

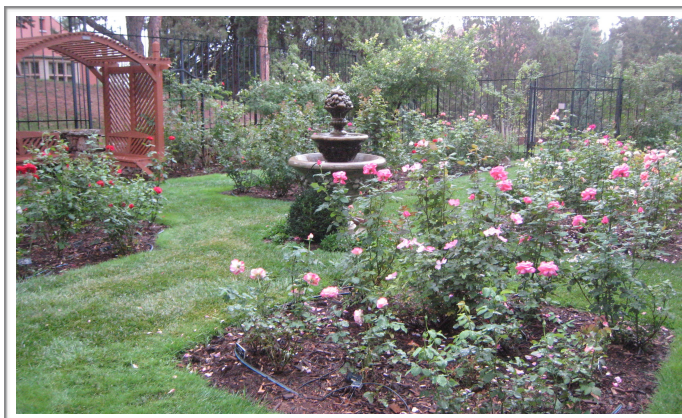


TAMEONTA

Teach Us To Number Our Days: Reflections on Death and Turning Forty

By Mark Walker

"The years of our life are seventy, or even by reason of strength eighty; yet their span is but toil and trouble; they are soon gone, and we fly away...So teach us to number our days that we may get a heart of wisdom...Let the favor of the Lord our God be upon us, and establish the work of our hands upon us; yes, establish the work of our hands!" (Psalm 90:9-10, 12, 17 ESV)



Memorial rose garden at the author's spiritual retreat.

(This article is dedicated to the memory of my friend and brother in Christ, Jason Back: April 3, 1976 - March 31, 2017. Until we meet again.)

I love the rose garden on the grounds of the ministry where I go for spiritual retreat each year around my birthday. The huge property is breathtakingly beautiful - a fitting place for rest, refreshment, and quiet communion with God. But for me, the rose garden is the heart of the place. Between beds of

fragrant, multicolored rose bushes run grass paths in the shape of a cross. At the center of the cross a fountain of clear water flows.

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I love to walk along the cross-shaped paths and look at the roses. Below each plant, a sign stuck in the dirt gives the name of that particular variety of rose. Next to these signs, under most of the rose bushes, stand small memorial plaques. These roses were planted in remembrance of the dead. Most of the plaques have names on them - husbands and wives, brothers and sisters, sons and daughters, beloved grandchildren. Many have dates, too. Here is a grandmother who died after eighty years of faithfully serving Christ. There a son who died at twenty-four - I wonder how. A child whose life was measured in days, another who survived

for mere hours; their roses have outlived them, but their names are here. On one plaque a grieving family has written, "Our Hearts Broke." I go to the garden, I look at the names and the roses that remember them. And I think about death.

Last fall in the garden I was meditating on turning forty. I thought of my first twenty-six years living in sin, of my walk with Christ over the last fourteen years, and of the ministry God has given me to do in the time I have left. I wondered how many more years I might have in this world. Forty? Thirty? Ten? Fewer? Can I possibly accomplish anything of value for the kingdom of God in such a brief time? How much time have I wasted in sin and pointless amusements? Will I faithfully fulfill my ministry calling in the days to come? Will God's people remember me when I am gone? Will I have a memorial rose in the garden, and what will my plaque say?

"One day we wake up and realize that a huge chunk of our lives has been spent on the yard, in the chow hall, on the weight pile, in the rack. Was it completely wasted? Did it mean anything, or did it just evaporate like fog when the sun rises?"

I suspect many of you have had similar thoughts. In prison we can be very aware of time even as it slips away from us with surprising speed. One day we wake up and realize that a huge chunk of our lives has been spent on the yard, in the chow hall, on the weight pile, in the rack. Was it completely wasted? Did it mean anything, or did it just evaporate like fog when the sun rises? "What is your life? For you are a mist that appears for a little time and then vanishes" (Jam. 4:14).

As disciples of Jesus, particularly if we sense God calling us to ministry, this feeling can be particularly painful. We know that God has called us to do something for His

kingdom - why are we still stuck in prison? Will we ever get out so we can pursue God's calling on our lives on the outside? If we do, how much time will we have left? If we live the rest of our lives on the inside, can we do anything worthwhile for Christ? The ticking of life's clock can become very loud in our ears.

As I contemplated these things in the rose garden, the Lord brought Psalm 90 to mind. It is comforting to think that Moses, one of the greatest leaders in the history of God's people, faced some of these same questions about his own weakness, sinfulness, and mortality. As fellow sinful mortals standing before the face of an eternal and holy God, we need to see the answers that Moses found.

Psalm 90 is the only Psalm explicitly attributed to Moses (Reardon 2000, 177). I cannot think of a greater leader of the people of God in the Old Testament. Only David, and perhaps Joshua, really come close in terms of leadership accomplishments. Moses led the people of Israel out of slavery in Egypt and witnessed God's mighty hand and outstretched arm in the plagues, in the pillar of fire, as the people walked through the parted sea on dry land. He brought them through the wilderness, received God's covenant law for them at Mount Sinai, and led them to the very edge of the promised land (Augustine 2002, 303). If any Old Testament leader could look back at his ministry and, in spite of his mistakes, be satisfied in the work he had accomplished on God's behalf, it would be Moses.

But that is not what we find in his Psalm. Instead, Moses meditates on the eternity of God (vs. 1-2). Before this everlasting, unchanging God, human beings seem to spring up and disappear overnight (vs. 3-6; cf. 2 Pet. 3:8; Augustine 2002, 304-306; Ross 2016, 28-32; Delitzsch n.d., 52-53). "They are like a dream, like grass that is renewed in the morning: in the morning it flourishes and is renewed; in the evening it fades and withers" (vs. 5-6; Alexander 1975, 380). In the face of God's judgment on the wilderness generation (Num. 14:26-38), Moses also acknowledges that the fleeting and difficult nature of our lives is the result of human sinfulness before a holy God (vs. 7-11; Alexander 1975, 381; Bonar 1978, 272; Reardon 2000, 177; Augustine 2002, 307; Ross 2016, 26-27, 32-35; Spurgeon n.d., 62-63; Gaebelein 1939, 343; Delitzsch n.d., 56). "You have set our iniquities before you, our secret sins in the light of your presence. For all our days pass away under your wrath; we bring our years to an end like a sigh" (vs. 8-9). Even those who belong to God must still live and work in a fallen, broken world that groans under the weight of His righteous wrath against sin (Rom. 1:18, 8:20-23; Gaebelein 1939, 344-345). "The years of our life are seventy, or even by reason of strength eighty; yet their span is but toil and trouble; they are soon gone, and we fly away" (v. 10; cf. Calvin 2009, 469-471). We live but a moment, our God is eternal; we are sinful, our God is holy (Reardon 2000, 177-178). Even if we accomplish as much as Moses did, what significance can our lives possibly have in service to such a God?

In light of this troubling question, Moses makes four requests of God (vs. 12-17). Those of us who seek to serve the Lord in ministry would do well to pray as Moses did. First, that God would give us wisdom by teaching us to know and feel how short and fleeting our lives are (v. 12; Alexander 1975, 382; Ross 2016, 36-37; Piper 2016; Fintelman 2016, 229; Delitzsch n.d., 57-58; Calvin 2009, 473). Second, that He would mercifully come to us and enable us to find satisfaction and joy in His love while we do live (vs. 13-15; Augustine 2002, 312-313; Ross 2016, 38-39). Third, that He would graciously allow us - and those who come after us - a glimpse of His great work and power (v. 16; Ross 2016, 39). And finally that God, by His unmerited favor, would cause the brief and feeble work we perform today in His service to endure and bear eternal fruit for His glory (v. 17; cf. John 15:16; Alexander 1975, 383; Reardon 2000, 177-178; Ross 2016, 39-40; Spurgeon n.d., 66; Calvin 2009, 476-477).

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If God will grant us these four things, then no matter where or how long we live, our lives will be filled with joy, purpose, meaning, and everlasting significance. "Here is the dramatic reversal, for to live in the pleasure of God means that [our] labor is not in vain" (Ross 2016, 40; cf. Eph. 5:15-17). In the morning we will wisely set our hand to the work God has given us, knowing that our time is short (Calvin 2009, 473-474). And in the evening, when we fade and wither like the grass, we will be able to depart in peace and go to be with Christ (Phil. 1:23; 2 Tim. 4:6-8).

In the garden, among the plaques and the roses, I think about my short life and about my coming death. But I also think about resurrection. I think about life eternal in the presence of Jesus, our Lord

and precious Savior, who rose victorious over the grave and defeated death itself for us. I stand in front of the fountain of water flowing from the center of the cross, and I remember the words of Revelation:

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away."

And he who was seated on the throne said, "Behold, I am making all things new"...And he said to me, "It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. To the thirsty I will give from the spring of the water of life without payment..."

Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb through the middle of the street of the city; also, on either side of the river, the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, yielding its fruit each month...No longer will there be anything accursed, but the throne of God and of the Lamb will be in it, and his servants will worship him. They will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads. And night will be no more. They will need no light of lamp or sun, for the Lord God will be their light, and they will reign forever and ever. (Rev. 21:1-6; 22:1-5)

"When we fade from this world we will not be gone or forgotten. One day we will all rise together in glory because of what He has done, never to suffer or die or be separated from each other again."

Wherever we are, however long we live, whatever our ministry successes or struggles, we will join that 80-year-old grandmother and that 24-hour-old child in the new heavens and the new earth, and spend eternity together in the presence of God and of the Lamb. Death for us is not the end - it is the beginning. "There is a morning coming when joy everlasting begins, when death is no more, when all tears will be wiped away" (Gaebelin 1939, 346). We will receive our Lord's commendation for our feeble but faithful service, and will have all eternity to serve, worship, and enjoy Him (Matt. 25:19-23). When we fade from this world we will not be gone or forgotten. One day we will all rise

together in glory because of what He has done, never to suffer or die or be separated from each other again. That is the promise of the rose garden. That is the promise of the fountain standing at the center of the cross. Until then, may God give us the wisdom to number our days. And may He, in His great mercy and grace, establish the brief work of our hands.

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Faint Yet Pursuing

By Coventry Patmore (1823-1896)

Heroic Good, target for which the young
 Dream in their dreams that every bow is strung,
 And, missing, sigh
 Unfruitful, or as disbelievers die,
 Thee having miss'd, I will not so revolt,
 But lowlier shoot my bolt,
 And lowlier still, if still I may not reach,
 And my proud stomach teach
 That less than highest is good, and may be high.
 An even walk in life's uneven way,
 Though to have dreamt of flight and not to fly
 Be strange and sad,
 Is not a boon that's given to all who pray.
 If this I had
 I'd envy none!
 Nay, trod I straight for one
 Year, month or week,
 Should Heaven withdraw, and Satan me amerce
 Of power and joy, still would I seek
 Another victory with a like reverse;

Because the good of victory does not die,
 As does the failure's curse,
 And what we have to gain
 Is, not one battle, but a weary life's campaign.
 Yet meaner lot being sent
 Should more than me content;
 Yea, if I lie
 Among vile shards, though born for silver wings,
 In the strong flight and feathers gold
 Of whatsoever heavenward mounts and sings
 I must by admiration so comply
 That there I should my own delight behold.
 Yea, though I sin each day times seven,
 And dare not lift the fearfulest eyes to Heaven,
 Thanks must I give
 Because that seven times are not eight or nine,
 And that my darkness is all mine,
 And that I live
 Within this oak-shade one more minute even,
 Hearing the winds their Maker magnify.

Cecil, Lord David, ed. 1940. *The Oxford Book of Christian Verse*. London: Oxford University Press. 447-48.

My New Walk

by Daniel Lyons

Father, now that I see how dark the world is,
how can I see?

Follow Me.

Father, how can I follow You if I can't see You?

I am the Light.

Father, I cannot see where I am going.

Just walk, trust and have faith in Me.

Father, I cannot even see beyond my next step.

I will make your path straight.

Father, what if I get lost?

I will guide you.

Father, what if I stumble and fall?

I will pick you up.

Father, what if I grow weak?

I will give you strength.

Father, what if I get sick?

I will heal you.

Father, what if I can't walk?

I will carry you.

But Father - I am scared.

Take courage and trust in Me.

Father, what if I make a mistake?

I will forgive and have mercy on you.

But Father - I do not know what I am doing.

Rely not on your own understanding.

Ministry Updates

•**What does "Tameonta" mean?** We get this question so frequently that we have decided to include the answer in every issue from now on! The name is a transliteration of a Greek phrase found in 1 Cor. 1:28 which means "things that are not." Read 1 Cor. 1:26-31 for a better understanding of why we selected this name for our newsletter.

•**Connecting Prison Churches to God's Global Mission:** God has burdened our hearts at The Cell Church to find new ways to connect our brothers and sisters in prison to God's global mission to spread the gospel of Christ and expand His kingdom among every tribe, tongue, people, and nation on earth. One of the ways we will try to do this is by sharing updates and prayer requests from missionaries who have come into contact with our ministry. Enclosed with this newsletter are updates on the missionaries we introduced last time - Brad and Kathy Koenig. We are also pleased to introduce you to Rob and Heather Blanks. They spent many years in Mozambique, where Rob trained indigenous pastors at the Maputo Biblical and Theological Seminary. Rob and Heather are now working with Lancaster Bible

College to educate indigenous pastors in Uganda. Please take some time to pray for the Koenigs and the Blanks and their ministries!

- **A Vision for The Cell Church on the Streets:** For some time now, Mark and his mentor Kenny have been praying about the possibility of planting a transitional church for parolees and others being released from prison. The vision is that the church would be an approved DOC re-entry program, which would allow any parolee to begin attending immediately upon release without special permission, and to have contact with the other parolees at the services. It would also be a great place for those of you in whom God is developing ministry gifts to continue to exercise those gifts in service to others. Finally, the church would be a place where local churches in the community could come and witness the character and gifting of paroled leaders, so that they might be more comfortable opening up ministry roles in their churches to former prisoners. With this in mind, Mark has recently started a Bible study in his home for parolees. Please join us in

praying that God would provide everything necessary for this vision to become a reality, if it is from Him.

- **Mark and Q at the Prayer for Prisoners Banquet:** For some time Q and his father have been involved in the ministry of Prayer for Prisoners, and they recently invited Mark to attend the ministry's annual fundraising banquet in Colorado Springs, which was hosted by Focus on the Family. It was a great evening of worship, of hearing God's word, and of thanking God for what He has done and will do through the work of Prayer for Prisoners. One of the highlights of the evening for us was seeing Phil Rodriguez, a good friend of The Cell Church and one of our published authors and artists, stand before the assembled volunteers to share what God had done in his life and to encourage them in their ministries. It was the first opportunity for us to meet Phil face to face, to hear what God is doing through him, and to pray for him as he continues to settle back into society and find his place in ministry. We are grateful to God for His grace toward Phil and us, and we pray that we might see many more of you out here soon, glorifying God for His mercy in your lives! May the Lord continue to bless and provide for the ministry of Prayer for Prisoners!
- **New Prison Visitation Shuttle Service:** Recently a brother named Henry Price contacted our ministry to let us know that he was starting a new shuttle service to help the family members of prisoners get to the facilities to visit their loved ones. If your family is in need of transportation for visiting, they can contact Up From Ashes Transit LLC, 3700 Quebec St. Unit 100, Denver, CO 80207, 720-595-7069, www.ufatransit.com. Brother Henry can be reached at henry@ufatransit.com. Please pray that the Lord would provide the resources needed for this new service!
- **Mark Interviewed for "Redemptive Revolution" Podcast:** Recently I had the privilege of being interviewed by Nick Arnold for his *Redemptive Revolution* podcast. *Redemptive Revolution* is a ministry created to provide hope, encouragement, and resources for the formerly incarcerated. I was honored to be able to talk to Nick about the ministry of The Cell Church, and about the Lord's grace during my own journey through prison and back into the community. Our thanks and gratitude go to Nick for kindly taking some time to talk about this ministry, and to the Lord for providing such a great opportunity to share what He is doing in the prison churches!

Letters from the Church

We at The Cell Church enjoy printing excerpts from prisoners' letters in this section so that we can share encouraging stories of the work the Lord is doing in the prisons, answers to prayer that have been received, and thanks for the ministry of our volunteers. If you write to us and don't mind us sharing parts of your letters in Tameonta, please mention that when you write. We won't share anything private that you tell us! To all the imprisoned ministers we serve - thank you so much for all you do! You are the hands and feet of our Lord in the prisons, and we are honored and grateful to have the opportunity to support and encourage you!