

The Goodness of Givenness
Numbered Days (Psalm 39:4-6; 90:9-12)
Preached by Pastor Jason Tarn to HCC on May 1, 2022

Introduction

- ❖ Last week I helped kickstart a new sermon series that we're calling *The Goodness of Givenness*. It's a series aimed at a dominant cultural narrative that's found in all our sources of news and entertainment. **We're talking about the modern idea of the Sovereign Self.** That's the idea that we have within ourselves – not just the ability to discover truth about reality – but the authority to create our own truth. To design our own reality.
 - Last Sunday, we considered how this idea of the Sovereign Self can be applied to **the issue of gender identity**. The contemporary discussions about transgenderism are rooted in the philosophical assumption that my given gender – as revealed biologically through my body – has no authority to define my reality (my identity). Transgenderism only makes sense in a framework where the sole authority to define reality lies within my mind (how I think about myself). Or within my heart (how I feel about myself). **The point is that the inner Self is sovereign and has the authority to reject external authorities – whether that's natural law, a religious text, or even the evidence of our own physical bodies.**

- ❖ **So when we speak of the goodness of givenness, we're trying to recover a biblical view of human nature – of the human body in particular.** Instead of seeing our identities as blank canvases and ourselves as artists creating something brand new, Scripture says that we are *not* the artist – God is. We are his workmanship. We are existing works of art.
 - Now sadly, we've been defaced and marred by the effects of sin. **So our job is to function as art restorationists – working to recover and restore the truth, beauty, and goodness of our given nature and given bodies.** So last week, we considered the goodness of our **given gender**. Next week, we'll look at the goodness of our **given ethnicity and heritage**. And we'll close the series with the goodness of our **given stories** – recognizing that, just as we are not artists with a blank canvas, we are *not* authors with a blank book writing our own stories. There is a divine Author of the story of our lives, and our job is to know him, know the plot line, and faithfully live out our part. And the whole point is that these given realities are not to be rebelled against – but to be embraced and appreciated.

- ❖ **This morning, we'll consider the givenness of our mortality.** The fact that each of us are destined to die. No matter how convinced we are that we're sovereign selves with authority to define our own reality – the stubborn and unbending truth of our givenness is that our bodies will age. They will decline. And will eventually die and become dust (Gen 3:19).
 - Of course, we try our best to ignore this reality. But we can't change it. We can't stop the inevitable. **But what if we didn't have to resist our mortality? What if we faced it honestly?** What if we listened to what our aging bodies are trying to tell us? What if we learned to number our days and to live in light of these given realities?

- ❖ That's what we're here to talk about. Now like I said last week, in this series, we're not going through a single text like we normally do. We'll look at a few texts dealing with our given mortality. But we'll mainly be in Psalms 39 & 90. We'll consider three biblical truths: (1) Our mortality is undeniable, (2) Our mortality is unnatural, and (3) Our mortality is a teacher.

Our Mortality is Undeniable

- ❖ Let's begin by considering how our mortality is undeniable. No matter how hard we try – and boy do we try! – we can't escape this fact. We will one day die. I know it's not considered proper to talk about these things. **We don't talk about mortality.** We don't talk about death. That makes people feel squeamish and uncomfortable.
 - We'd rather turn to our devices and various forms of media to distract us from dwelling on death. And we rely on technology to reverse the signs of our mortality – to slow down or to mask the aging process. **We have pretty much lost any sense of death awareness and have instead created a culture of death denial.**
- ❖ Now there are reasons why this is so. **On one hand, we don't talk about death because it's not as prevalent as compared to ages past.** Thank God that we live in a day and age where mortality rates have significantly plummeted and life spans have significantly increased. We should be grateful for modern sanitation and plumbing. We should thank God for modern medicine – for vaccines and antibiotics; for modern surgery. Things that would've certainly killed you a hundred years ago can now be treated with a prescription or procedure.
 - In past generations, if your children caught a fever, you weren't annoyed they might have to miss school. You were afraid they might die. If you got pregnant, on top of worrying about how you're going to care for the newborn, you had to worry about whether you were going to survive childbirth. That was a fact of life.
 - So before we talk about the good ol' days and how things were simpler back then – just remember that also means simpler developments in medical science. **So let's be thankful for all the advancements we enjoy.**
- ❖ But the lack of death awareness among us is best explained – not by advances in modern medicine and technology – but by changes in the culture. **First off, in our society, we rarely come in contact with the dying or the dead.** Unless you work in a hospice, ICU, or funeral home – or you serve in law enforcement or the military – you probably have rarely seen a dead body. If ever, it was likely at a funeral, in a casket, sensitively prepared for viewing. But in previous centuries, death would have happened where life happens – in the home. But now our loved ones take their last breath in a nursing home or ICU, isolated from most everyone.
 - I know many parents wrestle with the decision to bring their small children into the hospital room to see grandpa or grandma in their frail, weakened state, at death's door. We don't want to give our kid's nightmares. **But by shielding them from death, could it be that we're giving them a false impression of our mortality?**

- ❖ The psalmist takes a different approach in Psalm 39. **He prays for God to keep him mindful of his mortality.** To help him remember his death. Listen to **Psalm 39:4**, “*O LORD, make me know my end and what is the measure of my days; let me know how fleeting I am!*” The psalmist doesn’t want to forget about his death.
- ❖ The last time I was in Boston with family, we walked the Freedom Trail and visited all the historical sites, which included a number of churches and their graveyards (where a lot of the Founding Fathers are buried). **Just think about how sobering it must have been, to go to church every Sunday, having to walk past (or through) a graveyard where your relatives and neighbors are buried six feet under.** Think of the signal that must have sent.
 - And I’m fascinated whenever I visit these old burying grounds and examine the gravestones. The Puritan graveyards are the best. They’ve got gravestones with these engraved skulls with angel wings or crossbones. And sometimes they’ll have a Latin phrase carved into it: ***Memento Mori***. “**Remember death.**” Next time, instead of walking or driving quickly past a graveyard, slow down and look. And remember that you will be there one day and not standing on your own two feet. Remember death.
- ❖ I know that sounds odd to say. **But that just shows how good we are at denying the reality of death.** We market products to slow down the effects of aging or to mask it. We offer elective surgeries to help keep us looking young. We pluck out or dye gray hairs. And we change our language to come up with euphemisms for death. She passed away. He departed. She lost her battle. He kicked the bucket. We hesitate to say that so and so died.
 - **We have effectively airbrushed out the reality of death in our lives.** But to what end? We haven’t made a dent in changing the eventual outcome. We may not talk about (or think about) death as much compared to past generations. But death is just as inevitable today as it was back then. Nothing has changed about that. **We are still dust and to dust we shall still return** (Gen 3:19).
- ❖ There’s evidence of this reality all around us. Listen to **Bill Bryson** and how he puts it, “*We shed skin cells copiously, almost carelessly; some twenty-five thousand flakes a minute, over a million pieces every hour. Run a finger along a dusty shelf and you are in large part cleaning a path through fragments of your former self. Silently and remorselessly we turn to dust.*”¹ **Friends, the evidence of your mortality is literally all around you.** You can try *not* to think about it. But that doesn’t change the reality – you are mortal and will one day die.
- ❖ Now look, I understand, if you’re going to die one day and there’s nothing you can do about it, **then I can see how – from a therapeutic perspective – you’d be much happier for the remainder of your days *not* to think about the inevitable.** Why ruin the short time you have by fixating on the fact that it’ll be over soon?

¹ Cited in Sam Allberry’s *What God Has to Say About Our Bodies*, pg 118.

- ❖ Sure, that makes sense. **But what if there was a way to *not* stay dead?** What if there was hope beyond the grave? If that were so, then facing your mortality and talking about death would be good things. Helpful activities. Because then you'll have to think about the nature of death and its fate. **According to Scripture, death will one day die** (Rev 20:14). Death may be inevitable, but it's not immortal. Death will die. One day it will be no more.

Our Mortality is Unnatural

- ❖ This is why we need to talk about our mortality. Otherwise we'll just assume death is normal. But when we actually talk about it and look at it in light of Scripture, **we realize that death is *not* part of the natural order of things.** Which is our second biblical truth: Our mortality is unnatural. It is this way – we can't deny it – but it shouldn't be this way.
- ❖ This is an important point. **Because when we speak of the goodness of our givenness, we're not saying that mortality is an intrinsic good.** We learned, from our previous study of Genesis 1-2, that death was *not* part of God's good design for our bodies. It wasn't until the third chapter of Genesis, when sin entered creation, did death follow. **So in a Genesis 3 world, it's easy for us to see death as natural.** As part of the natural order of things. You know, the circle of life. That's just how it is.
 - True. But that's not how it *was*. **In the beginning, the Lord created Adam and Eve with bodies that would not die.** He warned them not to eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil lest they die. Sadly, they turned from God and ate. Sin enter creation, and death soon followed.
 - Now after Adam and Eve sinned, they didn't drop dead. But something did fundamentally change. Their bodies became mortal. **They were now subject to decay, susceptible to disease, and sentenced to die.** Death may not have been immediate – but it became inevitable for all of mankind.
- ❖ But the point I'm making is that death is not natural. **Death is a foreign intruder. Death is an enemy.** It was not part of God's good design. It entered creation through sin. Which is affirmed in **Romans 5:12**, *“Therefore, just as sin came into the world through one man, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all sinned.”*
 - **Death is the consequence of our rebellion, of our turning away from God.** It's the result of sin's curse on creation. That's what the psalmist recognized in Psalm 90. Look there with me. Let me read starting in **Psalm 90:7**, *“⁷For we are brought to an end by your anger; by your wrath we are dismayed. ⁸You have set our iniquities before you, our secret sins in the light of your presence. ⁹For all our days pass away under your wrath; we bring our years to an end like a sigh.”*
 - **So Psalm 90 acknowledges that death is not a natural fact of life.** It snuck in through sin. Death is the wage of sin (Rom 6:23). It's a result of God's holy anger set against human sinfulness.

- ❖ Now why is this helpful to understand? **First off, if our mortality is unnatural – if death is not supposed to be our end – then that affirms the rightness of the grief we feel when a loved one dies.** There is nothing natural about seeing your loved one lying in a casket. You'd think what's natural is for them to sit up and move. **When you see a dead body, everything about it just feels wrong.** And you're right to feel that way. Your grief is justified because it wasn't meant to be this way. Death is the most unnatural aspect of life.

- ❖ But that leads to the second reason why it's important to understand this. **If death is not part of the natural order of things – if it's a result of God's holy wrath against sin – then at least there's hope that God has an answer to the problem of our mortality.** That he has a plan to satisfy his wrath. And that's the good news of Christianity!
 - **The gospel says that God sent his beloved Son to be the propitiation for our sins.** That means Jesus served as an anger-averting, wrath-satisfying sacrifice by dying in our place on the cross. And all who trust in Christ are assured that their sins have been forgiven and God's wrath has been assuaged.
 - But it's important to note that the gospel doesn't promise that believers will never die. No, Christians still die. As we said, that's undeniable. **But the gospel does promise that – just like Christ – Christians won't stay dead.** Our hope is in a spiritual resurrection (at our conversion) and a bodily resurrection (at the end of this age).

- ❖ **Friends, if you don't share in the hope of the Resurrection – in the conviction that, though you die, you won't stay dead – then I can see why you'll do whatever it takes to distract yourself from contemplating your mortality.** I can see why you'll throw yourself into your work or hobbies or mindless entertainment. Why would you want to remember death – to think about everything you know and love coming to a crashing halt?
 - **But what if it's true that Jesus really did defeat death by his own death?** He didn't extinguish death – not yet. But he did master death and turn it into his servant. Death now serves as an usher leading Christians into glory.
 - The poet **George Herbert** said it best. He said, *“Death used to be an executioner, but the gospel has made him just a gardener.”* That's why it's said that Christians aren't buried – they're planted.

Our Mortality is a Teacher

- ❖ That's a very different view of death compared to what's found in our culture today. **But that's the power of the gospel – to transform something scary into something that humbly serves you.** And that leads to our third biblical truth. Death serves us an education. Our mortality is a teacher. The psalmist sees this in **Psalm 90:12**. After contemplating his mortality, he says, *“So teach us to number our days that we may get a heart of wisdom.”* Numbering our days means recognizing our mortality and remembering our death.

- ❖ According to Scripture, death awareness is not meant to depress you or distract you from living your life. It's quite the opposite. **Numbering your days is meant to focus your attention, sharpen your priorities, and make you wise in the way you spend your days.**
 - The biblically wise person doesn't ignore the evidence of his mortality but learns from it and gains knowledge. The biblically wise person prays along with the psalmist, "*O LORD, make me know my end and what is the measure of my days.*" (Ps 39:4) **We seek this knowledge – not to gain mastery over life – but to gain proper perspective and appreciation for life.**
 - So what do we learn from numbering our days – from contemplating our mortality? Look in Psalm 39, and we see three things to learn: (1) that our lives are frail, (2) that our time is fleeting, and (3) that our hoarding is futile.

- ❖ **First, by numbering our days, we learn that our lives are frail.** Again, v4 says, "*O LORD, make me know my end and what is the measure of my days; let me know how fleeting I am!*" The KJV says, "*that I may know how frail I am.*"
 - **The biblically wise acknowledge that our bodies are slowly breaking down and coming apart.** Many of you are young and healthy so you're not thinking like this. But some of you are feeling the effects of aging and know what it means to be frail. That's why it's so good to be in a community of faith that spans different generations, so that the young may learn from the wisdom of our elders.

- ❖ **The biblically wise are those who neither deny nor despise the fact they're aging.** They don't idolize youth and pretend to be younger – ashamed of their age. The wise appreciate the goodness of their givenness and recognize that aging is part of the human experience in this present age. **The wise see their gray hair as a crown of glory** (Prov 16:31).
 - The biblically wise are those who have put their hope in the Christ who has defeated death. They have hope beyond the grave. They believe they will rise again. **And that gospel hope reorients the way they perceive and process the natural signs of aging.** Listen to how Sam Allberry describes this new perspective on aging, "*Signs of aging are no longer a threat but a promise. Gray hair and deepening lines on my face don't need to speak to me of a past I can't recover but of a future I can barely conceive. The real glory days are not behind but ahead.*"²

- ❖ **The biblically wise – who have learned to number their days – know that, for those in Christ, death is not a final destination.** It's a door to a better world. It's not a wall; it's a window. It's not the end of the story; it's the start of a new and better one. **If that is true, then all the signs of aging should be viewed as signs and pointers of the coming Resurrection.**

² Ibid., pg 185.

- ❖ So by contemplating our mortality, we learn that our lives are frail. **Second, we learn that our time is fleeting.** Life is a vapor. It's a mere breath. Listen to **Psalm 39:5**, "*Behold, you have made my days a few handbreadths, and my lifetime is as nothing before you. Surely all mankind stands as a mere breath!*"
 - A handbreadth was one of the smallest units of measurement in ancient Israel. It was the measure of the width of your hand – of four fingers. **The psalmist says that the length of his lifetime is like nothing compared to the eternity of God.** Our life is a like a blip. A raindrop in the Pacific. A grain of sand in the Sahara. A mere breath that quickly vanishes.

- ❖ The same emphasis on the brevity of life is made in **Psalm 90:10**, "*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.*" In ancient days, living into your eighties would've been quite a feat. But compared to the eternal God who exists "*from everlasting to everlasting*" (Ps 90:2) – eighty years is nothing.

- ❖ The point is that when you know your time is fleeting, your vision gets sharpened. Your priorities gets clearer. You're finally motivated to focus on the things that really matter. **Imagine if your doctor gave you a bleak prognosis – you have three months to live. How would that change you?** What activities or pursuits – that dominate so much of your time right now – would you lay aside for something more important? What would you spend the bulk of your remaining time on? Who would you spend it with? I assume all of us would make significant changes in our lives if we found ourselves in that situation.
 - **But the whole idea behind numbering your days is that wisdom would compel you would make those same changes right now – even without a bleak prognosis.** The biblically wise knows that their days are a few handbreadths, so they'll begin living in light of eternity.

- ❖ And what would that look like practically? That leads to another lesson that can be derived from numbering your days. **Third, we learn that our hoarding is futile.** In other words, building up a nest egg and laying up treasures on earth is a fool's errand. Listen to **Psalm 39:6**, "*Surely a man goes about as a shadow! Surely for nothing they are in turmoil; man heaps up wealth and does not know who will gather!*" The NIV puts it this way, "*in vain they rush about, heaping up wealth without knowing whose it will finally be.*"

- ❖ Think of Jesus's Parable of the Rich Fool in **Luke 12:13-21**. It's also about the brevity and uncertainty of life. It's about a rich man who has more wealth than he knows what to do with. Instead of being generous and blessing others with his wealth, he stores it all up for himself. He hoards his riches. **He was under the assumption that he had ample goods laid aside for many years to come.** He thought he could sit back, relax, eat, drink, and be merry. "*But God said to him, 'Fool! This night your soul is required of you, and the things you have prepared, whose will they be?'*" (Lk 12:20) His plans were cut short by an untimely death.

- ❖ That parable is trying to convey the same message as this psalm. **The number of our days on earth are a given.** They're fixed. And there's nothing we can do to increase that number. The biblical fool is the one who ignores this reality and acts like his days have no end.
 - **But the biblically wise will learn to number those days and to live like they're going to live forever – but in a kingdom still to come.** Not laying up treasures for themselves but being rich towards God (Lk 12:21). The wise know that they will one day go into the ground and their riches won't follow. But, at the same time, the wise put their hope in the gospel promise that they will one day rise to new life on a new earth, when God's kingdom comes.

- ❖ Just as some Puritan gravestones were marked with the words *Memento Mori*, others carried the inscription *Resurgam*. It's Latin for "I shall rise again". **Just as we ought to remember death and acknowledge our mortality, those who follow a Resurrected Redeemer can thumb our noses at death and defiantly say, "*Resurgam.*"** I shall rise again.