

LENGTH OF LIFE

“All our days pass away under your wrath; we finish our years with a moan. THE LENGTH OF OUR DAYS IS SEVENTY YEARS – OR EIGHTY, IF WE HAVE THE STRENGTH; yet their span is but trouble and sorrow, for they quickly pass, and we fly away” (Psalm 90:9,10).

Again today I heard a speaker at a prayer meeting read only the part of the above verses that is written in caps. The point he brought to us was that we should not allow ourselves to give in to serious illness at a younger age; we want our full quota of 70 or 80 years! Yet if you put the familiar quote into its context, as above, 70 or 80 years does not sound particularly inviting, does it? Do you identify with the Psalmist: hearing the moan, experiencing the trouble and sorrow, feeling the years fly by? Or would you set the well-known words in a more positive context if you were writing the Psalm?

I do not believe God has promised us a certain number of years, nor even a long life. I also do not see long life necessarily as a sign of God's favor. I am familiar with Ephesians 6:2-3, addressed to children: *“Honor your father and mother”* – which is the first commandment with a promise – *“that it may go well with you and that you may enjoy long life on the earth.”* I can not explain these verses, but I have lived long enough to know that disobedient children may live to be old people and that all the precious children who die daily around the world are not dying because they dishonored their parents. Leaving these verses behind, I would like to explore my thinking about length of life.

The story contained in Genesis 3:22-24 has given me much food for thought. Here it is: *The Lord God said, “The man has become like one of us, knowing good and evil. He must not be allowed to reach out his hand and take also from the tree of life, and live forever.” So the Lord God banished him from the Garden of Eden to work the ground from which he had been taken. After he drove the man out, he placed on the east side of the Garden of Eden cherubim and a flaming sword flashing back and forth to guard the way to the tree of life.*

Adam and Eve had sinned prior to this event. They had also confessed, been told about the consequences of their action, and had been restored to a right relationship with God through a blood sacrifice (3:21). Then God, concerned that Adam and Eve might eat fruit from the tree of life and live forever, cast them out of the Garden of Eden and made sure they could never return!

While some see the banishment as unnecessarily harsh, I see it as a sign of God's mercy and his deep love for the people he had created. Can you imagine what it would be like to live forever on this earth in its present condition? Does it sound appealing to you? I DO want to live forever, and I will, but not here. The book and the movie, Tuck Everlasting, examine the issue of continuing to live (being unable to die) in a very creative, thought-provoking way. I recommend them both.

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The genealogy from Adam to Noah, recorded in Genesis 5, contains interesting information about the length of life. Adam lived 930 years and then died. Seth lived 912 years, Enosh 905. Kenan was 910 when he died, Mahalalel was 895. Jared lived 962 years and Enoch 365. Methuselah died at age 969 and Lamech at 777. Noah, the last in the list, lived 950 years (Genesis 9:29). The one who especially interests me is Enoch, who lived the shortest life recorded in this chapter.

In a time when it was not unusual to live more than 900 years, Enoch's 365 years seem short indeed. What sort of man was he? Why did he die so “young”? Twice in Genesis 5:21-24 we read that Enoch walked with God. In Jude we learn that Enoch was a prophet who went about warning of

a coming judgment against ungodly people and their ungodly deeds. And in Hebrews 11:5 we find these beautiful words: *"By faith Enoch was taken from this life, so that he did not experience death; he could not be found, because God had taken him away. For before he was taken, he was commended as one who pleased God."* It is clear that God and Enoch had a very special relationship. Could it be that Enoch's being removed from the earth was a blessing for him? He was a good man living among ungodly people. Think of Hebrews 11:37, speaking of people of faith: *"The world was not worthy of them."* Certainly it was not a punishment that his life here was relatively short. And it is the same today. God's ways are higher than ours. One thing I know: God does not make a promise (such as a certain life span) and then fail to keep it!

After the flood, the length of life dropped dramatically. Abraham *"died at a good old age, an old man and full of years; and he was gathered to his people"* at 175. Isaac died at 180, Joseph at 110. Moses was 120 when he died; Joshua was 110. King David was said to be *"old and well advanced in years"* when he died at 70. And that was the age that I considered to be old when I was a child, as shown by the following article.

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THE YEAR 2000: FROM A CHILD'S POINT OF VIEW

Written December 10, 1999 by VMK

It was April, 1943, somewhere around my tenth birthday. I was sitting on my bed flipping through the diary I had been given for Christmas, 1942. In the back of that diary were pages and pages of "Interesting Information," including a listing of the dates on which Easter would fall up to the year 2000. I checked to see if my birthday and Easter would ever coincide. Yes! There were several years in that span of time when Easter and my birthday would be celebrated together!

Then my mind went off in another direction. Would it be possible for me to still be living when the year 2000 arrived? I quickly did the math: I would be 67 years old on April 18, 2000, so I would be 66 when the year started. Sixty-six: hmmm! Yes! I thought, I might actually live until 2000, far away as that seemed.

One thing I saw clearly: if I lived that long, I would certainly be an old woman! My grandfather lay dying at that very time at the age of 67. Sad as that was, nobody felt he was too young to die, for 67 was quite old in 1943 – just about the right age for death.

As 2000 is upon us, I think of all that has happened since I was 10 years old. One of the most obvious is the extension of the average life span. Now, when people die in their sixties, it does seem young with so many people living to be in their nineties or even past 100! As for me, well, I know I am not young, that's for sure. I'm not even middle aged any more, so I guess I'm old after all! But this is just the START of old age these days. Who knows how long it will go on?

In the 1940s my Grandma Hicks, then in her sixties, seemed old to me, appropriately so, I thought, for a grandma. She used to take me with her to church sometimes for the Wednesday morning quilting sessions. A whole table full of "old" ladies would be there, fingers nimbly sewing while they chatted away, having FUN! Grandma said to me, "We may be old on the outside, but on the inside we're just young girls." Now I know what she meant and she was right!

The Apostle Paul says it beautifully in 2 Corinthians 4:16: *"Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day."* How true! I am well aware that no one would look at me and think me young anymore. I don't mind being referred to as old, for outwardly I am! But in my mind I often feel like a young girl, not far removed from the ten year old who sat on her bed reading her diary ... HOW MANY YEARS AGO??!!

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Two people who died young have greatly influenced my life. In both cases I can't imagine that longer life would have lead to a greater impact for the Lord. One is Sammy Morris, a young man from Liberia, Africa who died over a hundred years ago at age twenty; and the other is Anna, who died in the late 1930s before she was eight years old. Her story is told in Mr. God. This Is Anna by Fynn. Both of their stories were brought to my attention in such unusual ways that I am sure God wanted me to know and learn from these wonderful people. How I thank God for them!

Sammy (not his original name) was a Kru tribesman in Liberia who had been captured by a rival tribe and was being held for ransom. As time went on, he was brutally tortured until one day he heard someone call his name and tell him to flee. Miraculously, he was able to get away, and following a light through the jungle, he arrived at a mission station. There he found out about the One who had called him and set him free.

Sammy is known for his deep, simple faith in God. This faith lead him to Taylor University in Indiana where he began his studies for the purpose of learning more about the Holy Spirit. He influenced people for God everywhere he went, causing revivals to break out through his speaking and his example. Sammy was at Taylor less than two years before his death. At his memorial service several students said they felt the call to go to Africa as missionaries in Sammy's place, and for many years that practice continued. Books (some still in print) and a video called Angel in Ebony still spread Sammy's story worldwide.

I think the most amazing tribute to the power of Sammy's faith is in and around Taylor University. On the campus is Sammy Morris Hall, named for a person who didn't even graduate and whose only asset was his faith. And in the 1990s, one hundred years after his death, three more-than-life-size statues of Sammy were erected and dedicated to his memory. And at his grave in a nearby cemetery, people still gather to be near the spirit of Sammy Morris. Sometimes lives are changed there. I was one of those who had to go to Indiana in search of Sammy. I both stood at his grave and saw the statues dedicated. Oh, to be able to draw people to God whether living on earth or in Heaven, like Sammy Morris!

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Anna, a homeless four year old in London in the 1930s, was found by a young man named Fynn, the author of her story. Fynn took the child to the home he shared with his mother and several others. Anna lived as a happy member of their household for the rest of her short life. Anna had a profound love for God and a deep respect as well, always referring to him as Mr. God. Above all, she ENJOYED God. Anna would laugh and say, "Isn't Mr. God wonderful?!" And, as I read the book, my heart would chime a response: "Oh, yes, Anna. Mr. God IS wonderful!"

Not all of Anna's theology was technically correct – after all, consider her age! – but in other ways she was head and shoulders above much older believers in her understanding of God. I cannot imagine where her thinking would have taken her had she lived to adulthood. Anna is a fine example of one who loved the Lord her God with all her heart and soul and mind and strength – and her neighbor as herself. I'm so glad I "met" her!

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2 Kings 20 records a "length of life" story concerning King Hezekiah, one of the kings of Judah who did what was right in the eyes of the Lord. He receives high praise in the scriptures: *"Hezekiah trusted in the Lord, the God of Israel. There was no one like him among all the kings of Judah, either before him or after him. He held fast to the Lord and did not cease to follow him; he kept the commands the Lord had given Moses. And the Lord was with him; he was successful in whatever he*

undertook" (2 Kings 18:5-7).

One day "Hezekiah became ill and was at the point of death. The prophet Isaiah ... went to him and said, 'This is what the Lord says: Put your house in order, because you will die; you will not recover.' Hezekiah turned his face to the wall and prayed to the Lord, 'Remember, O Lord, how I have walked before you faithfully and with wholehearted devotion and have done what is good in your eyes.' And Hezekiah wept bitterly" (2 Kings 20:1-3). The Lord sent Isaiah back to Hezekiah with a new message: "I have heard your prayer and seen your tears; I will heal you ... I will add fifteen years to your life" (2 Kings 20:5,6).

After Hezekiah's healing an incident is recorded in which the pride in the king's heart was exposed, bringing Isaiah back with a message of judgment from the Lord. And three years after the healing Hezekiah's son Manasseh, who succeeded him, was born. Of Manasseh it is written: "He has done more evil than the Amorites who preceded him and has led Judah into sin with his idols" (2 King 21:11). Yet some today see Hezekiah's life extension as so desirable that they want to have God lengthen their lives in the same way, as if this story contains a pattern and a promise (or at least a hope).

Hezekiah died at the age of 54. The story of his "extra" fifteen years brings many questions to my mind. I wonder: How developed was the thought of life after death in Hezekiah's time? Did Hezekiah think – as many do today – that death ends the existence of people, even people of faith? Is that why he preferred life on earth to death? How did he feel when the fifteen years were almost up? Did he ever regret his request?

We who live now have an advantage over Hezekiah. We can read the words of Jesus about the place he is preparing for us. We have the apostle Paul's exciting testimony that Heaven is better by far than earth. With our fuller understanding of life after death, more questions come to mind: Why do we fight so hard to extend our time on earth, seeing death as such a tragedy? Why do we struggle to keep our loved ones with us, rather than let them move to Heaven? Why do we talk about people dying "too soon"? What age would we think is just right for death? Even Jesus died at age 33, not in old age. Certainly that was the "right time" for him.

I cannot enter into Hezekiah's mind set to figure out his reasoning, nor should I try. Not all people of faith think the same about ageing and dying. Many years ago my young daughter said something simple yet profound: "People are different." Yes, they are, Marty. And so I will let Hezekiah be Hezekiah and let you be you, while I will try to be true to myself.

No matter how many or how few years we live on earth it will all seem like the blink of an eye when we enter eternity. Just think: Heaven will have no clocks, no calendars, not even day and night – NOTHING to remind us of time. THERE we will not feel cheated if we did not reach 70 or 80 years on earth. THERE life really begins – and never ends!

The QUALITY of our lives on earth should matter more than the length. I like the image of our earthly life as the preface to the book of eternity, or the overture to eternity's opera. Let's write good prefaces and melodic overtures! "Teach us to number our days aright, that we may gain a heart of wisdom" (Psalm 90:12).