

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

(June 8, 2008)

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Sermon manuscript

SERMON SERIES: An Exercise in Futility

(studies in Ecclesiastes)

Dead End

(Ecclesiastes 12)

Study #7

Introduction: A new twist on aging...

I agree with Rabbi Edward Cohn. Growing older - at least the way we do it today - is all wrong. Rabbi Cohn makes a recommendation I think we should consider:

“Life is tough. It takes up a lot of your time, all your weekends, and what do you get in the end for it? I think that the life cycle is all backward. You should die first, and get that out of the way. Then you could live for twenty years in an old-folks home. You get kicked out when you’re too young. You get a gold watch, and then you go to work. You work forty years until you’re young enough to enjoy your retirement. You go to college; you party until you’re ready for high school; then you finish with that and you go to grade school; you become a little kid; you play. You have no responsibilities. You become a little baby; you go back into the womb; you spend your last months floating; and you finish up as a gleam in somebody’s eye.”

As appealing as that revised system may sound (and I must admit, it’s sounding better and better...), Rabbi Cohn’s vision is neither the way it is nor is it the way it’s going to be.

No. Infancy is followed by toddlerhood which is followed by childhood and adolescence. Then comes young adulthood and middle age, which is followed by maturity and decline.

THAT is the way it is.

After several weeks giving attention to King Solomon’s *magnum opus* - Ecclesiastes - we’re going to conclude our study as he concludes his book, by focusing on old age and death.

With all the delightful, light and cheery fun times we’ve already had in Ecclesiastes, that does seem to be an altogether fitting end, doesn’t it?

In a book as honest and straightforward as Ecclesiastes is, it only stands to reason that Solomon would speak honestly and straightforwardly about death.

In the course of the book, he makes a number of passing comments about the reality of death, and we’ll take a quick look at a couple of those comments now.

No Exceptions: Everyone Dies

Death - a Part of the Cycle of Life

All people die

The cycle of our story (3:2)

According to Solomon, there is a time for everything under the sun. There is an ebb and flow to all of life. That is especially reflected in the opening words of chapter 3.¹

God has ordained an appropriate time for every event under heaven. There is a time for killing and for healing, weeping and laughing, mourning and dancing, war and peace. And there is also [2] ***A time to give birth and A TIME TO DIE.***

Birth and death. These are the parentheses between which we live. And EVERYBODY takes part in both. There are no strangers to the birth process, and there will be - ultimately - no strangers to death.

¹ Made famous by the Byrds in their 1965 classic “*Turn, Turn, Turn.*”

These events are part and parcel of the flow of life as we know it.

How often over the years have we announced on a Sunday morning the twin events of the birth of a baby to a young couple and the death of a friend or family member?

Solomon makes the point again - the inevitability of death - but less poetically, in chapter nine. Here, he reminds us that there is one fate for all people and for all kinds of people: death.

There is one fate for all (9:1-4)

[9:1] For I have taken all this to my heart and explain it that righteous men, wise men, and their deeds are in the hand of God. Man does not know whether it will be love or hatred; anything awaits him. [2] It is the same for all. There is one fate for the righteous and for the wicked; for the good, for the clean and for the unclean; for the man who offers a sacrifice and for the one who does not sacrifice. As the good man is, so is the sinner; as the swearer is, so is the one who is afraid to swear. [3] This is an evil in all that is done under the sun, that there is one fate for all men. Furthermore, the hearts of the sons of men are full of evil and insanity is in their hearts throughout their lives. Afterwards they go to the dead.

The wise and the righteous alike die. So do the foolish and the wicked. Cemeteries are filled with the bodies of those who lived well and those who lived badly.

Then, after these words, Solomon makes the following comment: ***[4] For whoever is joined with all the living, there is hope; surely a live dog is better than a dead lion.***

Can you hear the emotion in those words? Solomon is the lion! He is the KING! He's lived in the richest grandeur imaginable. But, he sees himself on a long, slow slide toward death. And, he would trade it all in to be a slightly longer-living peasant.²

² B.F. Skinner, on death, "What arouses fear is not death itself, but the act of talking and thinking about it, and that can be stopped. We brood about death most when we have nothing else to do. The more reason we have to pay attention to life, the less time we have for attention to death. A properly executed will can give you the satisfaction of knowing your possessions will go to the right people, and you can extend the life of part of yourself by donating any organs that might still be

This is not a news flash, but it's worth saying: Eventually, everyone dies. Every living thing dies.

All things die (3:18-19)

[3:18] I said to myself concerning the sons of men, "God has surely tested them in order for them to see that they are but beasts." [19] For the fate of the sons of men and the fate of beasts is the same. As one dies so dies the other; indeed, they all have the same breath and there is no advantage for man over beast, for all is vanity.

Just like the animals - all men die. All life human, animal, and plant - is punctuated with commas, hyphens, dashes - and a period.

The US Census Bureau reports that one out of every one person dies.

At Prayer Meeting this past Tuesday, we were talking a bit before we started to pray. We welcomed Andy Blake, who is in town for a couple of weeks. Andy currently lives in Kansas City, Missouri and works with the ministry of the International House of Prayer (IHOP).

After reviewing some of the prayer requests, especially for Andy's benefit, I realized the seriousness of the situations many people were facing. Lots of very serious health concerns. So, I turned to Andy and said, "Man, it seems like everybody in San Antonio is dying!" I think it was Todd Havekost who said, "Yep. We sure are."

And that's a Solomonic perspective. We are all dying. And, Solomon wants you and me to come to grips with that reality.

Like the crabgrass and the oak tree and the polar bear and the centipede, you and I will die. But there is something about human life and death that is different from all other life and death.

useful. When those things have been done, it is probably better not to think about death." (Ironically, this from the author of **Brave New World**.)

Eternity in Our Hearts (3:11)

[3:11] He has made everything appropriate in its time. He has also set eternity in their heart, yet so that man will not find out the work which God has done from the beginning even to the end.

If all human life ends on this earth with a period, it is also true that all human life begins a new paragraph after that period.

There is a consistent thread that runs through the religions of the world. It is the idea that human life extends beyond this earthly existence.

Some religions believe in Heaven and Hell. Others teach reincarnation. Still others believe that our souls are immersed in a grand “oversoul” and spend eternity in a Nirvana-like state of bliss. And, of course, there are variations on all these themes.

But the nearly global consensus is that *something* awaits us beyond the grave. (Certainly there are many people who do not believe in an existence after physical death. I was one of them before I became a Christian.)

There is, for many, uncertainty about what that future will hold - Will it be terror? Joy? Fulfillment? Pain? They don't know. But people everywhere have this sense that this life is not the end. And that is what Solomon meant when he said that God *“has set eternity in their heart.”*

Deep, deep down in our hearts we know (or at least suspect) that this life is not the end. There is a future after we take our final breath.

But death comes. It comes to us all.

And Solomon would say that if we are to live well, we will not push down thoughts about death and what follows. We will boldly embrace the coming of death and live each day to the full in light of our inevitable earthly end.

We Must View Life In The Light Of Death

Make the Most of Life (11:1-10)

Be adventurous! (vv. 1-2)

Cast your bread widely (v. 1)

[11:1] Cast your bread on the surface of the waters, for you will find it after many days.

This is a phrase borrowed from the international commerce industry of the ancient world.³

Solomon is telling us, *“Be involved in bold and courageous ventures. Don't just stick with the safe. Don't hide from danger. Don't be afraid to risk loss if there is the opportunity for great gain.”*

It is better to fail in launching out on a brave new venture than to safely hoard resources. As one of my more scholarly commentaries remarks, *“Act prudently - but not too prudently!”*⁴

That sage advice is followed by other words you may have heard from your financial advisor: Diversify!

Divvy up your portion to many (v. 2)

[11:2] Divide your portion to seven, or even to eight, for you do not know what misfortune may occur on the earth.

Invest over a broad spectrum. You don't know which sector of the economy will prosper and which won't. Solomon knows that all sectors of the economy won't likely crater at the same time.

Invest financially over a broad spectrum. Invest relationally in lots of people. Invest intellectually by reading broadly. Invest in your physical health and emotional well-being by leading a balanced life.

³ Solomon himself traded vigorously with foreign nations.

⁴ Keil and Delitzsch

There are giant steps of faith and risk to take, but don't take those steps foolishly. Don't put all your eggs in one basket.

But by all means, act! Take initiative! Don't be a sideline sitter!!

2. Take initiative! (vv. 3-6)

[11:3] If the clouds are full, they pour out rain upon the earth; and whether a tree falls toward the south or toward the north, wherever the tree falls, there it lies.

The two examples Solomon gives (clouds and fallen trees) might start us thinking about people who watch the world go by and don't take a high stakes gamble.

"Nope. Can't sow seed today. It doesn't look like it's gonna rain for the next month." Others see the same clouds and start a business in garden hoses and lawn sprinklers or cloud seeding!

His message? Don't wait for the perfect opportunity. It will never be just right.

Our assignment is to grapple with what actually is, do what we can with what is available.

[4] He who watches the wind will not sow and he who looks at the clouds will not reap. [5] Just as you do not know the path of the wind and how bones are formed in the womb of the pregnant woman, so you do not know the activity of God who makes all things. [6] Sow your seed in the morning and do not be idle in the evening, for you do not know whether morning or evening sowing will succeed, or whether both of them alike will be good.

Few great enterprises have begun under ideal conditions. There will always be a reason to NOT do something that should be done. But we don't make progress unless we are willing to face some adversity, roll the stone uphill, move past some quitting points.

There are too many unknown variables in life to be able to ever say, *"This will happen"* or *"This won't happen."*

Bottom line? Take full advantage of every opportunity you have in life while you have opportunity!

And why should we pursue life with such gusto? Especially, as Solomon says in so many places in this book, during our youth?

It's because youthful energy and creativity and health - which are necessary for bold ventures - don't last forever.

Contrary to what we might want to believe, there is no fountain of youth. Not only does everybody eventually die - but, given the natural course of things, and, assuming we live that long - we will all get old.

In the final chapter of Ecclesiastes, Solomon paints an especially graphic picture of the aging process. Before looking at that picture, though, consider the current state of life - and aging - in the good old United States of America.

Shattering the Myth of Eternal Youth (12:1-7)

The "graying" of America

Many years ago, pollster George Gallup reported, *"For many people, the age of 'old' is arriving later than ever before."*⁵

- If you had been born in the year 1900, your life expectancy would have been somewhere around 45. You would have been expected to barely live long enough to have a mid-life crisis!
- If you were born in 1940, the odds at birth were against your surviving to enjoy retirement.⁶

⁵ **OLD:** (United Nations Population Division 2002) The number of people 60 or older will grow to nearly 2 billion in 2050, for the first time in recorded history outnumbering those who are younger than 15, a trend that will have an impact on economic growth, investment strategies, tax policy and elections around the world. The report said the elderly are the world's fastest growing population segment. They now number 629 million, or about one out of every 10 people. While those 80 and older make up 12% of people over 60, they will comprise 19% in 2050, it estimated. The number of centenarians is projected to increase 15-fold over the same period, to 3.2 million in 48 years from about 210,000 today.

⁶ And THAT is why the age at which people were set to begin receiving Social Security checks was 65 - because hardly anyone lived that long!

- However, if you were born in 1980, you can look forward to living until you are in your early 70's.
- And for those born in 2008, life expectancy is closing in on eighty years of age for boys and nearly 85 for girls!⁷

Along with increasing longevity comes a “graying” effect for our culture. As has been widely reported and recognized for some time, as more and more Americans are living longer and longer, more and more of us are getting older and older.⁸

Now, that is a good thing - as the years pass, I increasingly think it is a good thing!

I know not many of you know this, but over the years, I've gotten older. Seriously.

The graying of a pastor...

I brought a series of messages on Ecclesiastes one time before. It was in 1989. at that time I was thirty three years old. Now I'm fifty two. And let me tell you, old age has changed a lot since 1989...

Then, there was a sense of detachment. Then, I could speak of older folks as “them.”

Now? Now, I think age spots are kinda sexy. Now I'm having to check regularly to see if I'm growing obnoxious hairs where hairs should not be. Now, while the sign of maturity I've always longed for - wisdom - is NOT present to the extent I wish it was, other signs - grey hair, receding hairline, chronic whininess because of aches and pain - are here in abundance!

⁷ “Aging” is a worldwide phenomenon. The world's population age 65 and older is growing by an unprecedented 800,000 people a month, according to a report issued as far back as 2001 by the U.S. Census Bureau and the National Institute on Aging. The report, "An Aging World: 2001," predicts that this phenomenon of global aging will continue well into the 21st century, with the numbers and proportions of older people continuing to rise in both developed and developing worlds.

⁸ Now of course, the stupid irony is that along with the “graying” of America, we have come to value less and less the “gray” among us. Elderly people often feel useless, guilty, bitter and fearful.

And I'm not the only one to document signs of aging. Solomon did it, too. And his observations are recorded for us in the last chapter of Ecclesiastes.

The “graying” of every person (vv. 3-7)⁹

Using graphic images, Solomon wants us picture a great house in decline as we think of a person in decline.

[3a] in the day that the watchmen of the house tremble and mighty men stoop...

Here is an older person who is trembling with weakness or palsy. In youth, there was a firm grip and a rock steady hand. That is no longer the case. Tremors are now the order of the day.

The young buck who stood proud and tall is replaced by a stooped over, hunch-backed fellow who can't straighten up. There is no strength left in the knees.

[3b]...the grinding ones stand idle because they are few...[4] and the doors on the street are shut as the sound of the grinding mill is low¹⁰

And what are “*the grinding ones*”? Teeth! Solomon writes in the days before dentistry.

In the natural world, animals die when they lose their teeth! People have never been quite so dependent on teeth as that. But if enough teeth are gone, it sure gets hard to enjoy a steak, corn on the cob, or a crisp red apple! And with the passing of time, most people lose teeth.

⁹ There are different ways to take this passage. Some take it as a complete and “point for point” allegory (this stands for this; that stands for that). Others see more general remarks being made, with figures of speech and vivid word pictures being used to strike a chord in our own hearts about the reality of the aging process. I will tell you that I fit more into this second category, although it is fun to try to figure out what exactly Solomon might have been trying to say with all of the similes.

¹⁰ It may be that the image of the doors on the street shutting is of the lips falling into the mouth with no teeth in place!

[3c]...those who look through windows grow dim;

Vision problems arise. Macular degeneration happens. People rarely keep 20/20 eyesight into their fifties, most lose it by age forty. We have eyeglasses today (which Solomon didn't have), but old eyes don't work as well as young eyes.

[4b]...one will arise at the sound of the bird, and all the daughters of song will sing softly.

Older folks often don't sleep as soundly as they once did. They awaken easily, at the least amount of noise. A bird at the window is enough to ruin a good night's sleep.

And there is a hint of the loss of hearing here, too, in the phrase ***"all the daughters of song will sing softly."***

Man, do I hear that! It seems that these days, EVERYONE is speaking more and more quietly. It is so annoying. Especially my wife. I wish Kathy would quit mumbling...

This picture of the body as a dilapidated house is like looking in a mirror for those of us in the second half of life. For those of you who aren't, trust me. It's like looking into a crystal ball. It happens. It happens...

Solomon moves from the house image to more outright statements about old age.

[5a] Furthermore, men are afraid of a high place and of terrors on the road...

Older men and women, having lost some of their physical strength and agility, know that they are susceptible to more danger than when they were young. They are cautious. They walk gingerly. They are prone to be suspicious. They may be afraid of heights.

[5b]...the almond tree blossoms, the grasshopper drags himself along, and the caperberry is ineffective.

Almond trees bloom with beautiful white blossoms - and people's hair turns white or grey with age. (It is said that we look distinguished. That's a young person's word for "old." Or perhaps EXtinguished?)

The grasshopper dragging himself along makes us think of someone who uses a cane for stability.

And the caperberry? Well, the caperberry was well known in the ancient world as an aphrodisiac - and in old age, there is a diminished interest in and capacity for sex.

[5c] For man goes to his eternal home while mourners go about in the street.

In old age, friends are taken, the senses and faculties are reduced. One by one, familiar customs change, and long-held hopes are abandoned. It is hard to adjust to the idea that we are in the final chapter. It's hard to adjust to the idea that there IS a final chapter! But, there is a homestretch. There does come a time when there will be no rally, no marked improvement.

In the final set of images, Solomon pictures the end of life.

"The silver cord" (the spinal cord that connects the brain and nerves is silvery) snaps; ***"the golden bowl"*** (perhaps the brain) is crushed; ***"the pitcher by the well"*** (the heart that nourishes the body throughout life) shatters; ***"the wheel at the cistern"*** (the life force itself) is crushed.

That's the end. And as mankind was first formed from the dust of the earth (see Genesis 2), so all will return to the dust - and to God.

[7] then the dust will return to the earth as it was, and the spirit will return to God who gave it.

It all does seem so sad, so unfair, that life should end like this! We remember the vision of Rabbi Cohn and could wish that aging was reversed.

But of course, even if we wish that this was the way things were, that's not the way things are.

And we have to take life as we find it. We are young first and then we grow old. Solomon would have us know that we can prepare for our latter years and for what lies beyond (eternity!) at any point in life. But, the earlier, the better!

When we are young, we can grapple with the unalterable facts of aging and death and God and eternity. Those realities can drive us to action so that we don't end up with despair and regret.

So, listen to some of Solomon's wisest counsel, from the final chapter of Ecclesiastes. He's writing as an old man to young people.

Preparing for the ~~End~~ BEGINNING! (12:1, 6, 13-14)

[12:1] REMEMBER ALSO YOUR CREATOR in the days of your youth, before the evil days come and the years draw near when you will say, "I have no delight in them"... [6] REMEMBER HIM before the silver cord is broken and the golden bowl is crushed, the pitcher by the well is shattered and the wheel at the cistern is crushed...[13] The conclusion, when all has been heard, is: FEAR GOD AND KEEP HIS COMMANDMENTS, because this applies to every person. [14] For God will bring every act to judgment, everything which is hidden, whether it is good or evil.

Solomon - the wisest of men - thought that he could, by wisdom, "figure life out." But, he found out that life can't be figured out. Mysteries remain.

He sought justice in life, and found none. He successfully pursued a life of hedonistic pleasure, and discovered it was emptier than before. He thought he could drown his problems in work - and wound up asking himself what it was all for.

His final assessment is the same as his opening guess: **Vanity of vanities. All is vanity!**

And here at the end, he comes full circle in the last verses of the last chapter and tells us that the essence of life is wrapped up in a vibrant, meaningful relationship with Almighty God.

Conclusion:

God is telling us that the path to follow is to face life AND DEATH squarely.

After our final breath, there is a dead END. But unlike other dead ends we have known, THIS dead end opens up to a whole new highway of eternal joy and blessing for those who, by faith, know the Lord.

Today, take Jesus as your own. Trust Him and Him alone. In trusting Him, you'll find hope beyond this life's end and ABUNDANCE for the here and now!