

Ancient Wisdom for Dark Days

Psalm 90; 2 Corinthians 6:1-10

“So teach us to number our days that we may get a heart of wisdom.”

Introduction: New Years always brings a sense of new hope, a fresh perspective, and an opportunity to start over. Most years this brings a desire to exercise more, eat better, or create some other new habit that has been lacking. But somehow, this year, that does not seem to be something that will satisfy. Most of us were hoping that the turn of the calendar would bring a return to normalcy, but instead we perhaps have less clarity than we did 9 months ago as we approach a year of this global pandemic. However, this break in the school year and start of a new semester allows us to reflect on the past but also gear up for the future. These last months felt a little like having a newborn in our house: we are too tired to plan for the months ahead, or not having enough clarity to actually know what to plan for. So today we don't look at the New Year as a church family from a programmatic view, but through the lens of Biblical principle: *how should we THINK and LIVE in the months/years to come.*

We have seen God's hand work the last year, but can also readily admit that in our lifetime, this has been one of the most surreal and difficult times we've faced. We are **tired**, running hard to simply stay in the same place (like trying to swim up river). We are **frustrated**, since we cannot plan like normal and have lost a sense of control. Some are **depressed**, mired in a cloud of sadness that we cannot even put into words. We are **angry**, pointing our angst at circumstances, or the government, leaders, or even God Himself. Some are **afraid**, that change is coming, death is possible, and things may not go back to normal.

This has caused many adverse reactions. Some have **run away or shut down**, thinking it better somewhere else or simply to hole up until it's all over. Some have looked to **place blame** on someone, anyone for their angst. Some have simply **isolated**, which has led to discouragement or susceptibility to lies that are peddled each day. We have **lost perspective, focused on ourselves rather than others, become more thankless, and even turned to temporary, sinful pleasures for solace.**

The outlook nationally for churches has also been affected. Thom Ranier, who does research on church trends, wrote on *churchanswers.com* last week on 12 major trends for churches in 2021. Typically, this kind of data is not helpful to us since it is too general or broad, taking into account a wide array of philosophy or theology of churches. However, a few things caught our attention. Based on his research, he believes that even after the **pandemic stabilizes and we can go back inside**, average worship service levels will go down **20-30%** of what it was before, along with an equal percentage of giving. Large churches will be hit the hardest, and even the definition of "large church" (top 10% in the country) will be 250 or more, rather than 450 or more. **Carey Nieuwhof**, a pastor who represents "mega churches" and speaks to future trends (and makes me twitch most of the time, even though he is a good Dutchman) pointed out a Barna study that says **22%** of churching adults have stopped going to church at all, be it in person or online. An advocate of online church platforms, his surprising solution was to stop trying to **entertain** and seek to **engage**, but even better, **to equip** (nice to see church leaders reading their Bible!). He also said people are discouraged by Christians being mean on social media and overly political as reasons. Regardless of the reasons, we can all sense and observe that the next months and years will not only be **different**, but will be **clarifying, revealing, and critical to our mission.**

So this morning we are going to consider **5 principles gleaned from 2 wise, Godly men separated by thousands of years.** We will consider the wisdom of **Moses** in Psalm 90, who prayed that God would

have mercy on frail humanity living in this sin soaked universe, and **Paul** in 2 Corinthians 6:1-7, who encouraged the church to fulfill the privilege they held in **gospel ministry**. Put these together, and we have a pathway of Biblical thinking as we move forward.

We want to thoughtfully, carefully, and faithfully resolve, by the help of the Spirit and power of God, to do this year. (For a soul-challenging list of resolutions, please read Jonathan Edwards resolutions from 1723 - <https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/the-resolutions-of-jonathan-edwards>)

We RESOLVE:

To Cultivate Biblical Wisdom vs Clinging to Worldly Knowledge (Ps. 90:12)

“So teach us to number our days that we may get a heart of wisdom.”

- **Heart of Wisdom is pumped out from a true knowledge of God**

In a Psalm by Moses, one of the most humble or meek men in all the world (Numbers 12:3) understood not only that he needed wisdom to navigate the challenge of leading God’s people, but knew where it came from. He **prayed** for it. But he also prayed according to the knowledge of God. He noted that God is: eternal (1-2), existing before anything was created, and then actually bringing everything into existence. He is **set apart** from humanity in both power and perseverance (v. 3-4), where man is dust and returns to dust, and He is outside of time, in charge of both life and death (5). Man is sinful and deserving of death and punishment, so God is right to be wrathful and angry over our sin (6-11) and our response should simply be to **fear Him**, the one who holds all things in His hand, He is not frustrated, and always does what He says.

It is this fear that is the beginning of wisdom (Prov. 9:10). When we have a clear and true understanding of God, we are **humbled** in His presence, **clear** in His expectations, and **assured** of the future. Wisdom sees that **our days are numbered**, both in the actual day that we die (Heb. 9:27), but that we should redeem the days that we are given, knowing that our lives are not our own.

- **Heart of Wisdom is exercised by a healthy intake of Scripture**

There are two kinds of wisdom: one that comes from above and is **pure, peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, impartial and sincere** (James 3:17). This is the essence of Biblical wisdom. There is also unbiblical wisdom that is **earthly, unspiritual, and demonic** which produces *jealousy, selfish ambition, disorder, and promotes every vile practice* (James 3:15-16). This teaches us an indelible principle: our source of wisdom will have clear effects in what it produces in us, our families, and this church. How are we to have perspective in the midst of darkness? We have a true knowledge of God, ourselves, why things happen, and what will happen in the end. We remind ourselves that God keeps His promises, that “hard” is part of living in a fallen world, that things will be made right in the future, and until now we have a clear mission. To say this another way, **we cannot have a heart of wisdom WITHOUT a ongoing, growing intake of Scripture. So we resolve to GET A HEART OF WISDOM by numbering our days.**

To Seek Satisfaction in Christ vs. Better Circumstances (Ps. 90:14a)

“Satisfy us in the morning with your steadfast love...”

- **Satisfied on the love lavished on us**

Much has been taken from us in 2020, or at least much has seemed/felt like it's been taken away. True wisdom says to seek the things that cannot be taken away, where thieves cannot take away, politicians cannot shut down, virus' cannot deteriorate, or rust destroy. There is only one source where that can be

found: **in Christ, and specifically, in the love of Christ.** Christ's love was poured out on us on the cross, where He took our place. Christ's love always keeps His promises, including the fact that Christ is so valuable that we can live for Him and dying would simply be gain. Moses prays that every day, each day, he'd be satisfied in the morning with the Love of God, which would shape the rest of his day. Christ's love is **lavished, steadfast, and freely given.**

- **Satisfied to liberate us from the love of the world**

Satisfaction in the love of Christ **liberates us from the love of the world**, helping us to fall *out of love* with the things here. Hasn't that been revealed to us more and more this year? The things that we store up, trust in, and think we can control can be taken away in a matter of moments. For some, when those things are taken, they are left desolate, depressed, and even angry. But when we are **satisfied in Christ each day**, we can take everything else as a gift of grace, even the hard.

Our resolution this year is to be **satisfied in Christ each day** so that we lose our taste for the things we love in the world that cannot satisfy. **George Muller**, the well known evangelist in Bristol, England, in 1800's England helped care for over 10,000 orphans and provided Christian education for more than 120,000. What drove him? What kept him going? What was his secret?

*"According to my judgment the most important point to be attended to is this: **above all things see to it that your souls are happy in the Lord.** Other things may press upon you, the Lord's work may even have urgent claims upon your attention, but I deliberately repeat, it is of supreme and paramount importance that you should **seek above all things to have your souls happy in God Himself!** Day by day seek to **make this the most important business of your life.** This has been my firm and settled condition for the last 35 years. For the first four years after my conversion I knew not its vast importance, but now after much experience I specially commend this point to the notice of my younger brethren and sisters in Christ: **the secret of all true effectual service is joy in God, having experimental acquaintance and fellowship with God Himself.**"*

Muller understood that satisfaction or true happiness and joy were intimately tied together. So did Moses. Notice what Moses prayed for next:

To Flee from Fear by Fighting for Joy (Ps. 90:14b-17)

*"...that we may rejoice and be glad all our days. Make us **glad** for as many days as you have afflicted us, and for as many years as we have seen evil. **Let your work** be shown to your servants, and **your glorious power** to their children. 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!"*

- **Profound joy is sourced in the supernatural**

Notice that Moses was not ignorant to the fact that life would be hard or that there would not be affliction. So he did NOT PRAY to be free from affliction since He knew all things came from the hand of God. No, his prayer was to find **joy and gladness in and through those days.** It was the Lord that could make them glad, since joy in the midst of terrible circumstances is by definition other-worldly. No one naturally skips and sings when life stinks. But the hope of a follower of Christ is that there is greater joy, more abundant gladness in Him than can be weighed down by the things around us. Notice that the prayer was for **God's work** to be shown, **His glorious power given**, and **His kindness/beauty/and delight** to be on him. When we rest in His work, function in His power, and are awed by His beauty we have the ingredients for joy and gladness in the midst of the worst kind of circumstances.

- **Perfect love casts out fear**

Fear is an interesting reality. It is both good and bad, keeping us from what can harm us and what is best for us. It is the fear of the Lord that produces understanding, knowledge and wisdom, but it is fear of man that can cause us to compromise, stay away, stay anxious, or even be disobedient. When we fight for joy, we do it by aligning our mind with Christ's and lay our trust on Him and not external arenas. In doing this, we delight in His love, and His love actually controls us (2 Cor. 5:14), knowing that perfect love casts out fear (1 John 4:18) because fear is sourced in punishment. John goes on to say that if we fear in the 'wrong' way, we have not been perfected in love. So when we are controlled by the love of Christ, we can have **confidence** for the day of judgment. Nothing can be taken away that has been promised, and so fear no longer controls us. We can make decisions consistent with this reality, exercising wisdom, embracing risk, and employing God's power rather than being ruled by fear.

So in Psalm 90, we resolve to live lives of **wisdom, satisfaction, and joy** rather than banking on worldly knowledge, circumstances, and fear. This is foundationally important as we look at two other resolutions as it pertains to ministry in our personal lives and this church.

To Live by Conviction vs. Convenience (2 Cor. 6:1-2)

Working together with him, then, we appeal to you not to receive the grace of God in vain.² For he says, "In a favorable time I listened to you, and in a day of salvation I have helped you."

Behold, now is the favorable time; behold, now is the day of salvation

- **Convinced by a privileged ministry**

With the right thinking and perspective, we turn to how we interact with each other and those outside of Christ. Paul made an appeal to the Corinthian church, one that had many divisions, sin issues ravaging, and false teaching to embrace the full realities of the **gospel and the New Covenant through the Holy Spirit** by engaging in ministry. The word "ministry" can simply mean service, but it gets thrown around so often that it loses any kind of specific emphasis. Paul built a case that we are **sufficient ministers** (3:6), **commissioned** by God (2:17), **confident** through Christ (3:4), and **bold** (3:12) to proclaim the **glory of God in the Person of Jesus Christ (4:6)**. Based on a proper understanding of the fear of the Lord, we **persuade men** (5:11), appealing, imploring, and begging them to be reconciled to God (5:19-20). Because we are a **new creation in Christ** (5:17), we no longer *live for ourselves but for Him who for our sake died and was raised* (5:15). When Paul says in 6:1 that we 'work together with Him', it does not mean that we are working as equals, since it is clear that He does the work alone. It does mean that we work as **ambassadors, representatives, messengers** of Him, putting flesh and blood on the life giving message of the gospel.

Paul appeals the church at Corinth to "not receive the grace of God in vain". In other words, God's grace came freely to us, but it simultaneously created a cosmic privilege for all followers of Jesus to deny our **self-autonomy**, to stop living for ourselves or to try to preserve our life in this world, and to engage in calling people out of darkness into light. This is our **conviction and compulsion**. This ministry will NEVER BE COMFORTABLE or CONVENIENT. We gather together NOT because it fits in our schedule, but because God tells us its vitally important to our life and mission. We do not engage others with the gospel because it's popular or that people will like us more. We do this all because of we are **convinced it's true, right, and what God wants**. Will gathering together get more complicated and complex moving forward. Probably. Will it be less convenient and comfortable: most definitely. Has the importance of doing so diminished? By no means. In fact, Paul addresses that in the next verse:

- **Convinced for passionate action**

What we need to fight in our thinking: that somehow **gospel ministry has been put on hold as everything else has**. Paul said that NOW is the favorable time, and today is the day of salvation. The word "time" here means "opportunity or season". What Paul impressed on the Corinthian church was the fact that they did not wait until everything lined up circumstantially for engagement, but recognizing that since Christ came the first time until He returns the second is the **favorable season**. We are in a ripe day when people need Jesus, need to deal with their sin, and find their hope in the future. It also means that there will come a day when this **season of time is OVER**. God will save all that He calls, but He gives us the privilege to work with Him in the venture.

So we want to **resolve** that we will not be driven by **convenience** in the New Year, but embrace the hard as normal, committed to gather to worship with each other and scatter to reach others to be reconciled to God in Christ, all to the glory of God. An effective church is a **convinced church**, one not driven by technique, programs, or ease, but living out **who we are as new creations in Christ**.

To Commend Ourselves vs. Complaining to Others (2 Cor. 6:3-7)

*We put no obstacle in anyone's way, so that no fault may be found with our ministry, 4 but as servants of God we **commend ourselves** in every way: **by great endurance**, in afflictions, hardships, calamities, 5 beatings, imprisonments, riots, labors, sleepless nights, hunger; 6 **by purity**, knowledge, patience, kindness, the Holy Spirit, genuine love; 7 by truthful speech, and the power of God; with the weapons of righteousness for the right hand and for the left;*

One of the ways people deal with disappointment, frustration, or sadness is to **complain**. In fact, talk shows, news outlets, and websites are essentially venues that people can grumble about their **government, spouse, or sports team**. Grumbling and complaining is a pressure release of our heart, and great revealer of what we really believe. Complaining is so commonplace that it has become a **sanitized sin, an acceptable form of expression**. However, complaining is truly sinful. "*Do all things without **grumbling or disputing***." (Phil. 2:15). Complaining directed outward is **always complaining driven upward**, ultimately calling out God for not doing enough, doing it wrong, or not conforming to what we want. **2020 has been a year of complaint**. **And unfortunately Christians have joined the bandwagon rather than offering a radical, counter-cultural, joyful alternative in Christ**.

We lose historical perspective quickly. The circumstances for Christians in Paul's day was not peachy. Threat of persecution, rejection, and affliction was the norm. 2020 for us has been radically different for us relative to the rest of the years we've lived, but a scan of history would not mark this as one of the top 10, or 100, or maybe 1000. So Paul directs the church that **in light of or even in spite of circumstances, that they COMMEND themselves in every way**. In other words, the message of good news is carried by lives changed by good news. In doing this, we are to put no obstacle in anyone's path by offering something lesser than the glorious realities of Christ.

Notice what he calls them to. To **exercise great endurance**. To embrace afflictions, hardship, calamity, beatings, imprisonments, hunger, sleepless nights (not just from back pain but from prison slabs). These are all the **expectations that a believer can expect** in reaching the world as ambassadors. It would nullify the message if through these the church would **complain, blog, and grumble about how bad things were**. That is exactly what EVERYONE does in those situations. We offer something far different in Christ.

Our response in the midst is everything: by purity of holiness, patience and kindness flowing as fruit produced by the Holy Spirit, genuine love, holding to the **word of truth, the power of God and His**

righteousness imputed to us! What does the world need right now? People who are captivated by Jesus Christ who offer hope and perspective in a time of uncertainty, compelling people to be reconciled to God. This is how we will be distinct, effective, and fruitful in the coming year. The field is white with harvest. Will we be faithful?

I think we all had the hope that when the calendar flipped that the surreal dream of 2020 would be over. Frankly, I have no idea what will happen governmentally or with the virus moving forward. But what we do know is enough. We don't put our trust in things getting **back to normal, but rather in the fact that God has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.** (2 Cor. 4:6). We have the answer to the longing questions people have, the antidote to hopelessness, the cure for our sin. The question is do **we** actually embrace it as we walk in wisdom, satisfaction, and joy, walking by conviction, commending ourselves to others. Let that be our resolution for 2021!