

10 Benefits to Numbering Our Days Elizabeth Turnage

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

“Death isn’t a popular subject. We live in a society characterized by the denial of death. This is unusual because most people who have lived on this earth have given a great deal of attention to death. In fact, in every century except our own, preparing for a good death has been the goal of life.

We will learn to live well when we learn to live wisely. And we will learn to live wisely when we learn to realize that our days here on earth are numbered.”

Eugene Peterson, *Conversations: The Message Bible with Its Translator*, 871.

New column: “Number Your Days” (?)

If you missed the “Fourth Tuesday” column last month (still thinking about the title—what do you think about “Numbering Our Days”?), welcome to a new monthly blog focusing on the issues of aging, dying, and death from a gospel perspective.

Before you click away, even if you’re only twenty-five and think these matters are far removed from you, consider this:

Why you should number your days no matter your age

If you’re twenty-five, your parents are beginning to age, and your grandparents have entered their final quarter. Knowing a little more about some of the hard losses they face will help you to love them better. If you’re forty-something, you may be vaguely aware that you’re aging (what is it about turning forty that makes you suddenly need reader’s glasses or have more aches and pains after that weekend tennis tournament?). You’re probably even more aware that your parents are aging (and possibly your grandparents, since the fastest growing age group in America is 85 and over). If you’re sixty-something, you definitely know you’re aging, and you’ve probably already done at least a short stint of caregiving.

Moses, the man of God who began his career leading the exodus at the ripe age of eighty, knew a thing or two about numbering his days. He knew that being old didn’t disqualify a person from serving the Lord; he also knew that our time on this earth is fleeting. He knew that life on this earth could be full of “toil and trouble” (Psalm 90:10), and he could see from afar that a better promised land, a “heavenly country,” awaited him (see Hebrews 11:13-16). In Psalm 90, he asks the Lord to teach us to “number our days,” or as Eugene Peterson puts it in *The Message*, “Teach us to live well! Teach us to live wisely and well!”

In this monthly column, I hope to help us do just that. I’d love your input (titles and topics, questions and suggestions, struggles and joys, etc.). Please feel free to message me using the contact form or by hitting reply to this email if you’re a subscriber (subscribe here by checking Fourth Tuesday on signup). Today I want to consider briefly ten benefits of numbering

our days, that is, facing the issues of aging, dying, and death. We will explore these more fully in the coming months. If you're short on time, just skim the bold, and you'll get the main idea.

Ten Benefits of Numbering Our Days

1. **Numbering our days helps us face our fears regarding aging and death.** Let's face it, death is scary, and those of us who have watched others die know it isn't always pretty. Death, as we will discuss when we look at the biblical perspective on death, was not God's original design for his creation; it resulted from rebellion against God. Death is disorienting, and if we don't want to die, and we don't want our loved ones to die, well, at some level, we're normal. As we name our fears around aging, dying, and death, we will also discover the profound biblical hope of living eternally through salvation in Jesus Christ.
2. **Numbering our days helps us to embrace limitations.** If you haven't yet had the discussion with a parent about revoking their driving privileges, trust me, it's awkward. If you haven't yet had to move a parent who loved independent living to an assisted living facility, trust me, it's agonizing. The fact is, aging often brings increasing limitations on our independence, and we naturally resist these limitations. However, as Christians, limitations can lead us to be more like Christ, who himself, "made himself nothing.... being born in the likeness of men" (Philippians 2:7). In Christ, we can surrender to the indignities and losses that often come with aging and dying, because Christ himself surrendered to indignities, humiliation, and death.
3. **Numbering our days helps us to value the gifts and joys of this life rightly.** What we don't want to face about aging, dying, and death is the loss. Consider the life of an elderly person you know — what losses have they faced in the past five years? Loss of a spouse? Loss of a home? Loss of driving? Loss of health? Facing the losses of aging, dying, and death can, paradoxically, lead to hope, "Though our outer self is wasting away, our inner self is being renewed day by day" (2 Corinthians 4:16). Facing the loss we will all eventually experience also helps us to value the gifts we now enjoy—healthy bodies, family feasts, meaningful work—as appetizers of the great feast we will enjoy with Christ in heaven.
4. **Numbering our days helps us reclaim a gospel perspective on aging and the elderly.** The Bible emphasizes the experience and wisdom of the aged and declares the Lord's love and care for the aged (see Deuteronomy 5:16; Proverbs 20:29; Job 12:12; Isaiah 46:4). It features numerous] older people serving the Lord and giving him glory: in addition to Moses, consider Abraham, who at seventy-five was called to leave his homeland (Genesis 12:4); Sarah, who at ninety or ninety-one gave birth to the promised son, Isaac (Genesis 17:17); and Anna, who at eighty-four was one of the first to recognize Jesus as the redeemer (Luke 2:36-38), to name just a few.
5. **Numbering our days helps us counter cultural myths about aging and dying.** In Western culture, we are taught to fend off aging with hair products that cover our gray and creams that reduce our wrinkles; we are peddled cures for hearing loss and memory

loss and other losses of aging, some effective, others not. The elderly are often marginalized, mocked, and devalued. Their needs are considered inconvenient. To make matters worse, many elderly people have a sense of entitlement: the eighty-year-old woman who insists, “I can say anything I want because I’m old,” the ninety-year-old man who says, “I can drive my car if I want because I ran my own business for fifty years” [Future blog coming soon: The Age of Entitlement or The Age of Wisdom?] When we consider what the Bible teaches us about aging, we can counter the myths of eternal youthfulness, marginalization, and entitlement.

6. **Numbering our days helps to prepare our loved ones for crisis and death.** When my father was diagnosed with terminal cancer, I struggled to get him to fill out an advance directive, and because I wanted to avoid discussing death, I never asked him if he had a will. He did not. In the aftermath of his death, not only were we grieving, we were also lost. We didn’t know his final wishes, nor did we have a clear sense of what business needed to be addressed or what to do with his belongings. Conversely, when my mother died (my parents are divorced), she left a twenty-page file of instructions beginning with a sheet entitled “What to do when I die.” In the file were lists of people to contact, credit cards, financial advisers, insurance agents, important passwords, and directions about where to find her funeral wishes and information for her obituary. In the midst of my grief and confusion over her death, she gave me the ultimate gift, the gift of a guide for the coming days. When we prepare intentionally for aging, dying, and death, we bless the living.
7. **Numbering our days gives us peace and hope when a crisis comes.** Along the same lines, when we have prepared documents like the ones my mother had gathered, we feel more at peace when we are required to walk through a difficult health diagnosis. When the nurse asks, “Do you have an advance directive,” we can answer confidently, “Yes.” (For a helpful advance directive, go here). We know that if we are incapacitated and aggressive medical procedures must be discussed, we have left clear instructions for our loved ones about what kinds of measures we would and would not want.
8. **Numbering our days renews our hope in the resurrection.** While our culture, even Christian culture, too often focuses on the here and now as “our best life now,” we as Christians have a different hope. We acknowledge that we are “strangers and exiles on the earth,” “seeking a better homeland,” desiring “a better country, that is, a heavenly one” (Hebrews 11:13-16). Recognizing that we are dying reminds us of this sure hope, that we will be with Jesus, and with him, we will await the day he returns to gather fellow believers to bring them home to the new heavens and the new earth. We look forward to living in this better country, where there will be no more death, pain, or suffering (Revelation 21:1-5).
9. **Numbering our days gives us hope as we face the dying and death of loved ones.** As Christians, we do not “grieve as those who have no hope” (1 Thessalonians 4:13). We know that death is followed by resurrection for those who trust in Christ. The body may remain in the grave or the crematorium, but the believer’s soul will be conscious,

present with Jesus. Even as we grieve their loss, missing our spouse's hand quietly taking ours, missing the laughter of our five-year-old playing with the puppy, we know that they are enjoying perfect peace and joy, and we look forward to the day when Jesus will return, and we will be reunited with our loved ones.

- 10. Numbering our days provides a prime opportunity to share our hope in heaven and hope in Jesus with others.** Because her mother died when she was thirteen and because that death was never discussed or properly grieved, my mother had a lifelong fear of death. Years before she died, she was hospitalized with severe atrial fibrillation and faced surgery for a pacemaker. Before the surgery, she cried to me, "What if I die? I don't know if I want to go to heaven." I knew by now that my mother trusted in Jesus as her Savior. I took her hand and gently explained, "Mom, I don't think you will die, but if you do, you will be with Jesus, who loves you more than anyone on this earth ever has. He will welcome you to your true home, where you will live without fear or pain forever. And it won't be boring. I promise." She didn't die that day, but this past year, when she died in her sleep after struggling with Covid, I know she finally understood.

I'd love your thoughts:

What aspects of numbering your days have you found helpful? Struggled with?

What did I miss? What other benefits do you see of numbering your days?

Answer in the comments or shoot me a message. I'd love to hear from you.

Also, I'd love to hear any ideas you have for the title of this column. Now considering: "Number Your Days: Gospel Hope for Aging, Dying, and Death" and "Putting on Immortality: Gospel Hope for Aging, Dying, and Death."