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# Numbering our Days

## Reflections upon arriving at age 70

I can remember as a child listening to sermons, reading my Bible, or listening to adults teach in Sunday School that we need to remember God's Word that "The days of our years are threescore years and ten" (Psalm 90:10; KJV). I seldom remember the rest of the verse (still reading from the KJV) "if by reason of strength they be fourscore years, yet is their strength labour and sorrow; for it is soon cut off, and we fly away." Today, in this last week of August 2018 - after having been born August 3, 1948 - I find myself remembering the verse and reflecting on it.

I no longer read the KJV - it seems so antiquated, so inapplicable to my life in today's world. I prefer newer translations, the NIV or NASB. Or, better still, a personal translation from a scholarly commentator on a selected text of Scripture. For example, John Goldingay, from his commentary on the *Psalms*:

Psalm 90

"Plea. Moses, Gods man.

- 1 My Lord, you were a shelter; you were ours, generation after generation.
- 2 Before mountains were birthed and you brought forth earth and world, From age to age, you were there, God.
- 3 You would turn mortals to crushing; you said, "Turn, you people!"
- 4 Because a thousand years in your eyes were like a day, Yesterday when it passes, or a watch in the night.
- 5 You swept them away in sleep, though in the morning they could be like grass that can renew itself.
- 6 In the morning it can flourish and renew itself; by evening it can wither and dry up.
- 7 Because we are spent through your anger, through your fury we have been overwhelmed.
- 8 You put our wayward acts in front of you, our youthful deeds in the light of your face.
- 9 Because all our days have passed under your wrath, we have spent our years as moaning.

- 10 The days of our years in themselves are seventy years, or, with strength, eighty years. But their boisterousness has been toil and trouble, because it has passed quickly and we have flown.
- 11 Who acknowledges the force of your anger and in accordance with reverence for you, your wrath?
- 12 In counting our days, so make us acknowledge it, in order that we may acquire [13] a wise mind.
- 13 Turn, Yhwh, how long?—relent over your servants.
- 14 Fill us in the morning with your commitment, so that we may resound and rejoice all our days.
- 15 Make us rejoice in accordance with the days you have afflicted us, the years we have seen evil.
- 16 May your action be seen by your servants, your majesty for their descendants.
- 17 May the delights of my Lord come, our God, for us. Establish the work of our hands for us, yes, the work of our hands—establish it.”
- from "Psalms : Volume 3 (Baker Commentary on the Old Testament Wisdom and Psalms): Psalms 90-150" by John Goldingay

My father died at 48, my mother years later. Both had been missionaries all the days of their lives, living and working in remote African locations. On the single English news TV we receive in the jungle of Peru I increasingly read about well-known people, actors, singers, politicians, friends a decade younger or older than me, dying. How many years are allotted to me? I do not know. Is this Psalm reminding me, reminding us, that God has given us more or less seventy or eighty years? It would seem obvious from this psalm; though Genesis 6:3-8 tells us that when God saw the wickedness of humans he was “grieved”, and limited our life-span to 120 years - the length of Moses’ life (Deuteronomy 34:7). Today, while life-spans differ by regions and countries and access to modern health care, the average mortality world-wide is 71.5 years.

An alternative - and, given the context of this psalm is that the “seventy years, or, with strength, eighty” in Psalm 90:10 is that the author is using the numbers like other “parallel numbers...[in the Bible], “three” and “four” in Amos 1-2, and “six” and “seven” in Job 5:19 and Prov. 16-19” [Goldingay]. The contrast is between the “everlasting to everlasting” of God [v.2], or “a thousand years in your sight are like a day” [v. 4] on the one hand, and our being “swept away in the sleep of death[v. 5]; like the green of “the new grass of the morning [v. 5b-6a] which by nightfall “is dry and withered” [v. 6]. Our days last a fraction of a nanosecond in comparison to the everlasting Creator, without beginning or end.

The point of Psalm 90 is not the length of our days but the depth of wisdom on our heart. God knows our heart, he is grieved by our thoughts and behaviors; our lives are filled with distress, with God’s judgment. Such was the experience of Israel, slaves in Egypt before being

liberated under the prophetic leadership of Moses. While he was on the mountain of God receiving the language of the covenant from Yahweh, the people were pleading to return to the idolatry and immorality of their Egyptian slave-masters. They demanding a king like the nations, rejecting Yahweh their liberator and covenant-maker as King. They were seduced again and again by the idols and powers of the nations, only to fall again into slavery. The “seventy” or “eighty” days of their lives were bitter with trouble and affliction. Psalm 90 is, above all, a “suffering psalm”, ending with a prayer for God’s compassion, unfailing love, splendor and favor. Psalm 90 is not about the length of our life, it is about the character of our life, a plea for wisdom.