

A prayer of Moses the man of God.

¹ Lord, you have been our dwelling place
throughout all generations.

² Before the mountains were born
or you brought forth the whole world,
from everlasting to everlasting you are
God.

³ You turn people back to dust,
saying, "Return to dust, you mortals."

⁴ A thousand years in your sight
are like a day that has just gone by,
or like a watch in the night.

⁵ Yet you sweep people away in the sleep
of death—
they are like the new grass of the
morning:

⁶ In the morning it springs up new,
but by evening it is dry and withered.

⁷ We are consumed by your anger
and terrified by your indignation.

⁸ You have set our iniquities before you,
our secret sins in the light of your
presence.

⁹ All our days pass away under your wrath;
we finish our years with a moan.

¹⁰ Our days may come to seventy years,
or eighty, if our strength endures;
yet the best of them are but trouble and
sorrow,
for they quickly pass, and we fly away.

¹¹ If only we knew the power of your
anger!
Your wrath is as great as the fear that is
your due.

¹² Teach us to number our days,
that we may gain a heart of wisdom.

¹³ Relent, LORD! How long will it be?
Have compassion on your servants.

¹⁴ Satisfy us in the morning with your
unfailing love,
that we may sing for joy and be glad all
our days.

¹⁵ Make us glad for as many days as you
have afflicted us,
for as many years as we have seen
trouble.

¹⁶ May your deeds be shown to your
servants,
your splendor to their children.

¹⁷ May the favor ^[a] of the Lord our God
rest on us;
establish the work of our hands for us—
yes, establish the work of our hands.

The first person I'd like to tell you about is my former colleague, Greg Rapkins. Greg and I taught together for four years in Hong Kong, sharing a cramped office with three other Science teachers that overlooked the school driveway. He was tall, barrel-chested and broad shouldered, and had a black moustache with matching curly hair that made him look a bit like a caricature of a carnival strongman. The kid's nickname for Greg was "Fo Che", or "train"; possibly given to him because of the way he would steam down crowded hallways during breaks trailing the scent of his trademark aftershave. I don't usually care much for aftershave on others, but when Greg wore it, it made me want to sit on his knee and have him tell me stories about the old days.

Although we weren't much alike, Greg was a personal favourite of mine. He was always friendly, always professional, a great physics teacher, and could always be counted on to burst through the office door and express staffwide frustration by sighing "*bloody 'ell*" in his thick Brisbane accent. Greg was a survivor—of tropical diseases, of snake bites, of Australian footie matches, and of divorce. There was not a tougher man alive than Greg Rapkins, a man who would seem as at home busting heads outside some seedy biker bar or writing about high-energy in his textbook "*New Century Senior Physics*"—published in 1999 by Oxford University Press. Greg was one of a kind, a dynamo of raw masculine energy. Greg could have had his name swapped out in any number of Chuck Norris jokes and it would have all seemed terribly appropriate: "Greg Rapkins can kill two stones with one bird"; "Apple pays Greg Rapkins 99 cents every time he listens to a song"; and "when the Boogeyman goes to sleep at night, he checks his closet for Greg Rapkins."

I found out a few days ago that Greg passed away last week from cancer. No one, not even my friend Greg, can escape the turning of time.

My second story is about someone you think you know: Barack Obama. Yet I will not speak so much about the man as I will the campaign he waged not just to become President, but also his campaign against rampant hopelessness with his slogan “yes we can”. Sure, as president of the United States he is quite possibly the world’s most powerful man, and as America’s chosen leader he is in a unique position to try and effect change—but it remains to be seen whether his time in office will effect a permanent change in the course of human history. Can Obama stop war? Can Obama stop sex trafficking? Can Obama conquer addiction? Can Obama cure loneliness?

What we know is that the odds are against Obama saving the world. This is not because we cannot hope for better, but because when we study history, we can only be left humbled by our propensity for destruction of many kinds, and cynical about any redemptive project that begins with us.

By now, you may be asking what Greg Rapkins has to do with Barack Obama. I brought them up because their stories intersect at this prayer: what strength can carry us beyond our death? When will hope be fulfilled? The invitation of the text before us today is a meditation upon these questions from the perspective of one who looks at humanity and not only shakes his head, but hopes for more, for something that lasts beyond the veil of death.

The Psalmist, identified as Moses, begins by considering what is permanent: *“Before the mountains were born or you brought forth the whole world, from everlasting*

to everlasting you are God.” For the Psalmist, the fixed point around which time turns is the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. This is not the “A” in our “ACTS” prayers where a cursory phrase of adoration is given before we get to asking for stuff. This is simply a statement of fact: that God’s experience of time is different than our own. What binds and conditions us does not bind or condition God. As if recognizing the complete *otherness* of God that the Psalmist begins his prayer by addressing God as *Adonai*, “Lord”—an impersonal term that was used in the Ancient Near East for kings as well as gods.

This recognition is an essential part of the Psalm because it sets the stage for a contemplation of our own transitory existences. We who are relatively young tend to live as though we have an inexhaustible store of years, but we all know that we do not, and just as the sand in an hourglass runs out, so will our time end here. Some think that contemplating our eventual deaths is a terrible thing, a reason for sadness and melancholy. Talking about death at parties is a universal no-no because our cultural perspective on death is stunted and screwed up. The reason we feel terror at the thought of heartstop-brainstop is that we inherently think that there is more to us than a collection of biological processes. In order to begin numbering our days rightly, we need to first number them against the one whose days are innumerable. A right contemplation of the measure of our lives does not begin with how much we have left on this side of death, but with a contemplation of eternity.

Yet if talking about death is hard, then talking about the wrath of God is even harder. Our world is comfortable with a permissive God who waves and smiles from a

gilded horse-drawn carriage like the Queen touring some Commonwealth country. It is the thought of a God who is more and does more that scares us—yet the wrath of God is not the sort of anger we might feel at a personal affront like someone cutting us off in traffic. The anger of God is routinely reserved for humanity’s sad situation, like a mother who watches her toddler playing in the middle of the street. It is divine disappointment with the way everything has gone wrong.

In order to understand what has gone wrong, we need to return to the story of the Fall of Humanity when the serpent says to the woman, “*when you eat of this fruit, your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God.*”¹ The temptation and our fallenness had little to do with eating some arbitrary fruit, but it has everything to do with desiring to have everything our own way and to become gods unto ourselves. Perhaps this is a strange message given the prevailing cultural climate that openly promotes everyone as their own god or goddess. Yet this is the discernment of the Creator upon the created: that we were not made for our own ends, but for joyful stewardship. As Bob Dylan once famously penned, you’re gonna have to serve somebody—and the greatest lie we perpetrate is that the pinnacle of our existence is to only serve ourselves and fulfill our own dreams.

God’s wrath, then, is not just anger at our moral shortcomings or the things we do wrong, but as this prayer points out, the anger of God is directed at what is secret and what we hide from the world, from our loved ones, and even from ourselves

¹ Gen 3:4

because the truth is too difficult to bear. The wrath of God is directed at the source of our mortality, the reason why we end our years with a sigh—that in our heart of hearts, the deep places beneath our imagining, we are not convinced that God is the source and sustainer of our lives.

It is in light of God's eye on our hidden natures that the Psalmist then says "*give me a heart of wisdom*". The call to number our days is not a call to live in fear of our deaths, but a request for humility—to live in light of the fact that we will die. When we live close to our deaths, in full acceptance of our mortality, the so-called important things we exhaust ourselves to accomplish rightly become inconsequential. We know that having a bigger house or nicer car or a more exotic vacation are shallow pursuits—yet even the Christianly things that we think are of eternal worth are things we leave behind when we finish our years with a sigh. The time for this church will pass. Our music will be stilled. Our friendships will wither. And these words I speak to you now shall also fall like leaves at the end of summer.

Yet here, at the end of all things, is where the Psalmist looks for what lasts. Not in stuffing our bourgeoisie faces. Not in bigger church buildings or more impressive sermons. Not even in feeding the hungry or clothing the poor. The only things that last are the things we hide in God, and if we hide our lives in Christ, our deaths no longer become the end. Instead, they become beginnings.

Meditating on our transitoriness is not a twisted longing for the tragic. It is meant to teach us to value what remains after we shuffle off this mortal coil. We see through

the veil of death into what a great kingdom lies beyond, but before we go on, what we do here must bear witness to the one whose Kingdom invades the here and now.

This is where the Psalmist's prayer leads us: to a consideration of what it means to store up treasure in heaven. Some of us might be under the impression that what lasts are the things we do here on earth—even those things we do in the name of Jesus. Yet history teaches us that simple charity fades in the face of the stark reality that Jesus himself tells us that poor, the wounded, the starving, and the marginalized will always be with us.² The work of caring for orphans and widows is, in this life, endless.

So what is it that God wants from us? If it is not to be little saviours of the world and messiahs unto ourselves, then what can we take with us? In answering this question it is good to ask what we will have when we finally see Jesus face to face. Will it be the number of mission trips we've gone on? Will it be the amount of money we give to the needy? Will it even be the words I speak Sunday after Sunday? No, all this will fade, because the only thing we will have with us are our hearts. No excuses, no hiding, no righteousness apart from Christ's—this is all we will have. Thus it is not the work itself that God is interested in, it is our hearts.

² Mark 14:7, Matthew 26:11