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Sermon preached by Mr. J. Delves at "Ebenezer" Clapham on
Sunday morning 31.12.72

Hymns 289, 498, 692
Reading Psalms 90 and 91
Rext: Psalm 90.12

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GOSPEL STANDARD BAPTISTS

"So teach us to number our days, that we may apply our hearts unto wisdom".

I am aware that this is the last Sabbath day of the year 1972, and not only the last Sabbath day but the last day of the year. This can render what I have read a wholesome word to which we may give ourselves and apply our hearts unto wisdom, the wisdom that can consist in one aspect in numbering our days. But there is another last day that I have had much in my mind, and often have in my mind now in these days, there is the last day of our life. It is very striking that in this particular Psalm the days of our years are referred to as three score and ten, although some live beyond this age for a time, but even so, generally speaking, I believe what is said here is true, that although life may be lengthened beyond that span, yet the powers of nature fail and weaken, and time is short. It is very solemn to think of these things, but it is wholesome for us to think upon them, especially when under a consideration of the comparative shortness of life we are led in our feelings to pray that we may be graciously prepared. I can seem to hear my old pastor repeating that verse to me the first time that ever he came to see me.

"Prepare me gracious God,
To stand before thy face;
Thy Spirit must the work perform,
For it is all of grace."

Perhaps to some this may appear somewhat gloomy, but it was not so, for that was his desire for me. It stands out before me as though it was only yesterday, and I can seem to see him in my shop at Brighton, solemnly repeating that verse; and I felt the need of it too. What a wonderful mercy it will be to be graciously

prepared. For after all, according to divine revelation, there is an eternity to spend somewhere, and it is a sobering thought. We shall either be saved or lost for ever, it is a mercy to be moved to pray to be prepared for our latter end. But there is another last day beside this that has been upon my mind, and that is the last day that the Lord Jesus referred to several times when He was upon earth, and particularly in John 6, where He says, "This is the will of him that sent me, that everyone which seeth the Son, and believeth on him, may have everlasting life; and I will raise him up at the last day". That is a last day to contemplate. The last day there evidently is the great morning of the resurrection, of which the Lord said "I will raise him up". That would not refer to the redeemed spirit of a believer for that would be in heaven, but, "I will raise their bodies at the last day". That is the last day I have been thinking of quite a lot. What a wonderful mercy it will be to be prepared for that last day! And what will it mean to us? It means that these mortal bodies will be raised an incorruptible body, a glorious body, fashioned like unto the risen glorious body of the Saviour that is as we may understand it.

What I have read here is a timely prayer, "So teach us to number our days"; and being a prayer we may assume that we need the Lord to help us to do this, so "teach us to number our days"; not I think I can number them; I am such an age, and so on, and can come to some calculation; but this is to take the matter to the Lord, and seek unto Him for that teaching whereby we may number our days in a gracious and profitable way and thus apply our hearts unto wisdom. If we attempt to number our days in a gracious and prayerful way, the exercise will move us to seek unto the Lord, that we may have a right understanding in the mind of God and so be made wise unto salvation. "So teach us to number our days".

The former part of the Psalm has relation to divine chastisements, probably as having reference to God's judgments upon the children of Israel, because of their rebellion and unbelief when they came to the borders of the promised land.

They received the evil report of the spies, and assumed that it was an impossible thing to overcome these sons of Anak, even after all that the Lord had done for them. So they were turned back to perish in the wilderness; and as we read in the epistle to the Hebrews of these unbelieving Israelites that "their carcasses fell in the wilderness". There are some solemn things here in relation to the terrible effects of discrediting the Holy Word and promise of God. It is said, "Thou hast set our iniquities before thee, our secret sins in the light of thy countenance". Therefore to number our days is a profitable engagement.

There are other things which may be considered here, and one of these is what is referred to here concerning the brevity of life. "So teach us to number our days". You may say they are numbered for us in verse 10, "The days of our years are three score years and ten". They are numbered for us, but why are they such a few days? Because the wickedness of the people was so great in the sight of God that He shortened man's life. As you know, it is said of Adam that the days of his years altogether were 930 years; and the days of the years of Methuselah were 969 years, - he was the oldest man that ever lived. But that does not appear to have continued very long, and when we come to dear old Jacob, as Joseph presented him to Pharaoh, Pharaoh said to Jacob, "How old art thou? And Jacob said unto Pharaoh, The days of the years of my pilgrimage are an hundred and thirty years: few and evil have the days of my life been". They were the days of Jacob. But even that is now almost halved because of the wickedness of man - three score years and ten - Jacob lived nearly twice that time. How short then is our time. What a matter for prayerful consideration, "So teach us to number our days".

It is of course but a simple matter numerically to number them, but there is something more than this connected with it all, and that is to consider the matter prayerfully in view of their brevity. This can be very wholesome and profitable for us. I realise the truth of what we read that if they are a little more, "yet is their strength labour and sorrow"; the powers of nature fail after that time even though life may continue for a space. To

number our days then is to prayerfully and soberly realise how few they are as before the Lord, to pray that He will regard us in His mercy, and remember us with the favour that He bears unto His people. Now not only are we to consider their brevity, but the uncertainty of everything here below. We cannot be certain of anything in the future, I know it is usual with the Lord's people to say they will do this or that, and we will hold services on such a day, "if the Lord will". This is very safe ground to stand upon, because we do not really know whether it will be the Lord's will that we shall hold services on such a day, or do this or that at such a time, though we may anticipate that we shall. It is very wholesome for us prayerfully to realise that everything is uncertain here, and that we know not what a day or an hour may bring forth. Many godly people have been suddenly taken home, almost in a moment; others have had a long, wearying illness; others have been taken in the prime of their days; and some have died in the flower of their youth.

Amidst all the uncertainty that seems to be enveloped round the brevity of life it is the comfort of the Lord's people to wait on Him. David appears to have been in a sea of trouble in Psalm 31, but he comes up from it and says, "My times are in Thy hand", and this appears to have brought him some relief. There is something very real about this. If we are really God-fearing people we shall realise the truth and comfort of it,

"All my times are in thy hand,

All events at thy command."

This can be a comfort to the Lord's dear people, for here they see them in far better hands than their own. When we can really feel this it gathers up everything of the past, and we are graciously exercised, it gathers up things in the providences of our lives, as well as our spiritual exercises, and we see them all in the Lord's hands. Changes in providence, unexpected things, unexpected steps in providence, unthought of things, have suddenly come upon us, they have opened up, and have been revealed to us as a path for us to walk in. This has sometimes been when all was dark and we were

filled with uncertainty about everything. How sweet when faith can approach a covenant God and say, "All my times are in thy hand", Some of you have seen them to be in the Lord's hand for your good. And what about the future? You will say, dark clouds hang over us; and so they do; dark clouds hang over the nation, it appears as though tomorrow (1.1.73) will be a fateful day for our dear old England, as we feel; but even so all is in the Lord's hands. When judgments come upon a nation they are in the Lord's hands, they are not in ours. But as we look at the future and the uncertainty of everything, if we really fear the Lord we can look upward and think of One Who reigns upon the Throne, Who controls everything, has supreme control. "My times are in thy hand", may be a quieting acknowledgment sometimes. Almost impossible things are done. I was reading the other day of a Chapel in Wiltshire in the olden days where the little company that attended there met with much persecution from other religious bodies as well as from the people of the village, yet the Lord blessed them, and there were several that strongly desired to be baptised; but they could not find a suitable place where they could be baptised. Eventually a certain man informed them they could have the baptising in some water upon his land. This brought a great relief to them; but just before the time came his mind was poisoned against them, and he refused to let them use it; but one of the good men said, We shall have it; and when they told those that were to be baptised that the water had been refused them, one said, "But we shall have it, we shall have it", then two of them went to see this man, and the Lord used what they said to him to move his heart to let them use the water, and he also said, "I will come and see it, and see that there is no trouble; I will come myself and be a witness", so what was apparently an impossible mountain the Lord removed. Perhaps some of you have a mountain of trouble before you, or a dark cloud hanging over you and it does not seem to move, but becomes darker. Now all these things are in the Lord's hands; your times are in His hands; He can remove the dark cloud or the high mountain, He can change the heart of a persecutor. "Is there anything too hard for the Lord?". It is the comfort of the Lord's

dear people that they can look above the heads of their persecutors to an almighty God to see Him work. Sometimes, as in the case of Manoah and his wife, some have been favoured to see the angel of the Lord do wondrously. The Lord speaks to His people in His holy Word saying "As thy days so shall thy strength be". "Thy shoes shall be of iron and brass", you would not need shoes of iron and brass if you were going to walk on a motor-way ; but the Lord's dear people need these shoes of iron and brass, because hard and rugged is the way often.

"So teach us to number our days". The reason for this is that "we may apply our hearts unto wisdom". Numbering our days then and soberly considering this matter tends to move the heart to seek the Lord. Wisdom here is not that we can be wise to handle things ourselves in a wise way, although as helped that may sometimes be the case. Wisdom has been given to the Lord's people sometimes to handle exceptionally difficult matters, and they have seen the Lord's guidance. When we can feel that the Majesty of heaven is our God it makes all the difference. The wisdom here then is to be considered in a higher sphere, this wisdom is the Lord Jesus Christ Himself. In Proverbs 8 the Lord is speaking under this appellation. We read of wisdom crying, wisdom inviting, wisdom leading, wisdom blessing. This is the Lord Jesus Christ pronouncing His blessing upon those who wait for Him and hear His voice. "Blessed is the man that heareth me". Here is wisdom. So, in a proper sense, it is to apply our hearts unto the Lord Jesus Christ to be our teacher, and that we may possess a saving knowledge of Him in the redemption of our souls. The Apostle Paul applied his heart unto wisdom when he said, "That I may know him, and the power of his resurrection". You ask the Lord to help you to apply your heart unto this wisdom, the wisdom of knowing the Lord for yourself, and not only knowing Him but that you may have an interest in Him. If we savingly know Him we have an interest in Him; we cannot possess a saving knowledge of the Lord Jesus Christ otherwise. A knowledge of Him is the evidence of our interest in Him. To apply our heart unto wisdom is to apply unto the Lord, to seek unto the Lord, for real teaching, to be made wise unto salvation, and that the

Lord may give us wisdom and grace in all matters with which we have to do. Some of you it may be have to say, I feel to need wisdom in many things; I feel to need wisdom, I am in a trial, I am in a difficulty, I know not which way to turn; things are so confusing, I do feel to need this wisdom. Where can you get it? It is in the text. Apply your heart unto wisdom; seek unto the Lord for it. Ask Him to give you that wisdom that you feel to need, because after all you cannot need anything beyond His power to bestow. "So teach us to number our days, that we may apply our hearts unto wisdom".

In the pilgrimage of the Lord's people we are exhorted to remember the way the Lord has led us; and as you look back you can see the way the Lord has led you. You will not have to say, I was very wise in everything I said or did; but you may have to say, in many difficulties, in some hard things, under some heavy things, the Lord was my wisdom; He gave me wisdom to cast it all upon Him. This is one blessed way of applying our heart unto wisdom, to take our matters to the Lord, whatever it may be, our enemies, and sometimes our friends.. There are many matters then, and perhaps you can look back to a day when you came to a pass in something, as we say, and did not know what to do or what to say; and you lifted up a silent prayer, Lord help me, Lord guide me, Lord appear for me. Has He failed you? O, say you, I do feel it is a mercy that in some things in my life I have had a God to take them to, and I have had to ask Him to manage them for me, to help me through them, and sanctify His dealings with me.

What is all this then? It is applying your heart unto wisdom. The Lord can give that wisdom which is needful, and particularly in soul matters. How then do you feel, some of you? Why, say you, I feel dark and troubled and weary, I am assaulted by the enemy; the Lord is silent, and I seem to come to a pass, as though I cannot go on any longer, I feel sometimes like casting it all away. That is what the devil has tried to do with me many a time. But what do you do in the face of all these oppressions of the enemy? You take them to the Lord, "Lord help me", His Word says, "There hath no temptation taken you but such as is common to man: but God is faithful, who will not suffer you to be tempted above that ye are

able; but will with the temptation also make a way to escape, that ye may be able to bear it."

Let us apply our hearts unto this wisdom then especially when we think of the brevity of life. Life is referred to as a tale that is told. It does not say it is like a tale simply, but a tale that is told, which has come and gone. So is life, it is soon gone. No contrast or comparison can be made between time and eternity. We can measure time, but we cannot measure eternity. Time belongs to this life, eternity to the life to come. We do not know what the Lord's purpose may be in things, "So teach us to number our days, that we may apply our hearts unto wisdom". In the highest sense then it is to be made wise unto salvation, to have a knowledge of the Lord Jesus Christ while we are here, and to feel a good hope through grace that when time shall be no more we shall be with Him for ever. Sometimes it has been confirming to read of how the Lord's people have been blessed just at the close of their days, some seem to have had what they never had before; they have had everything cleared up, have had such a blessing that they have longed to be gone; they could see what the natural eye cannot see here below of what God has prepared for them that love Him. So it is then; our life is short; there are some of us here that have gone past the assessment mentioned here; there are some here in the prime of their days; and there are some here in the flower of their youth. May the Lord bless you every one. And what greater blessing can our young people know than to apply their hearts unto wisdom as it may concern their temporal affairs or relationships in life, and more particularly their everlasting destiny? O may the Lord bless you every one and do not think me dismal when I say that however young we may be it is wholesome to number our days, solemnly to think of that eternity, humbly to breathe that prayer,

"Prepare me, gracious God,
To stand before thy face;
Thy Spirit must the work perform,
For it is all of grace."

This is what I understand by applying our hearts unto wisdom. Amen.