fleeting and frail my life is, O God." "Remind me I am going to die." Confronting the reality of our death will lead us toward deeper trust in God. But second, It will also bring us a new perspective of gratitude and even joy.

Tony Snow, former Press Secretary to President Bush, died of cancer in 2008. He left some remarkable reflections as to how he confronted his terminal illness. Snow noted that "God loves surprise. We want lives of predictable ease—smooth, even trails...but God likes to go off-road. He provokes us with twists and turns. He places us in predicaments that seem to defy our endurance and comprehension—and yet don't. By His love and grace, we persevere. The challenges that make our...stomachs churn invariably strengthen our faith and grant measures of wisdom and joy we would not experience otherwise.

"Picture yourself in a hospital bed. The fog of anesthesia has begun to wear away. A loved one holds your hand. "It's cancer," the [doctor] announces. The natural reaction is to turn to God and ask Him to serve as cosmic Santa. "Dear God, make it all go away. Make everything simpler."

"But another voice whispers, "You have been called. Your quandary has drawn you closer to God, closer to those you love, closer to the issues that matter...and has dragged into insignificance the banal concerns that occupy our 'normal time.'...there's an inexplicable shudder of excitement, as if a clarifying moment of calamity has swept away everything trivial and tiny and placed before us the challenge of important [things]."

What the world thinks are important things are not what is important. What will be important to you 50, 100 years from today? To savor moments of beauty; to laugh and spend time with friends. To pray. To love and serve one another. To love children. To give back and try to exhaust the gifts God has given you. To cultivate a life of

integrity before God in good times and in bad. To keep the faith. To experience joy.

The world doesn't understand about joy—the capacity to accept whatever comes, grounded in the trust that God is in charge and that in time, God and God's love will triumph. Not to minimize pain and suffering and loss—but to keep the long view that in the End, God will redeem it all. Every last tear will be wiped away. (We are never promised even tomorrow—but in Christ we are promised eternity.)

The world confuses joy for excitement, pleasure, ease, amusement. Excitement and pleasures come and go. Mostly, they go, or we grow bored with them. Joy, one of the gifts of the Holy Spirit, anchors itself deep in our spirit beneath all the ups and downs that life surely brings. God's joy within us endures even the most painful circumstances, and meets them with an unconquerable gladness.

We have the right to speak of joy in the face of death in this way because Jesus and so many of His brave followers have shown us what it is to live, right up to the last breath, out of an unconquerable spirit of deep joy. As Jesus neared the cross His concern was not for Himself but for those around Him. He wept for Jerusalem and for God's people.

He surely took joy in healing the sick, in feeding the hungry, in teaching His disciples, in joking with Mary and Martha and Lazarus and the rest. He took joy in surveying the vineyards and the olive groves and the sunrise over the Sea of Galilee. We know Jesus prayed and prayed, anchoring His experience of the Father deep into His own spirit. Jesus then trusted even during His final fatal days in Jerusalem, even confronting His own agonizing death, that the heavenly Father would somehow redeem His suffering. He did not release Jesus from the horrible suffering—Jesus still had the scars when He appeared to Thomas and the others just after that first Easter morning—but God raised Him up again into life and glory and joy. We are told Jesus "endured the cross for the sake of the joy on the other side of it" [Hebrews 12:2] His deep joy was able to sustain Him through the very worst.

Some of His followers—some of His brothers and sisters whom we have known and loved—have borne beautiful witness to us as they have drifted into the everlasting arms not in resignation or despair, but full of hope and peace—even full of joy. They have taught us what it is to live in His joy even as they confronted and crossed over the brink of death.

But the Psalmist is reminding us: we don't have to wait

until our frailties grow worse or until the inevitable curtain comes down. “O LORD, show me how fleeting my life is.” This morning, right now, we can face up to the certainty of death and the beauty of life, knowing that the God who has given life and overcome death is our Lord.

Don't be afraid to think about dying. Facing up to your own death may well open you to the Spirit of God in a new way. Don't be afraid to talk about dying, as appropriate, with your children or grand-children. Make good use of, and be faithful with, every minute God has entrusted to you. Do not try to fill with your doing what God alone can fill with His being. Be filled with the Spirit of God until His joy allows you to confront everything life throws at you with a sense of gratitude and confidence. God can redeem even the most painful things into an experience of richness and meaning.

(Again, in the words of Tony Snow) “We don't know much, but we do know this: no matter where we are, no matter what we do, no matter how bleak or frightening our prospects, each and every one of us who trusts in Him lies, each and every day, in the same safe and impregnable place: the hollow of God's hand.”

Psalm 39:4-7

O Lord, let me know my end, and what is the measure of my days; let me know how fleeting my life is. You have made my days a few handbreadths, and my lifetime is as nothing in your sight. Surely everyone stands as a mere breath—a puff of wind.

Surely everyone goes about like a shadow. Surely for nothing they are in turmoil; they heap up, and do not know who will gather when they're gone. And now, O Lord, what do I wait for? My hope is in You.