

“Remembering the Deceased”

Psalm 90:1–12

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Psalm 90:1–12 (PowerPoint)

Preface

This thick Bible, written on a vast scale by about forty people over the span of two thousand years, while being used by God, consistently speaks from beginning to end about one most serious theme — the death of man.

Above all, the one event that grieves and wounds the Creator God, who made the heavens and the earth, more than anything else, and that He simply cannot remain still about — an event that shakes heaven and earth — is the death of the human being who alone was created in the image of God.

The Bible teaches us that “human beings were originally the only creatures made by God in His image, to live an eternal life. But because they failed to value what is most important for humans — ‘to honor God as God’ — and became as if they forgot Him, they lost eternal life and became beings who die as the wages of sin.”

And it tells us that “that death itself is the most fundamental and greatest problem for humankind, and that all other problems in human life originate and arise from it.”

In other words, “all our sorrows and all our pains come from this problem of death.”

Perhaps that is why, every year when we look again at the photos of our fathers and mothers, grandfathers and grandmothers, brothers and sisters, or children who have gone to be with the Lord before us — the photos of the family of God in Christ with whom we once lived our church life together — when we look at them again like this, somehow the same sadness wells up each year, and tears come to our eyes that we cannot hold back.

The Memorial Service for the Deceased is a special time of worship for us — for those of us who remain — to worship the Lord our God who has prepared the heavenly home where we will live eternal life.

At the same time, as we remember together those who have gone before us into the presence of God, it is also a precious moment in which, while being comforted by the hope of resurrection in Christ, we are allowed to experience a joy that surpasses our sorrow. And yet, still, the death of human beings — the death of our loved ones — brings forth a deep loneliness that wells up within.

The deaths of those close to us continue to touch and involve our emotions and thoughts, as though they still stay near us even after death.

Today's sermon title is "**Remembering the Deceased.**" To recall and remember those who have gone before us seems to be something meaningful for us.

There are some who we cannot help but remember almost daily — those we can never forget — while for others, from whom we have already recovered somewhat from sorrow and loneliness, we may not think of them so often anymore. Yet whether during this once-a-year Memorial Service or in the midst of our ordinary daily lives, to remember the deceased seems to be something deeply meaningful for us.

Part One

In what sense is it meaningful? It is that when we remember those who have gone before us, we find ourselves newly filled with gratitude toward them, and we are able to love them again.

Indeed, when we recall or reflect upon the deceased, of course there may come to mind their unpleasant sides, their faults, or the times we were hurt by them. But strangely, at the same time — or even more so — we begin to remember their pain, their efforts, their kindness, their compassion, their hard work, what they did for us, or even their human weakness, the hardships and sufferings of life to which we can now empathize.

We realize anew — or perhaps we are reminded as if for the first time — that "no human being is perfect, and everyone has something good in them."

As we ourselves age little by little, and as we accumulate various experiences, we become able to notice and rediscover new things about those who have gone before us.

I have often spoken about my father.

If he were alive, he would be ninety-nine years old this year, but twelve years ago, at the age of eighty-seven, he was called home.

Half a year before his death, he confessed, "I believe in Jesus Christ," and received baptism by sprinkling in a private room of a restaurant, when our former senior pastor, Rev. Seino, kindly came all the way to Tokyo.

It was a sight completely unimaginable compared to the father who, when I was a university senior and told him, "I want to go to seminary to become a pastor," became furious and shouted, "You unfilial son! You've become a Jesus fanatic!"

When I was little, I hated my father, who drank every day and got angry, and I was terribly afraid of him.

There were times he would, in drunken rage, flip the table like the anime character

Hoshi Ittetsu, and I saw my mother crying as she cleaned up afterward. From my elementary school days, I would think, “You damn old man, just die already!”

But then, at some point, my father suddenly stopped drinking completely — not a single drop — and began to show a gentler side.

When I became a pastor, he once said quietly, almost muttering with heartfelt emotion, “What you’re doing can’t be bought with money — it’s something truly precious.”

After my father passed away, I found that I hardly remembered his violent days anymore. Instead, I began to think of his pain — the pain of living as a Korean resident in Japan since before the war, enduring the storm of discrimination; his human weakness; the 153-centimeter-tall big back that protected his family at the cost of his own life; his warm gaze; his shy but hearty laughter; his deep affection for my mother; the way he loved my wife as though she were the long-lost daughter he had finally found after years apart; and how, no matter what happened, no matter what mistakes I made, he always remained on my side.

Only the good things come to my mind now, and I cannot help but feel sympathy, tenderness, and regret for him — so much so that I think, “Well, no wonder he drank — he probably couldn’t have endured otherwise.”

When he was alive, I could never have imagined that such feelings would arise in me. But after his death, I began to feel a deep affection and longing to see him again.

Once, my late father appeared in a dream. Overjoyed, I ran to him and cried out, “Dad, I missed you so much!” and held him, weeping aloud.

Rather than remembering his flaws or his bad side, what came to mind were his love, kindness, reliability, patience, and generosity toward our family, and I thought, “He was truly an amazing person.”

Unexpectedly, within me, something happened — I began to **love my father again**.

How about you?

When you recall those who have gone before you, are there times when you are led to notice new, good aspects that you had not seen before?

If, in remembering the deceased, we are moved to say, “Ah, that’s right. I didn’t realize it enough when you were alive. I’m sorry. I should have treasured your pain and struggle more deeply. It’s too late to do anything for you now, but thank you, truly,”—if such gratitude and renewed love arise in us, what a blessed thing that is.

Even after death, husband and wife continue becoming husband and wife; even after death, parent and child continue becoming parent and child; even after death, siblings continue becoming siblings; even after death, friends continue becoming friends.

Or strangely enough, it may be after death that we *become* husband and wife, or *become* parent and child, or *become* siblings, or *become* friends. Moreover, this accumulation of “loving the deceased again” seems to make our own humanity — our character as human beings — humbler and richer. We become, even a little, people who can empathize with others, people who are trusted by others, people who please God, and people who can be useful to others. It seems that through remembering human death, our love for God and love for others can be deepened and increased.

Indeed, even in the Bible, we see many passages that urge us “to remember those who have already finished their life on earth and been called to heaven — to remember their way of life, and to follow and imitate the word of God spoken through their lives.” It seems that the death of human beings plays the role of a key that reminds us humans of both the existence of God and the preciousness of human love.

Part Two

A second meaning in remembering the deceased is that we are reminded of *our own death* — that most solemn and important fact of human existence.

Earlier, we read Psalm 90, and in verse 10 it speaks about the frailty of human life.

Psalm 90:10 (PowerPoint)

The writer of this psalm, Moses, seems to have known well the harsh reality that “human life does not last forever; when we look back, it is but a moment, and most of it is toil and trouble.”

He was made to realize this fleeting and severe truth — that from the moment of birth every person faces death and lives toward death — through looking up to the eternal God.

In his own life, Moses saw with his own eyes many others who died before him, and through their lives and deaths, he deeply felt in his very bones the contradiction and fragility of “life that is going toward death,” “a life that nevertheless carries death within it.”

Let us read once again verses 1 through 6.

Psalm 90:1–6 (PowerPoint)

Even for Moses, a man of God who believed in the one true God who created the heavens and the earth and who rules over every human life, the frailty of human life —

which withers like grass and fades away — and human death were not things unrelated to him, but serious, weighty matters with which he too had to personally come face to face.

In fact, the deaths of those close to us, such as family members, are used by God to cause us to remember the most solemn and important truth — our own death. Through the death of our beloved ones, God asks each and every one of us, “How will you understand, accept, and deal with your own death?”

As I mentioned at the beginning, the Bible teaches us the most important and serious truth:

“Originally, human beings, being created in the image of God, were those who did not know death. However, as the result of humanity’s sin of disobedience and unbelief toward the one and only Creator God, death came upon all people. No one can escape from that death, and until that death, human life has become a harsh one—filled with toil and trouble.”

Then, in the face of this reality, what did Moses do?

Did he say, “Such a life has no meaning. We are going to die anyway,” and choose a self-centered or nihilistic way of life?

No, he did not.

He did not choose such a way of life, because he was one who believed in the true God.

Then, what did he do?

Moses believed and accepted the crucifixion of Jesus Christ—the very essence of God who took human form and came to this earth to become the substitute for all people’s eternal death, the God who made human death His deepest sorrow—as the substitute for his own sin. He was granted the restoration of eternal life, which endures even in death, and chose to live a life that gazed far beyond it.

He chose to live a life pleasing to God, a life of faith in God, and he realized that such a life is the most blessed life—for himself, and also for others—and he fulfilled that way of life.

With nothing but sincere faith.

By faith alone in the death of Jesus Christ on the cross as the substitute for his own sins, he believed in the love of God who forgives all sins, remembered the gaze of God upon him, and chose to live making the will of God his own heart.

After finishing his journey on this earth, he was immediately called to the heavenly dwelling that God had prepared for him, and he longed for and lived in hope of the day

when he would live eternally in the Kingdom of God—in peace with the Triune God: God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit.

He thought to himself, “Instead of spending the remaining time on earth chasing after vain things—things that never satisfy even when seen, never fulfill even when heard, never quench the thirst of the soul even when possessed—rather, how can I live in such a way that pleases God?”

That thought, I believe, is expressed as a prayer to God in the words of verse 12.

Psalm 90:12

“To number our days” means to think about the time that remains to us—that is, to properly recognize our own death, to remember that we are sinners destined to die, and that the day will surely come when we must stand before God.

In order that we may be ready to die at any time—living in such a way as to please God, and after death, standing without fear before the judgment seat of God, and partaking of eternal life—we pray, “Teach us to number our days, that we may gain a heart of wisdom.”

Part Three

In the book of Ecclesiastes chapter 7, there is a passage that speaks about the importance of remembering death.

Ecclesiastes 7:1–4

To remember death brings back to us what is essential—our foundation—the reality of God’s existence, our love toward people, the paradox and frailty of mortal life, and even beyond that frailty, the thirst and hope for eternal life.

Unless we are properly conscious of death, our way of life easily becomes momentary, superficial, and concerned only with immediate matters.

But such a way of life neither pleases God nor brings true holy joy, deep satisfaction, or nourishment to the soul; instead, it ends up empty, wasting precious time, and before one realizes it, one finds oneself standing at the cliff edge of life’s end.

“To keep that from happening,” once Jesus spoke earnestly and directly to the people.

Luke 21:33–36

(“That day” → “eternal death”)

Jesus said, “Be careful, so that ‘that day,’ that is, eternal death, does not come upon you suddenly like a trap.”

To remember death—to remember our end before God in the light of His Word—and to pray for that awareness, these things protect us from a short-sighted way of life concerned only with what is before our eyes.

They save us.

It is said that in monasteries in Europe, monks, when passing each other in gardens or corridors, would exchange these words:

“Memento mori.”

“Memento mori” is Latin for “Remember death.”

That is, by remembering death, they reminded each other to treasure the time of life that remains to them, and especially, as those who believe in the Son of God, Jesus Christ—who offered His life on the cross for the forgiveness of our sins and rose from death—to seek the will of God, to obey it joyfully once they knew it, to serve others in love, and to live carefully with gratitude.

To remember death is not something fearful or meaningless, nor is it to indulge in sentimental resignation saying, “We are going to die anyway.” Rather, it has, in truth, a very positive and profound significance that connects us to true life.

Conclusion

Up to this point, we have thought together about the meaning of remembering the deceased. Through recalling those close to us who have gone before us to the Lord, we ourselves are reminded of our own death, and we desire to become those who live the remaining time on this earth with the wisdom that God gives.

While remembering those who departed before us in faith—those who believed in and walked with God’s Son, the Savior Jesus Christ whom God sent into the world, and who now, in heaven, live before the face of the Father in unspeakable joy, comfort, and peace—

though toil and trouble still accompany us who gather here today, we too desire to continue walking together, our hands held by Jesus Christ, constantly receiving encouragement and wisdom from God’s Word and His love.

Let us pray.

Benediction: Psalm 90:12