

Psalm 90:12

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

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

Analysis

So teach us to number our days, that we may apply our hearts unto wisdom. This verse pivots from lament over mortality (v.3-11) to prayer for divine wisdom. Having established human brevity and God's eternity, Moses now prays that awareness of mortality would produce not despair but wisdom—living purposefully within our limited time. This is the psalm's practical application: let awareness of death teach us how to live.

"So teach us" (לְמַנּוֹת/limnot) is emphatic petition for divine instruction. Lamad (to teach, train, instruct) acknowledges that wisdom doesn't come naturally—we need God to teach us. Humans naturally live as if we have unlimited time, squandering years on trivialities. Only divine teaching enables proper perspective on time's value.

"To number our days" (מַנּוֹת יָמֵינוּ) means to count, measure, assign number to our days. Manah (to count, reckon, appoint) suggests careful accounting. We should know our days are limited (seventy or eighty years at most, v.10) and count them as precious, non-renewable resources. Unlike money (which can be earned again), time once spent is gone forever. Joseph's advice to Pharaoh—"Let Pharaoh... appoint officers... and let them gather all the food of those good years" (Genesis 41:34-35)—demonstrates wise planning when resources are limited.

"That we may apply" (וְנִתְבָּא/venavi) means to bring, carry, present. Bo (to come,

bring, enter) suggests active movement toward something. This isn't passive awareness but active application—taking what we learn about mortality and translating it into wise living.

"Our hearts unto wisdom" (לבב חכמה/levav chokhmah) identifies the goal. Levav (heart) represents the center of thought, will, and emotion—the whole person. Chokhmah (wisdom) means skill in living, practical understanding of how to live well. Biblical wisdom isn't mere knowledge but skilled living aligned with God's truth. Proverbs 9:10 declares: "The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom." To apply hearts to wisdom means reorienting entire life around God's truth and purposes.

The logic flows:

1. God teaches us to count our days, recognizing their brevity.
2. This awareness produces urgency to live wisely.
3. Wise living means investing limited time in eternal purposes.

Ephesians 5:15-17 echoes: "See then that ye walk circumspectly, not as fools, but as wise, redeeming the time, because the days are evil. Wherefore be ye not unwise, but understanding what the will of the Lord is."

Historical Context

Moses, at 120 years old when he died, had lived longer than most. Yet he wrote this psalm emphasizing normal seventy-year lifespan, identifying with his people's experience rather than his exceptional longevity. His life divided into three forty-year periods: Egyptian prince (Acts 7:23), Midian shepherd (Acts 7:30), Israel's leader (Deuteronomy 34:7). Each period taught different lessons, preparing him for his calling. This demonstrates wisdom gained through numbered days—Moses didn't waste his years but grew in understanding through each season.

Ancient wisdom traditions emphasized life's brevity. Egyptian wisdom text Instruction of Ptahhotep reflects on aging and mortality. Mesopotamian Epic of Gilgamesh chronicles the hero's quest for immortality after his friend's death—ultimately concluding that death is inevitable but meaning comes through legacy.

Solomon's Ecclesiastes extensively meditates on life's brevity: "Wherefore I perceive that there is nothing better, than that a man should rejoice in his own works; for that is his portion: for who shall bring him to see what shall be after him?" (Ecclesiastes 3:22).

Yet biblical wisdom differs from pagan wisdom fundamentally. Pagan responses to mortality included hedonism (eat, drink, be merry), fatalism (acceptance of meaninglessness), or despair. Biblical wisdom responds differently: because life is brief and God is eternal, invest in eternal purposes. Store treasure in heaven (Matthew 6:19-21). Live for God's glory (1 Corinthians 10:31). Make disciples (Matthew 28:19). Love God and neighbor (Matthew 22:37-40).

The church historically emphasized memento mori (remember death)—keeping mortality in view to promote holy living. Medieval monks kept skulls in their cells as reminders. Puritans wrote extensively on preparing for death. This wasn't morbid but realistic—acknowledging death's certainty produced urgency about living faithfully. Modern culture avoids death-talk, resulting in shortsighted living focused on temporary pleasures rather than eternal significance.

Jesus taught: "What shall it profit a man, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul?" (Mark 8:36). He told parables about the rich fool who built bigger barns but died that night (Luke 12:16-21), and the wise and foolish virgins who either prepared or failed to prepare for the bridegroom's return (Matthew 25:1-13). These teachings embody Psalm 90:12—number your days, live wisely, prepare for eternity.

Related Passages

Genesis 1:1 — Creation of heavens and earth

Colossians 1:16 — All things created through Christ

Study Questions

1. What practical steps can you take to 'number your days'—actively counting and valuing your limited time rather than living as if you have unlimited years?
2. How does awareness of mortality change your priorities, and what activities or commitments should you eliminate or add based on life's brevity?
3. What does it mean to 'apply your heart to wisdom,' and how is this different from merely acquiring information or pursuing career success?

Interlinear Text

סְכִימָה: לְמִנְ וְתַ
us to number our days H3651 So teach that we may apply our hearts unto wisdom
H4487 H3117 H3045 H935 H3824 H2451

Additional Cross-References

Psalms 39:4 (Parallel theme): LORD, make me to know mine end, and the measure of my days, what it is; that I may know how frail I am.

John 9:4 (Parallel theme): I must work the works of him that sent me, while it is day: the night cometh, when no man can work.

Deuteronomy 32:29 (Parallel theme): O that they were wise, that they understood this, that they would consider their latter end!

Proverbs 4:7 (Parallel theme): Wisdom is the principal thing; therefore get wisdom: and with all thy getting get understanding.

Ecclesiastes 9:10 (Parallel theme): Whatsoever thy hand findeth to do, do it with thy might; for there is no work, nor device, nor knowledge, nor wisdom, in the grave, whither thou goest.

Proverbs 23:12 (Parallel theme): Apply thine heart unto instruction, and thine ears to the words of knowledge.

Proverbs 4:5 (Parallel theme): Get wisdom, get understanding: forget it not; neither decline from the words of my mouth.

Proverbs 22:17 (Parallel theme): Bow down thine ear, and hear the words of the wise, and apply thine heart unto my knowledge.

Proverbs 16:16 (Parallel theme): How much better is it to get wisdom than gold! and to get understanding rather to be chosen than silver!

Job 28:28 (Parallel theme): And unto man he said, Behold, the fear of the Lord, that is wisdom; and to depart from evil is understanding.

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