

Teach Us to Count Our Days

Psalm 90

Agnes W. Norfleet

Bryn Mawr Presbyterian Church, Bryn Mawr, Pennsylvania

Every once in a while we come across some fragment of a script from another era, and it is almost haunting how relevant it feels in the present day. The French philosopher Voltaire had a wit and wisdom that transcends his moment as a figure of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment. He posed an intriguing question in the form of a riddle that I believe preoccupies much of our consciousness today.

Voltaire asked, “Of all the things in the world, what is the longest and the shortest, the swiftest and the slowest, the most divisible and the most extended, the most neglected and the most regretted, without which nothing can be done, which devours all that is little and ennobles all that is great?” And then he gave the simple answer: “Time.”¹

We are well acquainted with the paradox of time. If we are waiting in a long line, anxious for the doctor to call with test results, or yearning for a college acceptance letter to arrive in the mail, then the passage of time lasts way too long. If we are rushing to get somewhere, have an unreasonably lengthy to-do list, or find ourselves up against a tight deadline, then time speeds by and comes up short. If we expand our musings regarding the passage of time from the personal to more general concerns about things like the upcoming presidential election, the plight of the largest refugee crises in history, or global warming, then sheer panic can erupt over the times we are in. We yearn for time to give us a chance to transform, heal, repair, rebuild, and open upon a brighter tomorrow. Depending on our momentary perspective, time is both the longest and the shortest, the swiftest and the slowest, the most neglected and the most regretted indeed.

I typed Time Management as a subject into the Amazon Books search engine, and over 50,000 titles can be found, including a whole section on time management for kids. Long gone are the days, it would appear, when children spend hours outdoors enjoying the good earth, making mud pies and feeding birds, climbing trees and taking flight in their imaginations. In 1979 a child was deemed ready for the first grade if she were six years old, had two to five permanent teeth, could tell a school crossing guard her address, could stand on one foot with her eyes closed for five to ten seconds, could ride a small two-wheel bicycle, could travel alone four blocks to a friend’s house, and could count eight to ten pennies correctly. Forty years later, a checklist for the first grade in one public school includes: the ability to identify and write numbers to 100, count by 2’s to 20 and by 5’s to 100, interpret and fill in data on a graph, read all kindergarten-level sight words, be able to read books with ten words per page, and form complete sentences on paper using phonetic spelling.² No wonder there is a market targeting time management books for children.

And sadly, during the recent Christmas shopping season, we learned that if you want one of those books the very next day, and I’m guilty of checking that box, we can put peoples’ lives at risk because of the pressure placed on subcontracted truck

drivers to meet our need for speed. What did Voltaire say? Time “devours all that is little,” and can ennoble “all that is great.”

In this season of high anxiety about both the urgent, quickly passing of hours and the slow moving length of days, how can we ennoble the great gift of time itself? The Psalmist gives answer, as if praying on our behalf in this moment of history, by asking God, “So teach us to count our days that we may gain a wise heart” (vs 12).

Psalm 90 puts our worry about the passing of time in a theological context that may be more beneficial than any book on time management. The psalm begins with strong affirmations about God, the Creator who transcends time, proclaiming, “Lord, you have been our dwelling place in all generations... from everlasting to everlasting you are God” (vs 1-2). It culminates declaring ageless and comforting attributes to describe God who steps out of eternity to enter the finite existence of humankind with *compassion, steadfast love, glorious power* and *favor* (vs 13-17).

In the intervening verses, the psalmist is utterly realistic about the human experience of time passing by. Our years seem fleeting; they are quickly swept away. We feel guilty and regretful about how we have spent our days when they are soon gone, and we wonder if our limitations are the result of God’s displeasure and wrath (vs 5-11). When the human lifespan is set upon the stage of God’s everlasting life, we can feel very small and insignificant. However, our hastening years still matter a great deal, held as they are within the eternity of God’s steadfast love. The very fact that we live within God’s grand drama is precisely what gives our transitory nature meaning and significance.

As Dorothy Bass has written,

The psalm brings these two kinds of time—our short sigh and God’s mountainous eternity—together. At the psalm’s center are our days, particular days, days that are of a finite and finally knowable quantity, like the actual days we pass from birth to death... This psalm, which strips us of all delusions about our duration and durability, begins nonetheless in confidence. “Lord, you have been our dwelling place in all generations.” This psalm is not a cry of cosmic homelessness but an appeal that arises from within a dwelling place more enduring than the mountains, more ancient than the world itself.”³

The movement of the psalm itself encourages this confidence from its opening affirmation about the eternal, everlasting nature of God through the stark acknowledgement of human finitude and limitations to its culminating prayer for practical wisdom about how to gain *a wise heart* (vs 12). According to Walter Brueggemann, *a wise heart* is one that discerns the purposes of God; *a wise heart* recognizes that human beings have power, freedom and responsibility; and *a wise heart* employs these attributes in trust and obedience to the living God.⁴

God’s dwelling place is not about geography but about relationship, and the psalmist’s closing petitions show us how to number our days with wisdom born of that relationship: we remember God has *compassion* for us; God satisfies us *in the morning with steadfast love*; God fills our days with *gladness* greater than any affliction we have endured; God’s *good work and glorious power* are made known to us; and God’s *favor* rests upon us. Finally, the great God of creation who is beyond

all time, cares “to prosper for us the work of our hands, to prosper the work of our hands” (vs 17). God’s eternal presence affects and influences the daily work of our hands. How awesome is that!

Twenty years ago on the eve of the millennium, as the clock ticked down and the year readied to turn from 1999 to 2000, my family buried a time capsule. It was a Christmas gift from friends who were spending the first New Year’s Eve with us in a brand new mountain cottage that our family built on property inherited from my mother. The time capsule was a two-foot long PCV pipe with one open end that could be secured with a tightly fitting top, a metal ring, and screws. Our children were six and four years old. Between Christmas and New Year’s, we collected some things to bury under the deck, not to be opened for some time to come.

One of the friends who gave us the time capsule just turned eighty, so we decided to dig it up this past New Year’s as we celebrated her four-score years and the twentieth anniversary of the house. Each of us remembered some of what we had put in the time capsule, but none of us remembered everything. It came up out of the ground and I said, “I don’t remember that it was covered with all those brightly colored stickers,” and our younger son who was just four and a half when we buried it said, “That’s about all I remember.”

We delighted in opening the time capsule. It included the Christmas Eve bulletin and a newsletter from our church; my husband’s architectural drawings of the mountain house; a 1996 pin of Atlanta’s centennial Olympics, since we lived in Atlanta at the time; a 33-cent postage stamp—now clearly outdated; the January 1st, 2000 *Newsweek* magazine with a cover cartoon of Charlie Brown saying “Good Grief” at his retirement after 50 years. Both of our sons had put in a picture they had drawn and a Pokeman card, and the six-year-old had included a little suitcase ID tag with his name and address proudly printed by hand. There were photographs of our friends who gave us the time capsule and pictures of our family in front of the cottage under construction. There was a little note that said, “This time capsule was put together by James, Winston, Agnes, Larry, Libba and Suzanne on New Year’s Eve, 1999. Today we went on a hike, worked a puzzle, went to the playground, worked a puzzle, had a good time, worked a puzzle, and buried this time capsule on New Year’s Day, 2000.”

Over these twenty years, those little boys have grown to young men who are making their way in this world largely on their own. Libba and Suzanne retired and left Atlanta to live not far from our cottage in the western North Carolina mountains. Larry and I have moved a couple of times, have been called to new work, and frankly, look about twenty years older! When we dug up the time capsule, apart from the stuff that we surfaced and examined through faulty memories and curiosity, the salient reminder that came to light for me was this: Time marches on and we grow older, we accomplish much, make mistakes and endure terrible things, but the most enduring qualities of life transcend the hours and the days—love, family, friendship, laughter, hopes and dreams and aspirations, faith and faithfulness. A wise heart remembers the Giver of all these good gifts.

Now, I know that most of life is not lived in a vacation home surrounded by family and friends enjoying the recollection of a really fun holiday twenty years ago. But we still have ample opportunity amid our fleeting years, in weekly worship and daily devotion, to be grateful, to be grateful that the daily work of our hands matters to the

God who has been our dwelling place since before those mountains were brought forth.

Notes

1 Marcel Danesi, *The Puzzle Instinct* (Bloomington: Indiana State University Press, 2002), 42.

2 Greg Lukianoff and Jonathan Haidt, *The Coddling of the American Mind* (New York: Penguin Press, 2018), 186.

3 Dorothy C. Bass, *Receiving the Day: Christian Practices for Opening the Gift of Time* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2000), 121.

4 Walter Brueggemann, *The Message of the Psalms* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1984) 111.