

Make Me to Know My End

Psalm 39:4-8

June 7th, 2020

Big idea: Lord, help me to deeply understand how short my own life on earth is.

Intro –

Some topics that we cover don't apply to everyone. Not everyone will marry. Not everyone will have children. Not everyone has a job. Not everyone is a woman. But the topic that will occupy our attention for the next few weeks applies to us all. And yet it's a topic we rarely discuss, let alone press into with eyes wide open. It's the topic of our own death.

Christians in the past did not shy away from thinking about and talking about death.

Jonathan Edwards: "Resolved, to think much on all occasions of my own dying, and of the common circumstances which attend death."

Martin Luther: "We should familiarize ourselves with death during our lifetime, inviting death into our presence when it is still at a distance and on the move."

The Psalms invite us to pray for God to help us number our days

Psalm 90:12 So teach us to number our days, That we may present to You a heart of wisdom.

Staring clear eyed at death, recognizing our own mortality, is a key step on the road to wisdom.

Ecclesiastes tells us that it is better to go to the house of mourning and take it to heart than to go to the house of feasting.

Ecclesiastes 7:2 It is better to go to a house of mourning Than to go to a house of feasting, Because that is the end of every man, And the living takes *it* to heart.

In other words, it's better for you to go to a funeral than a wedding. Why? Because that is the end of every man and we should take it to heart.

That is foreign to us today because we are an entertainment driven people. But I suspect that may be changing right now. We have faced a global disease that started with unknown but catastrophic projections of loss. Our lives were disrupted. An invisible enemy lurked behind every handshake. Even as the toll has not been as serious as the worst-case projections (for which we can be very glad), we all glimpsed our own mortality at least a little. Concurrently, our nation has given new attention to issue of race and injustice. Video circulated of a black man's death in Georgia at the hands of two men who chased him down with their trucks and then within a couple weeks we had the video of a black man killed by police in Minneapolis. There are peaceful protests and violent riots happening in cities all over. We watch the news and it's hard not to feel like life is shaky and uncertain.

Read the whole psalm but focus on verses 4-8

1. Make me to know my **end**.(39:4a)
 - a. David knew that life is like a vapor. He wrote about it. But as James Johnston put it in his commentary on this psalm, there is a difference between knowing and *knowing*.
 - i. Johnston uses this illustration: A recent college graduate might know that he will retire someday and that the money he sets aside will compound over time. But not many begin to save when they can. Why not? They know about retirement intellectually, but they have not really grasped that truth—in a real sense, they don't *know* they will retire. That is why so many of us start playing catch-up in our forties when we finally begin to realize that life is short! David wants to *know* his life is short and take it to heart.
 - b. Do you know that your life on earth will end?

- i. I don't mean do you know *when* it will end. None of us know that. But do you really know *that* it will end?
- c. Michael Whittmer, *The Last Enemy*
 - i. You are going to die. Take a moment to let that sink in. You are going to *die*. One morning the sun will rise and you won't see it. Birds will greet the dawn and you won't hear them. Friends and family will gather to celebrate your life, and after you're buried they'll return to the church for ham and scalloped potatoes. Soon your job and favorite chair and spot on the team will be filled by someone else. The rest of the world may pause to remember—it will give you a moment of silence if you were rich or well known—but then it will carry on as it did before you arrived.
- d. We are shielded from death today in ways that no other generations have been in human history.
 - i. Death was more common and people could not avoid seeing it up close.
 - ii. The 17th century British minister and theologian John Owen outlived every one of his eleven children and his first wife.
 - iii. The average family in America during colonial times lost 1 out of every 3 children before adulthood.
 - iv. In a book about burial practices, Elizabeth Fournier said this, "Up until the last one hundred years or so, people all over the globe have tended to their deceased loved ones in their own households, with their own hands, and with their own time and love."
 - 1. I'm not advocating we go back to that, but you can easily see how that would keep the reality of death at the front of our minds from the time we were young.
- e. At least one social media account is dedicated to keeping the reality of death before people.
 - i. Daily death reminder – 29k followers on twitter, only tweets out one thing:
 - ii. "You will die someday."
 - iii. And it tweets that out every day at 10:14 pm.



- iv.
- ~~f. The poet W. S. Merwin observed, every year we pass unaware the anniversary of our death. For Merwin, that day turned out to be March 15th.~~
- g. If we know our end, we can prepare for it.
 - i. Your end will not be a cessation of existence. Your physical life will end but the immaterial part of you will continue.
 - 1. You will continue either with Christ or apart from Him.
 - 2. **2 Corinthians 5:8** we are of good courage, I say, and prefer rather to be absent from the body and to be at home with the Lord.
 - 3. **Matthew 25:46** "These will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life."
- h. If we know our end, we will live differently now.
 - i. **Luke 12:15-21** Then He said to them, "Beware, and be on your guard against every form of greed; for not *even* when one has an abundance does his life consist of his possessions." ¹⁶ And He told them a parable, saying, "The land of a rich man was very productive. ¹⁷ "And he began

reasoning to himself, saying, 'What shall I do, since I have no place to store my crops?'¹⁸ "Then he said, 'This is what I will do: I will tear down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods.'¹⁹ 'And I will say to my soul, "Soul, you have many goods laid up for many years *to come*; take your ease, eat, drink *and* be merry.'"²⁰ "But God said to him, 'You fool! This *very* night your soul is required of you; and *now* who will own what you have prepared?'²¹ "So is the man who stores up treasure for himself, and is not rich toward God."

- ii. Jesus called the man a fool in this parable not because he was productive with his land or because he desired to save, but because he stored up treasure for himself and wasn't "rich toward God." The money entrusted to his care wasn't used as a steward in a way that anticipated his own death but was focused solely on his own temporary ease.

2. Make me to know the extent of my days (39:4b-6)

- a. This physical life is brief, even if we break a record the modern recorded lifespan and live to 122 years and 165 days old, that will seem to be brief compared to eternity.
- b. Look at the way the brevity of life is described poetically in these verses.
 - i. Transient – meaning short lived, fleeting, frail
 - ii. My days as handbreadths – width of four fingers, about 3 inches, one of the smaller units of measurements. Our life is not measured in miles or light years but handbreadths.
 - iii. As nothing in your sight
 1. Not saying that our lives are meaningless or irrelevant, only that they are so brief compared to eternity that they are as nothing.
 - iv. Even at his best man is a mere breath
 1. Picture the breath coming out of your mouth on a crisp fall morning. You can see it hang in the air for a moment and then it's gone.
 - v. Phantom – like a shadowy form – a mere shadow is how other versions put it.
- c. Again, the prayer is that God would "let me know how transient I am."
 - i. We know it intellectually. We can look up the actuarial tables to see how much longer we live if we reach the average lifespan.
 1. According to the table I have 39 ½ years remaining. 14,400 days. That means I crossed the half way point about 3 months ago.
 2. Of course, I may live much longer or much less than that. Only the Lord knows the number of my days.
 3. But the prayer is that I would *know* it and live accordingly.
- d. The Bible teaches two truths that go together – My life is brief AND all my days are known and accounted for by God.
 - i. **Psalm 139:16** Your eyes have seen my unformed substance; And in Your book were all written The days that were ordained *for me*, When as yet there was not one of them.
 - ii. Random chance will not dictate my life span.
 1. One author described how her mother would comfort her with these words when she was worrying about death as a child:
 2. "If it is the time God has chosen for you to die, you can drown in a thimble; if it's not, then you can survive for days in the open ocean."
 3. Jesus speaks to this as well during His sermon on the Mount in Matthew 6

4. **Matthew 6:27** "And who of you by being worried can add a *single* hour to his life?
 5. The action step when we begin to come to terms with our own mortality is NOT worry. It is to grow in wisdom. To live meaningfully.
- e. Because our life is so brief, living to amass wealth is worthless. (v. 6)
 - i. David was himself wealthy and he died with wealth.
 - ii. **1 Chronicles 29:28** Then he died in a ripe old age, full of days, riches and honor; and his son Solomon reigned in his place.
 - iii. But he sees things in this psalm in sharper focus, perhaps because he is in a period of physical suffering.
 1. **Psalm 39:9-11** ⁹ "I have become mute, I do not open my mouth, Because it is You who have done *it*. ¹⁰ "Remove Your plague from me; Because of the opposition of Your hand I am perishing. ¹¹ "With reproofs You chasten a man for iniquity; You consume as a moth what is precious to him; Surely every man is a mere breath. Selah.
 - iv. We might amass riches in this life but we don't know who they will go to after us.
 1. Will descendants spend it well? Will financial collapse or poor investment cause it to disappear?
 2. One thing is for sure, it won't go with you.
3. God alone is my hope (39:7-8)
 - a. Talk of death may seem depressing or devoid of hope. However, what it should do is direct our hearts to our only hope in life and death – God Himself.
 - i. JC Ryle, 19th century pastor
 - ii. "The day may come when after a long fight with disease, we shall feel that medicine can do no more, and that nothing remains but to die. Friends will be standing by, unable to help us. Hearing, eyesight, even the power of praying, will be fast failing us. The world and its shadows will be melting beneath our feet. Eternity, with its realities, will be looming large before our minds.
 - iii. What shall support us in that trying hour? What shall enable us to feel, "I fear no evil" (Psalm 23:4)? Nothing, nothing can do it but close communion with Christ. Christ dwelling in our hearts by faith—Christ putting His right arm under our heads—Christ felt to be sitting by our side—Christ can alone give us the complete victory in the last struggle."
 - b. We can't blind ourselves to the reality of death. But we can prepare for it.
 - i. That's actually what sparked this sermon series for me. One pastor talked about a sermon he heard decades earlier from his own father titled, "Christian, you can be ready to die." He remembered it as presented with gentle confidence.
 - ii. Christian, are you ready to die?
 1. There may be much more you would like to accomplish in this life.
 2. There may be children to raise and weddings to attend.
 3. There would be the tragic sense of loss for those left behind.
 4. All of that is true. Death is still the last enemy and not to be downplayed.
 5. But, are you ready to die? Is Christ your hope?

- iii. On average 3 people die every second worldwide. Since this sermon began, over 5,000 people will have died.
- c. The Heidelberg Catechism in 1563 memorably provided this question and answer
 - i. **Q. What is your only comfort in life and in death?**
 - ii. A. That I am not my own, but belong—body and soul, in life and in death—to my faithful Savior, Jesus Christ.
 - iii. **Romans 14:7-8** For not one of us lives for himself, and not one dies for himself; ⁸ for if we live, we live for the Lord, or if we die, we die for the Lord; therefore whether we live or die, we are the Lord's.
 - iv. In coming week's we will look at some of the key passages in the OT and NT that talk about death and life after death. We'll also answer questions like: What happens when a person dies right now? Where do they go? What is heaven like? What will the new earth be like?
 - v. Return to JC Ryle in closing
 - 1. Let us cleave to Christ more closely, love Him more heartily, live to Him more thoroughly, copy Him more exactly, confess Him more boldly, follow Him more fully. Religion like this will always bring its own reward. Worldly people may laugh at it. Weak brethren may think it extreme. But it will wear well. At even time it will bring us light. In sickness it will bring us peace. In the world to come it will give us a crown of glory that fadeth not away.

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“Resolved, to think much on all occasions of my own dying, and of the common circumstances which attend death.”

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Martin Luther: “We should familiarize ourselves with death during our lifetime, inviting death into our presence when it is still at a distance and on the move.”

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Psalm 90:12 So teach us to number our days, That we may present to You a heart of wisdom.

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