

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

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

³*You turn men back to dust, saying, "Return to dust, O sons of men."*

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

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

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

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

¹⁷*May the favor of the Lord our God rest upon us;
establish the work of our hands for us—yes, establish the work of our hands.*

Dear Friends in Christ,

GAINING A HEART OF WISDOM FOR THE NEW YEAR

Another year has passed. It used to be that at the end of a year all the media programs would be chock full of sentimental looks back over the past year—a lot of the good, a little bit of the bad; remembering those who had passed and the blessing they were. You don't it as much the last couple years. Maybe we aren't reminiscing because most people seem about as sad to see 2021 go, as they were to see 2020 go—as if the years 2020 and 2021 were evil twin brothers.

They have been challenging, and it seems like every challenge of these two years has divided our nation. The challenge is only partly that different people have different answers. At least as much of the challenge is that our society has gone from having serious conversations about challenges to having shouting matches and food fights. It hollows out a person's soul. Who wants to live in a world like that, where everyone is at each other's neck? What is the Kentucky state motto? United, we stand; divided, we fall? Hmmm. Makes one think.

We may rightly lament this new reality in our society. Christians, however, have experienced this for quite a while. It's been going on longer than the last two years or the 21st century. It's older than America; older than the Reformation. Read the New Testament and you become aware that from the beginning Christians have been in tension with just at about everyone over just about everything. It is embodied in Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. He repeatedly threw down the gauntlet and said, "*You have heard it said... but I say to you*" (Mt 5-6). More than once, the Apostle Paul compared society's and the Christian's approach to issues and then said to his brothers and sisters in faith, "*But as for you...*" (Eph 5:3; 2 Tim 3:14). Numerous times the New Testament commands the Christian to strap on spiritual armor (Eph 6:10; Rom 13:12; 1 Th 5:8). Who walks around in body armor unless you expect to need it? It's spiritual warfare out there!

Which is all to say that you and I look at the world in a very different way from how non-

Christians do. We view the world as fallen. Human beings too. So when we look for the answers to our problems we look out and up. The unbelieving world looks inward. It views humanity as basically good and having the answer to all its self-inflicted wounds. As we evaluate the past year, and make resolutions for the next, this difference is front and center.

God's people yearn for the "Heart of Wisdom" that our reading, Psalm 90, speaks of. This is the center point of our meditation on God's Word: "**[Lord,] teach us to number our days aright, that we may gain a heart of wisdom**" (12).

About forty years ago there was a popular song—maybe you younger ones have heard it too—"Party Like It's 1999." It originally came out in 1982, before I was even listening to that kind of music on the radio. The premise was this: Imagine that the world is going to end on January 1, 2000. What would you be doing on December 31, 1999? Prince's answer was, "Party!" Which isn't a bad thing in itself—partying, I mean. Isn't that how Jesus frequently pictured heaven? A wedding banquet? One of the psalms included even in our Lutheran hymnals (say it isn't so!) acknowledges God's goodness by saying, "*You turned my wailing into dancing*" (Ps 30:11)! When the prodigal son returned, didn't the Father throw a block party complete with music and dancing (Lk 15:23-25)?

The Bible isn't against people being happy and enjoying themselves. That's not the problem. The difference is that the world's source of joy is in ourselves; we are the center. Biblical joy, on the other hand, always always finds its joy in other people and acknowledging God's blessings. There is a fundamental self-centeredness in "Party Like It's 1999" and a

fundamental God-cente
redness in Psalm 90 when it also tells us to "***sing for joy and be glad all our days.***"

So let's examine this psalm and how it would start us on the new year. Today I've tried to summarize the many thoughts of this psalm so a mind can get a handle on it, reducing it to four "R" words: Realize, Rejoice, Resolve, Rely. May these four "R"s assist you in gaining a heart of God-fearing wisdom for 2022.

The first thing Psalm 90 would have us do is **REALIZE**. And boy, oh boy, does it ever make us sit up and take notice!

It tells us that, contrary to our imagination, we are not masters of our destiny. "**[O Lord,] you turn men back to dust, saying, 'Return to dust, O sons of men.'**" God rules and decides human history and personal destiny.

Psalm 90 presses the point home about who is really in charge. Some time this past year—I should have screen-shotted it—I saw something from some guy who was taking great care of himself, watching what he ate and drank, did lots of exercise, monitored his sleep, etc. He said that he expected to live at least 130 years. He was really emphatic about it. I'm not sure if he was selling something or smoking something, but he really imagined that he was in charge of how long he would live. Psalm 90 would remind us, "***The length of our days is seventy years—or eighty, if we have the strength... [and] they quickly pass.***" Of course it's not saying no one ever lives more than eighty years. Don't you hear the rhythm of poetry? It's saying that human beings have a general life span, some maybe a few extra years, and then it's over. That's the only way it works. People don't not die. Meanwhile, about God the reading

says, *“A thousand years in your sight are like a day that has just gone by, or like a watch in the night.”* That’s not a math equation, like, one dog year is equal to seven human years, and 1,000 human years are equal to one day for God. It’s saying that God doesn’t fit in the framework of time. He is outside of time. He created time! We are totally ruled by time and have very little of it. God isn’t a little greater than us, not a lot greater, not exponentially greater. He is infinitely greater!

As if realizing the shortness and powerlessness of our lives weren’t humbling enough, verse 8 reminds us, *“[Lord,] you have set our iniquities before you, our secret sins in the light of your presence.”* Try as we might, the one certain thing about human beings other than that we die is that we sin. By nature, we continually offend our God. Even the sins done in secret that seemingly hurt no one, these secret sins God sees and counts against us. God isn’t a little holier than us, not a lot holier, not exponentially holier. He is infinitely holier!

These realities that this psalm puts in front of us are like looking at the sun. It hurts our eyes. We have to look away.

These frank acknowledgments of who we are and who God is are the foundation for Psalm 90. This psalm puts to words the regret that seizes us when we finally stop pretending and actually admit who we are. It gives voice to the anxiety that sets our minds running in circles when we feel things spinning out of our control. It results in the confession of sins before an almighty God that begins our worship service. There can be no pretending.

The gulf between our failings and where we want to be is bridged by the final thing we need to realize: *“Satisfy us [O LORD]... with your unfailing love.”* God’s love for us is unfailing. What the psalm writer who lived centuries before Jesus could see only in prophecy, we have seen in reality. The Son of God was born for us. He was born to suffer for us. He was born to die for us. He was born to bring God’s peace to us. There is the answer we have been looking to heaven for!

When we realize our predicament and God’s solution, when we realize the truth of Law and Gospel, we **REJOICE**. That’s the second “R”.

Day by day we come back to the sobering realizations of our sin and our Savior. We fall short, and we hope that God can somehow forgive our stubborn ways and hard hearts, and he does. It’s too good to believe. I could never forgive like that. But God does. It’s like he reassembles the broken pieces that are me. And so, this psalm which laments our failings and limitations goes on rejoicing! You can still can say with confidence: *“Lord, you have been our dwelling place throughout all generations.”* That is why you say in verse 14, *“Satisfy us in the morning with your unfailing love, that we may sing for joy and be glad all our days!”* Rejoice and sing in God’s goodness. You can laugh or you can tear up, and hey, if you want to dance over it, that’s good too! God is that good to us. And if you are the sort who holds back a little more, a stick in the mud like me, you can walk a little lighter, be a little kinder, bid farewell to that worry and anxiety. That’s rejoicing over God’s faithful goodness too!

Part of rejoicing in God’s goodness is to do what we often do at the end of a year: look back and count God’s goodnesses. Some might think of 2021 as 2020’s evil twin, but as we Christians concentrate, we begin to remember the blessings God has poured out on us. While lamenting a second Covid year, have you forgotten about the child and grandchild born into

your family? What about the graduations and degrees completed? Did someone you love find the love of his or her life? Was there a new job, a new car, a life goal achieved? Have you had opportunities to make a difference in other people's lives—those are blessings too—to ease someone's pain, to shape a young mind, to share Jesus? Even if we have laid a loved one to rest, we can thank God for the blessing they have been; and for the Christian we give special thanks because they are now enjoying what we still hope for. As that hymn rejoices, *“O God, our help in ages past, our hope for years to come, our shelter from the stormy blast, and our eternal home”* (CW93, 441:1).

Realizing and rejoicing leads us to **RESOLVE**. We resolve to live for God. Verse twelve prays: *“Teach us to number our days aright that we may gain a heart of wisdom.”* The child of God doesn't act godly to get something out of God, but to give something to him for the goodness we realize in him.

A new year is a great time to make and get started on resolutions. Set aside ten minutes in the morning or evening to pray. Ask pastor print out a Bible reading list for the year, or even the month. Resolve to get a handle on wasted time, a runaway temper, a runaway mouth. Make a point to invite that neighbor to Easter or Christmas services. Spend time in service to community.

Asking God to teach us to number our days aright will inevitably lead us to realize that we should be investing a little less in our 70 or 80 years in this world, and a little more in a life unending. That's wisdom that numbers our days aright.

Finally, in all things we rely on God to bless. That is the fourth “R,” **RELY**. This psalm ends in a prayer of reliance. *“May the favor of the Lord our God rest upon us; establish the work of our hands for us—yes, establish the work of our hands.”* We ask God to bless far beyond our ability to do or plan. We leave the results to God.

You may be or have been privileged to be a parent for several years of a young life. Should that child live out a life of 70 or 80 years, do you realize how great your influence will be? And that child, when grown, will repeat the wisdom you spoke to the next generation. The values you inculcated will be shared with another generation. *“Lord God, establish the work of our hands!”*

Being a parent is the biggest opportunity there is to make enduring change in our world. But it isn't the only one. Who of us does not remember wise words that our teachers told us, five years ago or fifty years ago? What about the habits of good and godly family members? Be that! *“Yes, [Lord,] establish the work of our hands.”*

God can see it all. 2022 is already unfolded for him, and so we pray that God would establish the work of our hands, the words of our mouths, the answers to our prayers.

It's a new year. Realize, Rejoice, Resolve, Rely on God. Amen.