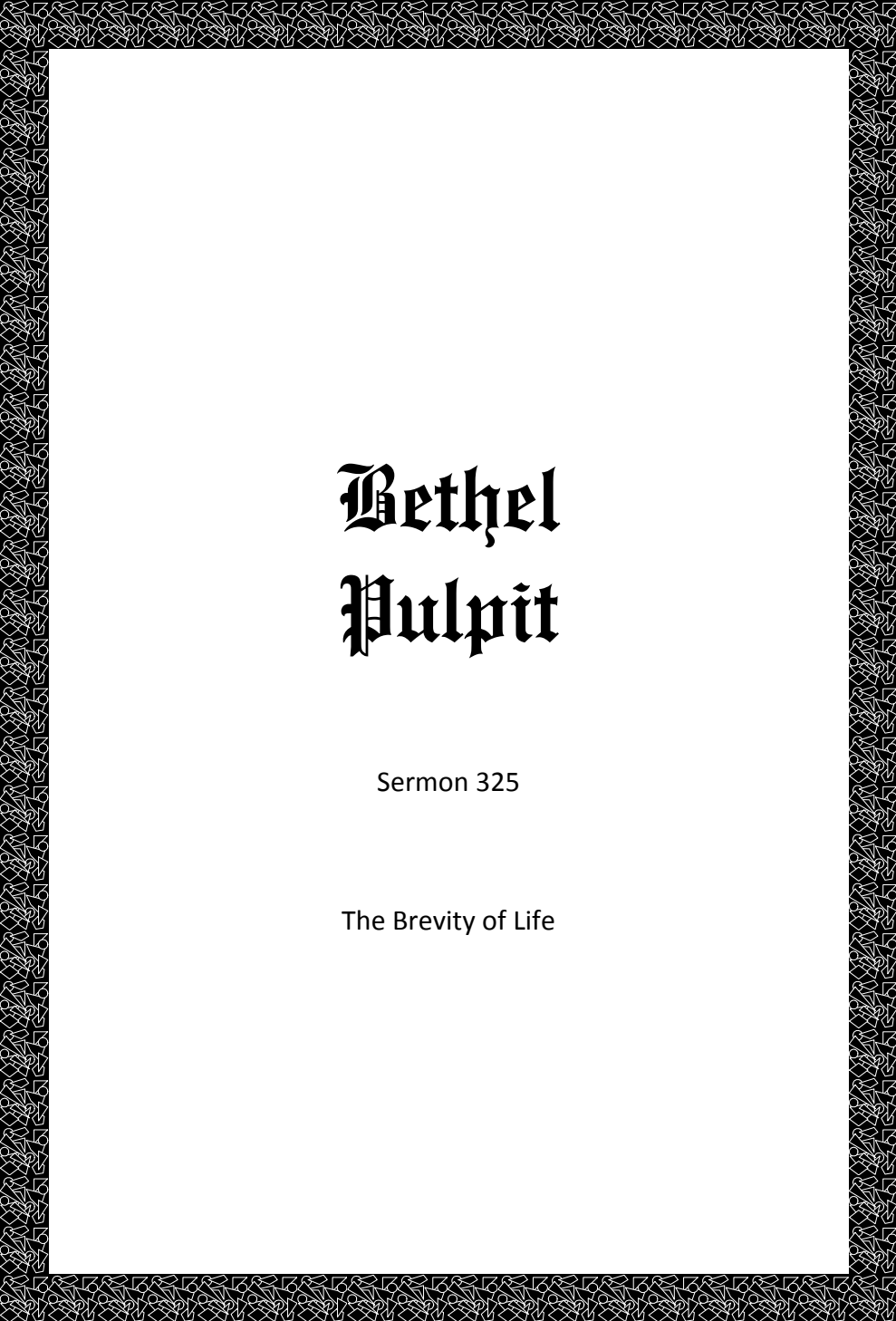




Bethel Pulpit

Sermon 325

The Brevity of Life

**Sermon preached at Bethel Chapel, Luton,
by Mr. B. A. Ramsbottom,
on Lord's day morning, 5th August, 2012**

Text: *"So teach us to number our days, that we may apply our hearts unto wisdom" (Psalm 90. 12).*

When Christianity first came to these dark islands in the early days of British history, the king of Northumbria called his wise men, his Thanes together, and they heard what these Christian visitors had to say, and there is the well-known story often told in British history. They were all heathens sitting there and an aged nobleman, an old Thane, stood up. He said, "It seems to me that our lives are something like this. On a cold, wintry day we are gathered together in the great hall and the fire blazing and outside all is cold and snowy and dark, and at one side a little bird flies in, and it hovers around for a moment or two in the light and in the warmth, and then it disappears the other side into the darkness and the snow." He said, "It seems to me that our lives are something like that. We do not know where we come from; we do not know where we go. We are only here for a little time. If these visitors can explain these things to us, then surely we ought to listen to them."

Well, beloved friends, that is just what it is. The Word of God *does* explain these things to us, and it is your mercy and mine if we listen to them, because we are just like that little bird, here for a little time. We do not know how long; we do not know how short. The Word of God does tell us where we come from. We were created originally by God. We were created righteous. But we fell in Adam, and as we come into this world, we are sinful and defiled, but God is still our Creator and He still has a righteous claim upon us. That little space, like that little bird flying round the hall, is given us for one purpose: that we might glorify God and enjoy Him for ever. But the vast multitude of the human race never have and never do and never will. It is your mercy and mine if we realise why we are here, and what a short time it is, and that time might be spent to the honour and glory of God, and above all that we might be prepared for when, like that little bird, after a little season we fly out at the other side into eternity for ever and ever, to meet our Maker, to stand before our Judge, to give an account of the deeds done in the body, to receive the

eternal sentence, either, “Come in, ye blessed,” or, “Depart, ye cursed” for ever.

So the great need is to be made right, to be made ready, to be prepared, and blessed be God, the Word of God opens up the way of salvation for those brought to feel their need. But O may the Holy Spirit enlighten our eyes, enlighten our hearts, that we might feel our need, that we might realise why we are here, that we might realise it is but for a short time, and realising our need of forgiveness, that we are sinners, that God is holy, that we have come short, we are guilty, we cannot make ourselves right, we cannot prepare ourselves for when, like that little bird, we fly out of the hall; to flee for refuge to Christ, to beg for His forgiveness, His mercy, cleansing in His precious blood. The wonderful revelation of the Word of God, the gospel, is this: that none ever sought His face in vain, that

“The vilest sinner out of hell,
Who lives to feel his need,
Is *welcome* to a throne of grace” – on one ground –
“The Saviour’s blood to plead.”

And it is an all-prevailing plea. It is a plea which has never failed. It is a plea that never will.

So Moses here says, “So teach us to number our days, that we may apply our hearts unto wisdom.” We need to be taught these things. We might think we know them, but we look back in our lives and at one time we used to go on as if we were here for ever. We did not seem to realise how short our time was, that there is an eternity before us, that there is a purpose in life. We need to be taught these things, to be taught them by God Himself, to be taught them by the Holy Spirit of God.

“So teach us.” It is a simple prayer. In a sense, it is a confession of ignorance. It is a confession of how little we know. It is a confession we need a teacher. Do not forget, this is Moses, and we are reminded at the top of the Psalm, “the man of God.” You read through the life of Moses. What an eminent man he was! He was so naturally; he was so as Israel’s leader. But he was so as a man of God, as a godly, gracious man, and when you think, this was under the old dispensation, before Christ had come, but the grace and the godliness of that man! This is the only Psalm he wrote, as far as we know. It is the only Psalm in the inspired record.

But he felt his need of divine teaching, and I think you will notice that with all the Lord's people, especially with David. Now look at David, the man after God's own heart. But in the Psalms he is continually praying, "Lord, tell me." He does not know all the answers. "Lord, show me." He is not sure he is always right. "Lord, teach me." You have it over and over again all the way through. You even have it when you come to the Song of Solomon, if you will, with the bride of Christ. "Tell me, O Thou whom my soul loveth, where Thou feedest, where Thou makest Thy flock to rest at noon." Tell me, Lord; show me; teach me.

This is a great point, and it is a great point for a young believer. "The grace of God that bringeth salvation hath appeared to all men, teaching us." Did you know that? The grace of God that brings you salvation does not leave you. It teaches you. It is quite a revelation for a young believer. You have started in the things of God. How are you going to manage? How are you going to go on? You have a divine Teacher. "All thy children shall be taught of the Lord; and great shall be the peace of thy children." So the Lord will teach you. He will teach you as you pray. He will teach you His way. He will teach you His will. He will teach you as you read His Word. He will teach you as you hear preaching. He will teach you at the prayer meeting, teach you in the house of God. He will teach you by correcting you. A great part of a teacher's work is showing the pupils where they are wrong. He will teach you sometimes by chastening and affliction. "If ye endure chastening, God dealeth with you as with sons; for what son is he whom the father chasteneth not?"

So this is a good prayer for each one of us, that we will not be left ignorant in vital things, in the things that really matter, that the Lord will teach us – He has not committed it to any man; it is His own work – that the Lord Himself will teach us. And especially this great, this vital lesson: "So teach us to number our days, that we may apply our hearts unto wisdom." Now would you say this is divine arithmetic? Moses wants to be taught to number his days. Well, he has just been doing it. He said, "Threescore years and ten," and then he said, "Fourscore." It is this solemn word, *so*. "So teach us." We are told in the Acts of the Apostles that as well as being a great man, "Moses was learned in all the wisdom of the Egyptians." He was a learned man, and one thing the Egyptians specialised in was mathematics. But when it comes to the things of God, "So teach us to number our days." It is that *so*. A little child could

number up to threescore years and ten, count up to seventy. *So*. That gracious *so*, that divine *so*, that almighty *so*. “*So* teach us to number our days.” He has been talking about threescore years and ten; he has been talking about fourscore years. He does not say, Teach us to number our years, or months, or weeks – *days*. And the emphasis of the Psalm really is how little a time we are here upon earth, even the most aged person, just here for a little time.

There is a text, “A time to be born, and a time to die.” I only ever once preached from that. I do not know whether you remember the occasion. It was on the Lord’s day morning and in the week before I had had two funerals. One was an aged person over eighty and the other was a baby. One aged; one a baby. “A time to be born, and a time to die.” I cannot remember what I said on that occasion apart from one thing. I said this: it does not say anything about any time in between. It does not mention anything in between. “A time to be born, and a time to die.”

Earlier on in the Psalm, Moses says our lives are like “a tale that is told.” You are listening to a story and it is interesting, and you are captivated by it, and suddenly it comes to an end, and that is it; there is not any more to it. That is your life and mine: “as a tale that is told.” O may the Lord teach us this, *so* teach us this.

“So teach us to number our days, that we may apply our hearts unto wisdom,” that we might spend our time wisely. Why were we given this little life? Why did God create us? Why were we not made an animal, a beast? Why do we have this little season here on earth? For the glory of God, but we have not glorified Him. We need forgiveness, mercy, salvation. But this little life, the preparation for another. But all of us by nature went along as if we were here for ever, perhaps at times just a little concern, but then we continued to go on. But did the Lord ever stop you?

“Stop, poor sinner! stop and think,” says John Newton,

“Before you farther go!

Will you sport upon the brink

Of everlasting woe?”

O Lord Jesus, by Thy Spirit, “so teach us.” I pray it for the whole congregation. The older I get, in secret I think of you all. Sometimes I go round you all. I do not want one to be left out. May the Holy Spirit in love

and mercy command His blessing here. The preacher cannot do it; your best friends and loved ones cannot do it. Only the Lord can do it.

O but may there be this prayer earnestly in many a heart here this morning: So teach me, Lord. Do not pass me by. Like blind Bartimaeus. I come so often to Bartimaeus. He was a beggar. He heard that Jesus of Nazareth was passing by, but he could not bear the thought that He would pass *him* by. He said, “Jesus, Thou Son of David, have mercy on me.” Do we believe what we do believe, that when we meet for worship, Jesus of Nazareth passeth by, that the Lord walks among the golden candlesticks? Do we believe He is here? But you do not want Him to pass you by. Do not pass me by, Lord Jesus.

“So teach us to number our days, that we may apply our hearts unto wisdom.” Well, the Lord’s people, those who have been blessed, we need to be concerned about spending our time wisely, that we may apply our hearts unto wisdom. We have that word in the epistles: “Redeeming the time, because the days are evil.” How do you redeem the time? One of our old deacons said, “Live every day as if it was your last.” “Redeeming the time” – seeking to live before the Lord’s all-seeing eye for the honour and glory of His name. We have that word – I know it comes in the parable, but perhaps some of you have felt it: “Occupy till I come.” Perhaps you are going to run away. Perhaps you are going to give it up. Perhaps you are going to falter by the way. “Occupy till I come.” We sing it, and I trust we mean it:

“While our days on earth are lengthened,
May we give them, Lord, to Thee.”

“So teach us to number our days.” They are only short. There used to be a hymn, I think it was a very ancient hymn sung in the Church of England:

“Days and moments quickly flying,
Hide the living from the dead;
On what hope am I relying?”

That is the great point, the great question. “So teach us to number our days, that we may apply our hearts unto wisdom.” It is for the Lord’s people as well as a warning to the ungodly. “So teach us to number our

days,” to occupy till He shall come, to redeem the time, to live wisely, to seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness.

“So teach us to number our days, that we may apply our hearts unto wisdom.” Well, the Lord Jesus had a lot to say about wisdom and about being made “wise unto salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus.” Remember He spoke about the wise man. He was one who was made wise. What did he do? He built his house upon a rock. His house – his life, his hope his profession. He built his house upon the rock. Of course, the Lord Jesus put a contrast, a foolish man, and it seemed his house looked alright. You could not see anything wrong with his hope, his profession, but it was on a sandy foundation, a shaky foundation, and everything seemed alright until the floods came and they beat vehemently on it, “and it fell: and great was the fall of it.” That is any life lived without Christ.

When I lived at Haslingden, on our way up to chapel we always passed a big General Baptist, Ebenezer Baptist Chapel, and they used to have a “wayside pulpit.” Sometimes they were very good, but one week they had this up and it made quite an effect, and people were talking about it: “We may travel the sea of life without Christ, but what about the landing?”

But the point about the wise man when he digged deep, he wanted a good foundation for his hope, his life, his profession. He wanted to find Christ, and he found Him, and he built his hope, his only hope there. And in the great day, when his days on earth were ended, “it fell not: for it was founded upon a rock.” In the early days of my pastorate, there would be a funeral sermon, and perhaps people out of the world or people in Luton, friends, relatives would come. I remember the first church member I buried at Bethel, and this was the text: “It fell not: for it was founded upon a rock.”

“On the Rock of Ages founded,
What can shake thy sure repose?”

“So teach us to number our days, that we may apply our hearts unto wisdom.” To be made “wise unto salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus.”

And then you remember again the Lord Jesus spoke about the wise virgins. You know all the details about it, the bridegroom and the ten virgins and the lamps they were carrying. They all carried lamps, all ten of them. If you looked at them, you could not tell any difference. Five were wise; five were foolish. But the great point about the wise: they were prepared, they were ready for when the bridegroom came. “Behold, the bridegroom cometh.” We will hear that cry one day, the midnight cry. “Go ye out to meet Him.” Even the foolish were trimming their lamps. I want to speak very lovingly, but trimming your lamps will not get you to heaven if there is no oil. What do I mean by trimming your lamps? We have a baptizing service and people’s hearts are strangely moved, and they start trimming their lamps, thinking seriously. Or there is a funeral. It is a close relative, a loved one, and you think of their gracious, godly example. You start trimming your lamps – What about me? But trimming lamps will not get anyone to heaven, because it wears off. I say this in love and affection. You cannot be satisfied until you have fled for refuge to Christ.

Those old, godly Scottish divines would not give a sinner a glimmer of hope until, to use their terminology, the sinner had “closed with Christ.” They were not being discouraging, but they had seen so many people who *seemed* to be concerned (trimming their lamps), and they were satisfied because they were concerned, and they never got beyond being concerned, and then they went back to their old state and back into the world. “They that were ready.” Made “wise unto salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus.” “They that were ready went in *with Him*.” You will never get in without Him. “They that were ready went in *with Him* to the marriage: and the door was shut.” “So teach us,” like the wise man who built his house upon the rock. “So teach us,” like the wise virgins.

“So teach us to number our days, that we may apply our hearts unto wisdom.” Now at first this perhaps seems an unusual expression. I do not think we have it anywhere else in Scripture. “Apply our hearts.” I am thinking of it in two ways, two different ways this morning, how we use this word, this expression, that we might “apply our hearts unto wisdom.” Sometimes there is a girl or boy at school and they are not doing very well, and yet they have the ability, and it is parents’ evening, and the parents are quite concerned – this boy, this girl not doing so well – and what does the teacher say? Well, he could do it if he wished; he has

the ability, but he does not seem to apply himself to it, or take it seriously, or really get down to it.

“So teach us to number our days, that we may *apply our hearts*” – not be careless, and not be neglectful, and not think of it as if it is something that does not really matter; to be in earnest, to be really concerned, for it to be so vital, for it to be so important. Some of you look back to those days when the Lord awakened you and you knew what this word meant: applying your heart unto wisdom. It was the one thing that mattered. It was with you when you went to bed; it was with you when you woke up in the morning, on the Lord’s day especially. O you were applying your heart to these things. You knew what that Scripture meant. It was well engraven on your heart: “One thing is needful.” And you had to leave all these other things.

“So teach us.” We need the Lord to teach us these things. And then surely these two things go together: being taught how short our time is, and then being taught to apply our hearts to wisdom. But just to linger on this point for a moment or two. You find in so many places in Scripture whenever time is spoken of, or our little lives here on earth, it is the quick passage of time; it is the shortness of our lives. To come to it simply and practically, did it almost come as a shock to some of you during this week when you pulled your calendar off and found we had already reached the month of August – most of the year gone, the summer nearly ended, and it only seems a short time since the year began?

But the Word of God again and again – wasn’t it Job who said it was like a weaver’s shuttle? If you ever went into a cotton factory and saw a weaver’s shuttle, you could hardly see it, it was going so fast from one side to the other. And then in another place, a completely and utterly different illustration, that our days are like the swift ships. Well, there seems such a difference between a weaver’s shuttle and a fast ship. You are sitting on a beach and you can see a ship. It does not seem to be going very fast, and suddenly you look again, and it is gone; it is over the horizon; it is out of sight. It did not seem to be going fast – it seemed to be going slowly – but then in a moment it disappeared from sight. There are other things: an handbreadth. It is not very wide. “Thou hast made my days as an handbreadth.”

But the Lord does not say this to frighten people. He says it in love. We have our little lives for a season. There is a purpose. It is important. They must not be lived to ourselves, seeking pleasure, honour, riches, comfort. There is a purpose in it. O but we need the Lord to teach us, the Holy Spirit's work in the new birth, in salvation. "Ye must be born again." "If any man be in Christ, he is a new creature: old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new." So teach us these things, Lord. Do not leave us in darkness, blindness, ignorance. These are the things that really matter: how our lives are lived, and why they are lived, and what will be the purpose, and what will be the end. "So teach us to number our days, that we may apply our hearts unto wisdom." Well, beloved friends, that is one way in which we use this expression, *applying* – that child at school, instead of being careless, now realising the importance of it.

"That we may apply our hearts unto wisdom." But then we use this word *apply* in a second sense, a completely different sense. There is something you want, something you need, and there is only one person in Luton who can answer your question, or give you what you want, so what do you do? You apply to him. So that is a completely different way we use this word. You apply to this man – either you write to him, or you phone him up, or you visit him. You apply to him for what you want, and he is the only one who can give it, so you have to apply to him.

"So teach us to number our days, that we may apply our hearts unto wisdom." And beloved friends, in all its fulness I take *wisdom* here to mean the Person of Christ. I am not straining Scripture in that. We have it in the Old Testament and the New, especially in the Book of Proverbs, especially chapter 8, Christ as Wisdom. "That we may apply our hearts unto Wisdom." You know what Christ says speaking as Wisdom in Proverbs 8: "Whoso findeth Me findeth life, and shall obtain favour of the Lord." Then of course you come to the opening chapter in the first Epistle to the Corinthians, and Christ is made to His people – what? "Wisdom, and righteousness, and sanctification, and redemption" So I have no hesitation in applying this word in all its fulness in a gospel sense to Christ. "So teach us to number our days, that we may apply our hearts unto Wisdom." How do we apply our hearts unto Christ? And do not forget, this is not just speaking of our mind; this is heart religion; this is

vital religion. It is not something just intellectual. “Our hearts.” If we apply to Christ, it is with our hearts.

So what do we apply to Christ for? Well, “It pleased the Father that in Him should all fulness dwell.” So you are a sinner needing forgiveness, and you apply to Him because He has it to give, and He has promised to give it. O but you need cleansing, and so you apply to Christ, His precious blood to cleanse you from all sin. And you need a righteousness because you have none, and so you apply to Christ for it. So you might go on. You need strength equal to your day. You cannot find it. You need the arms of your hands to be “made strong by the hands of the mighty God of Jacob.” You have to apply for that strength. And then wisdom itself here. So many things – in the church of God, in your life, in your hearts, your choices, your decisions, the future, your family, your work, your dealing with other people. “If any of you lack wisdom, let him ask of God, that giveth to all men liberally, and upbraideth not; and it shall be given him.” O whatever we need is there in Christ. You could go on. Your longing for the blessing. Well, it is in Christ. You need that loving sympathy and compassion. It is in Christ. O but it is mercy, O Lord, mercy I need. Now it is in Christ.

And how do you apply? You apply on mercy’s ground. You apply as a sinner. You apply as someone who does not deserve it. You apply because in the gospel there is a sweet promise and a loving invitation. You can say, Lord, hast Thou not said? Wilt Thou not also do it? On the ground of His faithfulness and His mercy and His love and His great salvation and His precious blood, and His covenant work. And it is by faith, and it is in prayer. It is at the mercy seat. It is at the throne of grace. It is in your helplessness. O the loving welcome, the kind welcome that this venturing sinner receives – shall we say, this applying sinner receives! May the Lord teach us this, both sides of it.

“So teach us to number our days, that we may apply our hearts unto wisdom.” I think I have often told you when I was a little boy at Sunday school, we seemed to sing one hymn nearly every Sunday, and it ended up like this:

“God give you true wisdom, ere death shall draw nigh,
To number your days, and to Jesus apply;

And O may you learn in His blood-sprinkled fold,
The knowledge of Christ is more precious than gold.”

Now beloved friends, that is just it.

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