

## The W's And H's Of Meditation (Part Four)

**Meditating on the Brevity of Life**

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Let us begin in Psalm 90. We will turn to several related scriptures upon which I intend to weave a theme for this message. All scriptural references will be taken from the Lockman Foundation's *Amplified Bible*.

**Psalm 90:12** So teach us to number our days, that we may get us a heart of wisdom.

This poignant psalm of Moses presents a stark contrast between God's eternity and man's frail temporal nature, inviting us to contemplate the prospect of eternity from within our fragile, temporal perspective. We immediately compare the permanence of eternity to the time-bound impermanence of mortality.

**Psalm 39:4** Lord, make me to know my end and [to appreciate] the measure of my days—what it is; let me know and realize how frail I am [how transient is my stay here].

Exactly a month ago, Julie and I attended two separate funerals. The first was for the father of my daughter-in-law, Farley Gharagazlou, who was seven years older than I am. And then the second was the following day for Rita Bricker, who was the widow of one of our former members, the late Bob Bricker. Rita was just six years older than I am presently. The clergymen at both memorials referenced both Psalm 90:12 and Psalm 39:4, stressing our extremely fragile and transitory existence. I felt as though God was forcefully getting my attention, both in the matter of preparing for the spring holy days and in preparing this sermon.

In exactly two months from today, I will have reached the exact age at which my mother died—73 years, 11 months, and 15 days. Two weeks ago, an old friend of my deceased son, Michael, who had lost contact with him after our family had moved to Texas, succeeded in contacting me in an effort to locate

him. He was unaware that Michael had died as a result of a car accident in 2001. When I informed him of Michael's death, he was grief-stricken, bursting into tears, and in the process succeeded in re-opening some 17-year-old wounds deep within me which seemed to metaphorically bleed afresh as we commiserated together.

**Ecclesiastes 7:2** It is better to go to the house of mourning than to go to the house of feasting, for that is the end of all men; and the living will lay it to heart.

Scroll down to verse 8:

**Ecclesiastes 7:8** Better is the end of a thing than the beginning of it, and the patient in spirit is better than the proud in spirit.

Please scroll forward to chapter 12.

**Ecclesiastes 12:1-8** Remember [earnestly] also your Creator [that you are not your own, but His property now] in the days of your youth, before the evil days come or the years draw near when you will say [of physical pleasures], I have no enjoyment in them— Before the sun and the light and the moon and the stars are darkened [sight is impaired], and the clouds [of depression] return after the rain [of tears];

In the day when the keepers of the house [the hands and the arms] tremble, and the strong men [the feet and the knees] bow themselves, and the grinders [the molar teeth (some of us have more crowns and implants than we have real teeth)] cease because they are few, and those who look out of the windows [the eyes] are darkened;

When the doors [the lips] are shut in the streets and the sound of the grinding [of the teeth] is low, and one rises up at the voice of a bird and the crowing of a cock, and all the daughters of music [the voice and the ear] are brought low {I get very defensive when Julie asks me to turn down the radio}; also when [the old] are afraid of

danger from that which is high, and fears are in the way, and the almond tree [their white hair] blooms, and the grasshopper [a little thing] is a burden, and desire and appetite fail, because man goes to his everlasting home and the mourners go about the streets or marketplaces.

[Remember your Creator earnestly now] before the silver cord [of life] is snapped apart, or the golden bowl is broken, or the pitcher is broken at the fountain, or the wheel broken at the cistern [and the whole circulatory system of the blood ceases to function]; then shall the dust [out of which God made man's body] return to the earth as it was, and the spirit shall return to God Who gave it. Vapor of vapors and futility of futilities, says the Preacher. All is futility (emptiness, falsity, vainglory, and transitoriness)!

Last week, I was informed that my late father's only living sibling, Tante Milly, who is in her middle 90's, has been placed in hospice, and her days are indeed numbered. After her passing, a whole generation will have been wiped from my living family tree.

Before the Passover, we are instructed to soberly examine ourselves, preparing for an annual "spiritual state of the union" report—or as James Beaubelle called it, "Our annual, self-inflicted review of self." During this critical time, we recommit to our baptismal covenant, reflect upon the enormity of sin which continually threatens to overtake us, probe for hidden or secret sins for which we still need to repent, and seek evidence of spiritual fruit over the previous year.

Exactly one year ago I gave a sermon, "Caveats of Self-Examination," a topic which I intend to continue exploring in this message. This year, as Part Four in the series the "W's and H's of Meditation," I will delve into the critical need to meditate on the brevity of life, and why and how this practice leads to godly wisdom and a higher level of spirituality.

Meditating on the perils of our fragile, transitory existence paradoxically leads to a longer happier life now, and as our portion of God's Holy Spirit grows within us satisfies our craving for something permanent and eternal—namely becoming a member of God's Family.

Sometimes I liken this kind of sober reflection on the brevity of life to my life-insurance policy as I rode a motorcycle on the California freeways and winding mountain highways back from 1980 to 1990. Because I started riding at the age of 36, I no longer had the teenage need to show off doing wheelies and scooting between vehicles on the freeway. I had acquired no addiction to warp-speed velocity or thrills. The one thing that kept me alive and safe for a solid 10 years on the motorcycle was to think about death continually, having images of being maimed or killed if I ever lost control of the bike. This practice received reinforcement after I visited one of my students in the Pasadena hospital who had been thrown from his motorcycle on the freeway. Even having worn a protective leather jacket and a helmet, this student's lacerated limbs looked as though he had narrowly escaped from a slaughterhouse.

Young people in their teens or twenties (I used to be one myself) often consider themselves invincible and immune from accidents. Those of us who have passed 40, 50, 60, and 70 no longer entertain this notion. These young people feel that they have plenty of time (years and decades perhaps) to live their lives and fulfill their dreams. Those of us who have passed 60 and 70 have an entirely different perspective. To my surprise, after reaching 70, my days have turned into hours, my weeks have turned into days, my months have turned into weeks, and my years have turned into months. . . and the velocity seems to be increasing at warp speed and beyond.

The brevity of our life is a pervasive, recurring theme throughout Scripture. We may consider life long when we measure it by the year, but when compared to eternity, life is a mere vapor. The Scriptures refer to the concept of death more than 1,300 times (in such expressions such as die, death, dead, etc.) Obviously, it is a perennial topic in both the Old and New Testaments. I will give you a small selective potpourri of a number of these 1,300 references to the brevity of physical life. Because we will go through this list of samples quickly, you might not be able to turn to them before I go on to the next example, so allow me to point out the salient highlights to you.

**James 4:14** Yet you do not know [the least thing] about what may happen tomorrow. What is the nature of your life? You are [really] but a wisp of vapor (a puff of smoke, a mist) that is visible for a little while and then disappears [into thin air].

**Job 7:6-7** [Job laments] My days are swifter than a weaver's shuttle and are spent without hope. Oh, remember that my life is but wind (a puff, a breath, a sob); my eye shall see good no more.

**Job 8:9** [We learn that] For we are but of yesterday and know nothing, because our days upon earth are a shadow.

**Job 9:25-26** [He uses more similes of velocity and speed.] Now my days are swifter than a runner; they flee away, they see no good. They are passed away like the swift rowboats made of reeds, or like the eagle that swoops down on the prey.

As we scroll forward to chapter 14 Job reminds us that our time in this mortal flesh is short-lived.

**Job 14:1-2** Man who is born of a woman is of few days and full of trouble. He comes forth like a flower and withers; he flees also like a shadow and continues not.

Let us go full circle back to one of the lead-off scriptures, a psalm of David, and this time, I would like you to read along:

**Psalms 39:4-6** Lord, make me to know my end and [to appreciate] the measure of my days—what it is; let me know and realize how frail I am [how transient is my stay here]. Behold, You have made my days as [short as] handbreadths [a measure of four fingers, equal to about four inches], and my lifetime is as nothing in Your sight. Truly every man at his best is merely a breath! Selah [pause and think calmly of that]! Surely every man walks to and fro—like a shadow in a pantomime; surely for futility and emptiness he is in

turmoil; each one heaps up riches, not knowing who will gather them.

Like David, most of us cannot fathom or contemplate how transient our life is when we hold it up against the backdrop of eternity. If we could somehow grasp or internalize the preciousness of time, we would certainly be better stewards of the spiritual gifts God has given us, the opportunities to glorify our God and serve our brethren. One website I encountered devoted entirely to Christian time stewardship insisted that we should not picture time as sands in an hourglass, but precious opportunities flying away.

**Psalm 90:5-6** You carry away [these disobedient people, doomed to die within forty years] as with a flood; they are as a sleep [vague and forgotten as soon as they are gone]. In the morning they are like grass which grows up—In the morning it flourishes and springs up; in the evening it is mown down and withers.

**Psalm 90:9** For all our days pass away in Your wrath; We have finished our years like a whispered sigh. [Sigh—pretty fast, right?]

**Psalm 102:3** For my days consume away like smoke, and my bones burn like a firebrand or like a hearth.

**Psalm 102:11** My days are like an evening shadow that stretches out and declines [with the sun]; and I am withered like grass.

**Psalm 103:15-16** As for man, his days are as grass; as a flower of the field, so he flourishes. For the wind passes over it and it is gone, and its place shall know it no more.

**Psalm 144:4** Man is like vanity and a breath; his days are as a shadow that passes away.

Some at this point are probably wondering if Maas is going to read all 1,300 examples. We have read only 18—or .01 % of the scriptures pertaining to the brevity of our lives. I will read only one more example to wrap up this list. Let us turn to it in Isaiah 40:6-7, a passage made memorable by Johannes

Brahms *German Requiem*, one of my favorite orchestral and choral works. (By the way, there are nine full-length productions of this work on YouTube.) While preparing this sermon, I listened to several different versions of this work playing in the background. This magnificent work, blending sorrow with tranquility, provided immeasurable comfort as I weathered the emotional turbulence following the premature death of my son Michael 17 years ago, and has also given me in the proper frame of mind to approach the Days of Unleavened Bread.

**Isaiah 40:6-7** A voice says, Cry [prophesy]! And I said, What shall I cry? [The voice answered, Proclaim:] All flesh is as frail as grass, and all that makes it attractive [its kindness, its goodwill, its mercy from God, its glory and comeliness, however good] is transitory, like the flower of the field. The grass withers, the flower fades, when the breath of the Lord blows upon it; surely [all] the people are like grass.

Why do we find all this seeming morbid obsession about the brevity of life and the necessity of redeeming the time and counting the cost of our calling? Why do we feel a supreme sense of urgency in the words of our Savior in John 9:4, when He proclaims, “We must work the works of Him Who sent Me and be busy with His business while it is daylight; night is coming on, when no man can work.” Why do we find this same urgency in the apostle Paul’s admonition in Ephesians 5:16 where he implores us to make the very most of our time [recognizing and taking advantage of each opportunity and using it with wisdom and diligence], because the days are [filled with] evil? He adds in verse 17 that we not be foolish and thoughtless but understand and firmly grasp what the will of the Lord is.

If we have rehearsed the Passover (the solemn renewal of our baptismal covenant) for 10, 20, 30 40, or 50 years (this constitutes my 52nd Passover observance) do you not think we should have some inkling of what the will of the Lord is for us? In six days from now, we will be reviewing Jesus Christ’s words to His disciples on the night of His betrayal, explaining His expectations from them, as well as His expectations from us in the current season of God’s spiritual harvest.

**John 15:5-8** I am the Vine; you are the branches. Whoever lives in Me and I in him bears much (abundant) fruit. However, apart from Me [cut off from vital union with Me] you can do nothing. If a person does not dwell in Me, he is thrown out like a [broken-off] branch, and withers; such branches are gathered up and thrown into the fire, and they are burned. If you live in Me [abide vitally united to Me] and My words remain in you and continue to live in your hearts, ask whatever you will, and it shall be done for you. When you bear (produce) much fruit, My Father is honored and glorified, and you show and prove yourselves to be true followers of Mine.

Bearing fruit requires diligently making use of our planting time, growing time, and harvest time.

Hugh Macmillan, contributing author to the Bible Hub Commentary, has observed:

The lights which God has set in the firmament enable us to redeem the time; to retrieve the misspent past by the right improvement of the present. Each day is a miniature of the whole of life and of all the seasons of the year. Morning answers to spring; midday to summer; afternoon to autumn; evening to winter. We are children in the morning, with fresh feelings and hopes; grown-up men and women, with sober and sad experiences, at noon; aged persons, with whom the possibilities of life are over, in the afternoon and night.

Joseph Hall (English satirist) proclaimed: Every day is a little life; and our whole life is but a day repeated: whence it is that old Jacob numbers his life by days; and Moses (Ps 90:12) desires to be taught this point of "holy arithmetic"—to number not his years, but his days. Those, therefore, that dare lose a day, are dangerously prodigal; those that dare misspend it, desperate.

Warren Wiersbe, in his commentary on Psalm 90:12, concludes that “God has ordained that the entire universe functions a day at a time.”

American Business Leader D. J. De Pree, a champion of biblical principles in the workplace, a legendary dynamo of productivity, lived to be almost 100 years old. He developed the practice of calculating his age in terms of days. If you asked him, “How old are you?” he answered immediately with the number of days. He based this practice on our lead-off scripture [Psalm 90:12](#), “Teach us to number our days, that we may gain a heart of wisdom.” Literally counting his days reminded him of the swift passage of time and the need to live with eternity’s values in view. As an experiment, I started calculating my age in days, keeping the daily calculation in my journal. Today, I have reached 26,569 days. I find the concept of overcoming on a daily basis more negotiable and user friendly than thinking I have years and years to accomplish that goal.

The late Dale Carnegie, motivational speaker, and author of the self -help book *How to Stop Worrying and Start Living*, has been credited with the “live in day-tight compartments” principle. But neither he nor Sir William Osler have the copyright on this concept. Our Savior Jesus Christ patented the principle, as we see in His model prayer in Matthew 6:11, “Give us this day our daily bread.” As we approach the Days of Unleavened Bread one week from today, this verse should take on new significance when we realize the Bread of Life is in reality God’s precious Holy Spirit, the only part of us that will make it through the grave.

Looking down to verse 34:

**Matthew 6:34** So do not worry *or* be anxious about tomorrow, for tomorrow will have worries *and* anxieties of its own. Sufficient for each day is its own trouble.

You see, our Savior Jesus Christ has the copyright or the patent for the concept of “living in day-tight compartments.” Evidently, the apostle Paul emulated this principle as he proclaimed in I Corinthians 15:31, “[I assure you] by the pride which I have in you in [your fellowship and union with] Christ Jesus our Lord, that I die daily [I face death every day and die to self].” Along with Paul, we figuratively also die on a daily basis when we

realize that sleep, if not a twin, is a perennial metaphor of death throughout the Scriptures. In another aspect of this dying daily concept, we must emulate Paul as he cautions us in Romans 8.

**Romans 8:13** For if you live according to [the dictates of] the flesh, you will surely die. But if through the power of the [Holy] Spirit you are [habitually] putting to death (making extinct, deadening) the [evil] deeds prompted by the body, you shall [really and genuinely] live forever.

Paul, of course, emphatically implores this need to mortify the flesh or put to death our carnal nature [something we emphasize not only during the Days of Unleavened Bread, but every single day of our life]. Someone has wisely said, “You should treat every day as if it is your last one, because one of these days you are going to be right.”

Believe it or not, we might just learn some wisdom from our arch-enemy Satan the Devil, who is more energized than ever before because he knows his time is short (Revelation 12:12). Why are we not we just as energized and vigorous for God knowing our time also is short? Whether we are 30, 60, or 90, I doubt very much whether any of us are satisfied with the spiritual progress we have made, or the spiritual fruit we have borne during our brief existence. Passover is the time to assess our productivity.

Back in 1953, an inspirational speaker, Dr. Reuben K. Youngdahl, author of a popular devotional book *Live Today*, a work which derived its thesis from Psalm 90, used to give the final nightly words on WCCO-TV in Minneapolis, Minnesota, right before the station went off the air for the evening. I often heard him say, “Yesterday is gone; tomorrow does not yet belong to you; so why not live today.”

We cannot afford to put off overcoming and character-building for the future. Psalm 90 impresses on all of us that we do not have much time to productively use the spiritual gifts and the opportunities God has entrusted to us. In the words of Robert Moffatt, whose Bible translation was one of Herbert Armstrong’s favorites, said, “We shall have all eternity in which our to celebrate our victories—but only one short hour to win them.”

Jesus said: “I must work the works of Him Who sent me, while it is day; the night comes when no man can work” (John 9:4).