



Number our days: A reflection on Psalm 90, a Moses Psalm

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*Teach us to number our days,
that we may gain a heart of wisdom.*
Psalm 90:12 (NIV)

I am convinced that this phrase "number our days" means more than assigning a numerical value to our day. I also think it is more than adding another day towards our next birthday. Why am I convinced? The outcome of numbering our days is gaining a heart of wisdom, not a numerical age.

I am also convinced that is not about productiveness. Many of us like to look back at each day and see what we have achieved. We feel proud we have achieved an outcome towards a project. I feel pleased when my friend Alison says to me, "you are such a productive person." Yet I know that I can do activities and make items, but these do not produce in me a heart of wisdom.

"Numbering our days" seems to be something we need to be taught; at least here, Moses asks God to teach him to "number his days," which means we probably need to do that too. I am hoping in this season, when many are dying all around our world, I learn something more about what it means to "number our days."

Longevity is something after which many have sought. We have all been advised of the advantages of the Mediterranean diet, but when we saw COVID-19 take on Italy, all those dietary advantages seemed to fade as the virus spread rapidly. Worldwide, and particularly in the West, we have forgotten the devastation of infectious diseases.

This idea of time has especially caught my attention just now. I am reading on Hinduism for my PhD. Hinduism takes a circular view of time, yet, strangely enough, as writers give their understanding of how the Hindu religion developed, they take a

linear view of time. It seems rather anachronistic to me.

Moses takes a linear view of time as he begins this psalm saying, "The Lord God has been our dwelling place through all generations."(v.1) Was this psalm written before or after the building of the Tabernacle, a physical dwelling place for God? Moses is not talking about a dwelling place *for* God but instead says God had been the dwelling place *for* his people. He does not mention Canaan, the Promised Land. This statement of Moses includes both space and time. God was their dwelling place, through all generations.

I guess Moses was between 80 and 120 years old when he wrote this psalm. Moses knew about death — he had been saved from death by his mother, he had killed an Egyptian then ran to the desert to protect his own life, he had seen the death of all the firstborn in Egypt at the final plague, and he saw Pharaoh and his army covered in the watery grave of the Red Sea. Now in the desert wanderings, Moses watched death after death of those unbelieving people. Perhaps, he already knew he must face his own death before the Israelites entered the Promised Land.

In my isolation in semi-rural Australia, I am with my mother who is about to turn 80. I am wondering what her 80th birthday will look like. As Australia's number of cases of COVID-19 grow, I have wondered if she will see this 80th birthday. It has been a special privilege to "number our days." We have talked about many things, both serious and funny, but I am glad I am here and can be with her in these days.

Already this year, I have "counted my days" to 14, twice. My travel to Singapore and India before my return to Australia had me counting. Neither



were the compulsory isolations, but having public health training, I was making sure I knew who I might need to contact if I developed symptoms. What a relief it was as I counted off that final 14th day twice.

I sit in my warm office looking out at the cold rain landing on a red maple tree, but I often remember other parts of the world. Many of my colleagues are facing the onslaught of COVID-19 with limited resources. Many of their patients do not make it to 70 years of age at the best of times. My colleagues are counting the days until the peak of the virus hits while I am counting those days until the curve flattens. How thankful I am that prayers, and the Holy Spirit, are not contained by social distancing and lockdowns.

Moses finishes this psalm by praying in verses 13 to 17. He asks, "Relent Lord, how long . . .," a prayer many other prophets and ordinary people have prayed. Moses asks for five things. These items have provided me with prompts on what to pray for his people while I am limited to this space in Australia.

- **Lord, have compassion on your people.** This virus is no respecter of people, but Lord have compassion on your creation.
- **May your people be satisfied with your love each morning.** As your people arise this

morning, fill them with your love. They may face many difficult decisions; may they be filled with your love to enable them to care for others.

- **Make us glad for the days you have given us.** Right now, it is easy to think of the losses: YLL (years of life lost), financial, freedoms, and hunger. Make us all glad for each day you have given us.
- **May your deeds be shown to your people.** Grant your people wisdom in making decisions, and may Your Hand be visible in their situations. May those who do not yet acknowledge you also see Your Hand at work.
- **Maybe your favour rest on your people and establish the work they do.** Father, some of your people are at the frontline caring for those sick with COVID-19, tracing contacts and testing cases; some are entering data into computers to track epidemiological curves and advise governments; some are educating and making hand sanitizer; some are planning for the recovery phase; and others are continuing routine work like antenatal checks. Father, show your favour and establish the work of their hands.

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