

So Teach Us to Number Our Days 1

December 29, 1957

So teach us, or teach us so, to number our days. Or, if Thou will teach us to number our days that we may apply our hearts unto wisdom.

Now, I have a negative and a positive sermon. I have one for tonight that I think will be helpful and cheerful for everybody. This morning I want to talk to you. I trust you're intellectually and spiritually mature enough to be talked to plainly. And let me begin by saying that this we'll consider the last day, though it is not quite by two days, the last day of the year. The last Sunday it is. And I shall continue to talk as though it were the end of the year. And you will make such mental adjustments as may be necessary as I go along.

But this is the last Sunday of the year, which I have no doubt, when seen in the wrong perspective of history, will prove to be or have been among the most momentous of the Christian era for a number of reasons, which you may read anywhere and which I'll not take your time to enumerate now.

If you have been listening to the radio or reading the newspaper or if you have been a reader of Newsweek, Time, United States News and World Report, or any other of the magazines or journals that chronicle the news, you will have been finding out what we call, or learning what we call current history. But in this last year you and I have been writing a history which is infinitely more important than anything that took place in the Kremlin or Washington or London or Bonn or Paris. We have been writing a history which will probably not yet get into the books. But it is the history of our own lives that we've been writing. And that history will stand accurate and forever.

If you were to sit down and write up the last year and try an autobiography or journal, a diary for the last year, it would not be quite accurate and would likely be forgotten before many years. The reason it would not be accurate would be two reasons. It would be two. One would be a faulty memory, and the second would be that nobody quite likes to tell the truth about himself. And then, we would have to discount your journal or mine a little because we are more or less prejudiced in favor of the subject, and our memory would be faulty. Therefore, it would not be accurate.

But this which you and I have been writing, for though it is past, it will be there in our future. And it is being written with the thoughts we have entertained, the words that we have uttered, the deeds that we have done or left undone. How we dare not flip this book shut as a child flips shut a Mother Goose book or a comic book, as something that is amusing, but scarcely serious. We must close this book of ours reverently. And we must put it carefully away knowing that we shall see it again.

Now, think about this last year. During the year, we have been given a number of gifts from God. We have been given 365 days; 365 times since this time last year, the sun did rise and the sun did set. We have been given also, 52 weeks with 52 Sundays and 52 Wednesdays. Why do I mention 52 Sundays and 52 Wednesdays? Well, I mentioned them because we claim to be Christian. We say that we're a part of the stream of Christian tradition and thought. And while we're not Sabbatarians, yet Paul said on the first day of the week, let him. And the church has, all down these centuries except for splintered, little marginal splinters, the church has been meeting and worshipping on the day commemorating the resurrection of Jesus Christ, and not the seventh day which is the Jewish Sabbath.

And we have had 52 of these given to us last year, in which we could take time out to cultivate our souls and seek the face of God and hear the preaching of the Word and sing together the songs of Zion. And then we've had 52 Wednesdays, but somebody says, what's Wednesday. Let every man decide in his own heart what the day is. I've read that too. I know that's there. And I know that Wednesday isn't any holier than Monday or Saturday at 4:15. I know all that. But I also know that Jesus went into the temple at stated times as His custom was. He wasn't too big to recognize the custom of His times. And I remember that Paul went out to the riverbank where a prayer was want to be made.

There are those who say, well, you can't bring my neck under a yoke from which our fathers escaped. I refuse to come under your yoke. You said Wednesday is a prayer meeting day. And then you'll condemn me if I do not come, and thus you lay your conscience upon my conscience and we get quite a talk. But isn't it quite significant that the apostles, those great big men, those apostles, Peter, who went up to the housetop at the time of prayer. And Paul who went to the riverbank at the time of prayer though nothing in the law commanded it. They accepted it as an opportunity. And they fit it in with the people of their time, and they worshipped their God together. They weren't too big to do it.

And my brethren, let me say that the Christian who so interprets the New Testament as to free himself from the spiritual obligation to mingle with the children of God a few times a week, that Christian is not big, he's little. And he is proving his littleness by doing what he does. And though he says, I am a free man under grace, He is using the grace of God to cultivate his own carnality. The apostles and the Lord of all the apostles recognized that in every year, God gives them 52 days or 52 or more times, during the weekdays, during the week when they can worship God. It's once a week, or if it's three or five or ten times in the early church it was every day.

Well, these are the times and I'm not going to ask, but you've been writing history my young friend. And my older friend, you've been writing history. And if you were writing it, you'd no doubt

could put in some footnotes to clear yourself completely. But the history is being written by words and thoughts and deeds done and deeds left undone.

Well, in addition to the 365, or not added to them of course, but as part of them, you had 8,760 hours given to you last year, 8760 hours. If you just had 8,760 dollars and that was, and you weren't to have any more, you'd watch it. And you wouldn't say, oh, it'll only cost a dollar. And yet, I hear people say, it only takes an hour. Well, there aren't many of them. Twenty-nine hundred and twenty of those hours we've spent in unconsciousness, most of us, and some of you have spent considerably more. And twenty-nine hundred and twenty again we spend at work. And when you add going and coming, and getting ready, why, we have very many more than that taken off, leaving us maybe, maybe 2,500 hours. Twenty-five hundred hours that we weren't working or asleep or going or coming.

What were we doing? Well, there were certain things we had to do and that we properly needed to do. There was for instance: eating, drinking, bathing, dressing, and the little amenities that are ours by virtue of the fact that we're part of a social order. And that cuts down those hours a great deal more. And so how few of the 8,000 hours that God gave us last year, have we had to prepare for the last hour? And how few have we had to prepare to meet our God. And yet the hours, oh, there were plenty of them. There were plenty of them, a couple of thousand anyway. I'm just wondering. I'll not ask what we did with them. But anyway, during those hours we were writing history, I was writing history and so were you. And that is written in the Book of Deeds. It's written in the Book of Deeds. And though we are redeemed from hell by the blood of Christ, and though His righteousness is imputed to us, still, He is not turning us loose like unbroken calves or colts from the stall to run our wild way. We're disciples of Jesus. And He's given us these hours to learn of Him and to prepare ourselves for the last hour and to meet God.

Then have you noticed this little thing too, that during this last year your heart was busy. Your heart, that vital engine that pumps away most of the time you don't think about it all until you hear somebody died of coronary occlusion, and then you think about your heart for 10 minutes. Or you read an article in Reader's Digest about the heart and then you think about it for an hour. But mostly, it just goes right on.

And you don't think about it. But it's that vital engine which must not stop. It must not stop. If it stops, you can't keep going. It must not stop. And each hour it beats 4200 times if you're normal physically. And each day It beats 100,800 times and last year, you know how often your heart beat? Now, mine didn't. My hearts about 62 instead of 72. I always was slow about things. And my heart beats usually about 62 times to the minute. So, I got caught short here, but if you're an average 6 or 72er, I counted at 70 to make it so there would be nobody complaining. Your heart beat 36,792,000 times last year. And if it had just missed two or three or four of those, you wouldn't be here and the total wouldn't have been pile up. You would have been among those who

went from us last year, and whom we reverently laid away to await the coming of our Savior, Jesus Christ our Lord.

Now, those were the gifts God gave us last year. That's not all, but those are the ones we usually don't think about: 365 days and 52 weeks and 8760 hours, and 36,792,000 heartbeats. God gave them to us last year. And you know this? All of it was the pure mercy of God.

I wish I could live another 100 years just to find out a few things; find out some of the wrong things that I've been taught, and to find out the things that I hadn't learned yet. For instance, I think I'd stop making a distinction between the things that are of God's mercies and the things that are not. Somebody says, well, I go out and I work and I get my money. I buy my house. I buy my goods. And I walk on the earth and I, the sun shines on me and the rain falls and I drink and eat and live. And that's not the mercy of God. But if I get saved and accept Jesus Christ, that's the mercy of God.

My brethren, did you ever stop to think that God never acts any other way except in mercy? And that it just took as much of the mercy of God to keep your heart beating 36 million times last year as it does to save you by the death of Jesus on calvary? Did you stop to think that, that they, ever stopped to think that the 365 days God gave you last year were as surely an act of His mercy as when He gave you eternal life through Jesus Christ your Savior?

Did you ever stop to think that every hour He gave you and every heartbeat and every breath you drew were acts of God's mercy. David knew it. And David said, have mercy upon me O God and hear my prayer. Why, he meant that even God's hearing a man's prayer was an act of mercy. But we divide the world, we divide our lives up into two divisions, and we're schizophreniacs, religious schizophreniacs. We say, well, now this part, this is the secular part over here. This over here, I get that by virtue of the fact that I'm a man born in the world, it's mine, and that I have a right to it and all the rest.

Did you ever think that when you first sinned, your first sin, you violated every right to everything that you got when you came into the world? When you consciously sinned, your first volitional sin, and did it out of your own will, you forfeited your rights and gave up your rights and died under law, and that therefore, anything God gives you is an act of mercy. That car you drive, you say, I sweat for that, but who gave your heart the impulse to beat on and on and on and on while you sweat? You say that house God knows I've sweat for that. Who gave you the power to sweat for that house? Who breathed life into you and even though you had sinned, kept you alive and kept you going?

No, my brother. Don't you take all these gifts of God as being natural and only eternal life has been merciful. Why, every gift God gives you is as much a gift of grace as when He sent his Son to die on

the cross. Each day is a day of grace. Don't forget it. It's another day of grace. Long time ago, you were sentenced to die. When the political prisoner in England years ago was sentenced, "I sentence you," he said to the judge, "to die. And nature sentences you, Your Honor, to die," said the prisoner and walked boldly out of the room.

My friends we're all under sentence and every day is a day of grace. Why doesn't the sentence, why doesn't the sentence fall? The trial is over. The verdict has been brought in. The day that thou eatest, thou shall surely die. There is no use for any more evidence. There is no use for any more pleas from prosecutors or, or defense. No reason for it, it's already settled. God the Lord hath spoken and called the earth from the rising of the sun to the going down thereof.

Therefore, you're already under sentence. But the day of grace, every day is a day of grace whether it's raining or whether the sun gets out of bed before you do. And you wake to a beautiful, clear day. It's a day of grace. It's another chance. It's another chance to change. It's another chance to change. And it's another proof of God's patience. How utterly patient God is.

One of the great faults of my life, one of the great faults of my life that I have not yet conquered, I hope you'll pray for me, is that I can't be patient with people when I see they're so obviously wrong. But oh, how patient God has been with me and with you. And we've been so obviously wrong, and yet God has waited and waited and waited. He waits that He might be gracious it says in Isaiah. And that long, long, long waiting of God and grace and mercy and love. So, every time the sun rises, instead of getting up and grumpy, we ought to get up and say, thank God, thank God it's one more day. One more day I didn't deserve.

You know, we take too much for granted. We Christians, we take too much for granted. We say at the beginning of each year, well, we're, especially around watch tonight, we're pretty sober. And we say this may be the last. And ominous echoes of broadcasts that we've heard and news reports come to us and we say, this may be the last. But then, it isn't the last and we wear out another year and it doesn't wear us out. And we come up to the end of another year, and we say I was foolish last year for worrying.

Like when I was a boy, I used to go home sometimes from down a little way where I would be, maybe at the store or something down in the little town near. And I would have to come through a dark place we called Wildcat Hollow. I always said that they called it that because there were no wildcats in it. There never had been any in my time nor I think in my father's time, but it was known as Wildcat Hollow. And there was a road or path that went through it and the overarching trees. It was completely pitch dark. And as a young boy, 12,13 or 14 years old, naturally, I was scared.

And I used to make good vows and good intentions and pray a little as I went through Wildcat Hollow and then, when I came out of Wildcat Hollow into the moonlight, I forgot all about it. I forgot that I was religious and forgot I needed God when I got out over the dark places. Occasionally an owl would let go just off to your right, and it sounded like the devil himself and you were terribly frightened. And then your little heart sent up a little more prayer. But the moonlight somehow rather took all your fear away. And as you walked across the green sward in the moonlight, you soon got thinking about something else.

People are like that as the year ends and a new one begins. We're a bit serious. We say, well, this could have been the last year, but then it wasn't. We said that five years ago and 10 years ago. We're going to say it again now. But did you know my friend that that's likely to make us bold and arrogant, very likely to. For don't forget that all things have an end. The pitcher goes at last once too often to the well. The old tree braves one too many winter storms and comes down with a great shout in the forest and echoes across the hill. And the heart beats weaker and sputters out. It's been doing its little job so long we think, oh well, what's this worry? What's this worry. I don't believe what I read. Well, it hasn't happened yet. But all things have an end. And the pitcher goes to the well and the tree falls to the ground and the heart sputters out.

So, teach us to number our day said Moses. Teach us so to number our days. Teach us to number our days O God. You know that the Christian should be of all people the most serious. He should also be serene and brave. I'm always bothered when I see a Christian stampeding. Always when a Christian gets hysterical, I'm bothered. Why should a Christian get hysteric? Why should he get bothered? He should be serious. People who live for fun and live for entertainment and pleasure, if they see it going from them, they get frantic. But there's no reason for a serious-minded Christian to get frantic. The Christian should be serious and brave and serene. He may see humor in things. I don't say he shouldn't. And my concept of a Christian doesn't fit exactly with that of the monks of the early centuries. I do not think it's a sin to smile. God made it possible for the muscles of the face to pull themselves in a little web, coordinated web that makes the face look pleasant, and I don't think it's a sin. But a Christian ought to be serious and brave, and his attitude toward life ought to be serious. My great, my great grief over the modern churches is that her attitude toward life is not serious. She doesn't take it serious. Christians should be realistic and unafraid.

A Christian shouldn't have to have things kept from him. The Christian has a cancer. He ought to be told it, he ought to be told it. If there's anything wrong with him, He should know what. The Bible says this or that. He should know that. You shouldn't live in a fool's paradise to keep things from him. I trust my family will never keep anything from me. I'm a grown man. I've lived and suffered and sinned and been forgiven and pardoned and cleansed and I love God. And I don't want to live in a paradise of idiots and be happy only because I'm ignorant. I want to know. I want to know however I feel about it. I want to be realistic about this whole thing. For a Christian has no superstitions. And he has no fears. A Christian isn't afraid. He may have the normal instincts.

Jesus had an instinct that when He knew He was going to die, He sweat blood, because He was going to have the sins of the world poured upon Him.

And if I should suddenly poke my finger toward your eye, you will go that way. And the bravest soldier that ever lived in all the world would recoil if you started to stick a pin into his eye. So there's such a thing as the reaction. It's normal. That's one thing, but it's quite another thing to go about in fear. Go about in fear, afraid of dead people, afraid of numbers, afraid of tokens and superstitious things.

Oh, my friend, the voice of God sounds from above reassuring His people. Reassuring His people, lo, I am with you all the days. And I will hold thy right hand saying, fear thou not for I am with thee. I will not forsake thee. When thou passeth through the waters I will be with thee and through the fire, it shall not kindle upon thee. And down to old age all my people shall prove my gracious, unchangeable love.

My brethren and sisters we're not to be afraid. God's people ought to be great grateful. You can't be grateful if you're shallow. And you can't be free from fear if your shallow. But the plans you've made for after church tonight, I don't know what they may be. But if the plans you've made for after church are all filling your mind. If those are suddenly caught away from you, you will be disconsolate. But if God is enough, if God is enough, if you're a Christian indeed, and nobody can take away your plans from it. I plan to die in grace and go to see the face of my Savior. You can take that away. Nobody can take it away.

Well, a Christian doesn't plan to stay here, for he knows he's a pilgrim. I thought about this yesterday or Friday when I was running over all this, my getting ready for today. I really got this up on the train coming home from Nyack two weeks ago. But I put it in shape and rethought it for you. And I thought about this. The difference between a religious pilgrim, so called, who makes his long trip to Rome and returns, or to Mecca and returns, or to the Ganges River and returns, those are the pilgrims. And almost every religion has its holy place, and people go there and are considered very wonderful if they've made a trip there. The Mohammedans, and I think the Buddhists have a certain headdress that they, for which they indicate that this holy man has made his pilgrimage and returned.

But you know that a Christian pilgrimage is one way, and he ain't coming back. He isn't coming back. He's not going to go to heaven and return. He's not coming back until the restitution of all things, when God has made the world over and changed it and all that the prophetic teachers know so little about and described so fully. But in that day, my brother, we may come back. But, in the meantime, we're not planning to come back. We're not going there and return. It's a one-way trip, this pilgrimage, because there we're going to our Savior and be in where-- the house of the Lord forever.

So, let's be cheerful What is that song? Come let us tune our cheerfully. What is that song? We could sing that couldn't we? I think that's a wonderful song. Anybody that says hymns are draggy they don't know what they're talking about. There's more lilt in this and more dance and joy in this and there is an all the rock and roll that ever rolled and rocked. That song we're going to sing next, Come let us join our cheerful ayes as we surround the throne. Brother, if ever there was joy, you could have felt the swift beat of the angel wings in that song.

So, let's be cheerful. We're traveling home and we know where we're going. We know where we're going. We've had a good year, we've had a moment this year. We've had a year of writing history. But we've also had on our side God the Father Almighty and Jesus Christ, the Mediator, and also the Comforter, the Holy Ghost. And we still have them there with us. So let's be wise and let's be triumphant. Let's be grave and let's be serious. But let's tune our cheerful ayes and let's be happier than Elvis Presley. Let's be happier than all the Pat Boones and Rosemary Clooneys in the world.

Father, in a fear drenched world, we keep our heads above it and worship the Lamb that was slain. And thank Thee for mercy and grace and another day that's ours. Thank Thee Heavenly Father together. We rejoice that we're Thine. And we join with angels and saints and beasts and living creatures and elders and serphim and cherubim and worship the God who loved us and washed us from our sins in His own blood and made us kings and priests unto God. And now may grace and mercy and peace be with us through Jesus Christ our Lord.