

The first is the gospel. Of all the voices clamoring for our attention, the Christian gospel is in a class by itself, for it has the uniqueness of unconditional love. The Christian gospel grabs us by the heart and fills the void that Ecclesiastes exposes. It's the message of grace, God's undeserved love for sinners, the message that says, **"This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as the atoning sacrifice for our sins" (1 Jn 3:10).** The first truth that God would have us hear and learn is that he loves us and that he wants us to have a relationship with him through his Son, Jesus Christ. Without that, life is meaningless, and eternity is hopeless.

The second truth is that in Christ we have a new identity. We're no longer lost and condemned sinners; we're redeemed and saved saints. We no longer merely exist, passing the time by twiddling our thumbs; our lives have meaning and purpose. Paul puts it this way: **"If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting our sins against us." (2 Cor 5:17-19).** As a new creation, we have a ministry from God, whether we are young, old, or in between. We are God's ambassadors to bring Jesus to our little corner of the world. In short, **"we bring every person in our area of influence closer to Christ."**

Senior citizens have been blessed by God to do this. "How's that?" you ask. Pray. Be a prayer warrior with the time God has graciously given you. Bring the needs of the Church Militant to the Lord in prayer. Mentor. Latch onto someone who's younger than you and help them make choices that are godly and good. Encourage. Teach. Volunteer. Smile. Hug. The list is endless. Need some examples? Alfred Lord Tennyson was still writing when he was 80 years old. Thomas A. Edison was still inventing when he was 85. Michelangelo was still producing masterpieces when he was 89. But my favorite is Enoch Johnson, a 103-year-old member during my vicar year in Omaha, Nebraska. Visiting him one day, he told me that God kept him going for 103 years—to drink Mountain Dew and so that he could show his wife of 75 years, 93-year-old Helen, how much he loved her.

There's no retirement from the Lord's service, and the more we realize this, the younger we will be. Dear friends, trust the God of your salvation and live each day of your long life with him and for him. Be thankful for all the ways he has blessed you and never stop calling on him in times of need. For when you do, then you can say, "Meaningful! Meaningful! Everything is meaningful!" Amen.

Ecc 12:1-8 – *Take Up Your Cross* – 440, 449 (1, 3, 4), 441, 439
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In the book of Ecclesiastes, God teaches us a number of important truths. First, we're all on a spiritual journey. We're all trying to find meaning in life, but the things of the world are *"meaningless."* In fact, the word *"meaningless"* appears no fewer than 35 times in Ecclesiastes. Nothing worldly is capable of satisfying our spiritual needs. Second, the more we search for meaning in life, the more life presents some troubling mysteries. For example, life is often unfair, human wisdom is insufficient, and death awaits us all. Third, despite the mysteries of life and the reality of death, we shouldn't avoid enjoying God's worldly gifts, even with their limitations. **"Whatever your hand finds to do,"** Solomon says, **"do it with all your might" (9:10).** Finally, while God is a gracious Giver—from him comes every good and perfect gift—he's also a stern Judge. Solomon says, **"Follow the ways of your heart and whatever your eyes see, but know that for all these things God will bring you to judgment" (11:9).**

In the final chapter, the chapter of our text, Solomon brings his divinely inspired instruction to a close. Basically, he says, *"Out of all the things I've had to say, these are the ones I want to emphasize, because they're the most important."* And so, as we wrap up our *Taking Up Our Cross* series, we look at the *Golden Years* and hear:

Two Godly Reminders about Growing Old

- 1. A reminder about aging**
- 2. A reminder about meaning**

1. Little Nelson was having a conversation with his grandfather, Earl Pickles. He asked, "Grandpa, is it true that no one lived through the Flood except for Noah and his family?" Earl replied, "That's what the Bible tells us, Nelson, so we believe it to be true." Nelson thought for a bit and then asked, "Well, how did you and Grandma make it?"

The fact of the matter is, as my dad liked to say, we're all getting older. And some of us are older than others. Solomon points out that getting older brings with it some things that aren't fun. He puts it this way: **"Remember your Creator in the days of your youth, before the days of trouble come and the years approach when you will say, 'I find no pleasure in them.'"** Solomon's referring to the point in life when we no longer enjoy our years on earth but spend a great deal of our time lamenting the cross of advanced age we have to carry.

He mentions the time when *"the sun and the light and the moon and the stars grow dark."* Our minds don't work the way they once did. They *"grow dark,"* and there's a sadness in growing old. My mom used to read the obituaries every day and, when I asked her why, she said she wanted to know if another of her dear friends had died. *"And the clouds return after the rain."* Our bodies don't heal as quickly as they used to, and recovery time seems to take forever. *"The keepers of the house tremble, and the strong men stoop."* Our hands start to shake, and our legs don't have the strength they once had. We tend to grow shorter and, in some cases, our spine begins to curve. *"The grinders cease because they are few."* It doesn't take a Hebrew scholar to know that Solomon's talking about our teeth. *"Those looking through the windows grow dim."* Our eyesight weakens as we grow older, and we put what we're reading farther and farther from our nose. *"The doors to the street are closed and the sound of grinding fades."* "What did you say? Would you repeat that, please?"

Solomon talks about *"people rising up at the sound of birds."* As we get older, we don't sleep well. Our aches and pains and our worries and concerns keep us up at night. And we have a hard time sleeping in. We're up with the birds. And Solomon says, *"All their songs grow faint."* Our once strong and clear voice no longer sings or speaks the way it used to. *"People are afraid of heights and of dangers in the streets."* Things that never used to bother us, like driving at night or going on the rides at the fair, now produce anxiety and fear, and we're afraid of being alone. "Help! I've fallen, and I can't get up!" *"The almond tree blossoms."* For some of us, the color of our hair whitens as we age and, for others, we experience RRS, Receding Hairline Syndrome. *"The grasshopper drags itself along."* We don't have the energy we once had. Some days it's a chore just to get out of bed or, as one of our retired seminary professors says, *"It's a victory just to go to the bathroom."* *"Desire is no longer stirred,"* Solomon says. We lose our appetite—both for food and for the passion and romance we once enjoyed in our lovemaking. In fact, all our desires, even the will to live, are diminished and eventually cease.

If all this weren't enough, we observe young people and what their bodies can do—and what ours cannot—and there's an emotional impact, what some call "a sense of invisibility." To the younger generation, we're often considered irrelevant and useless, "invisible," so to speak. We're there, but what we have to offer is often disregarded as nothing more than the opinions of old "fuddy duddies." It's like we've been discarded to the junk pile and are just waiting for Mike and Frank from *American Pickers* to come by and reclaim us.

And then the end comes. *"People go to their eternal home, and mourners go about the streets."* At the moment of death, we transition from our temporal existence to an eternal one. While Solomon uses a number of metaphors to describe this moment—he says, *"The silver cord is broken; the pitcher is shattered at the spring; the wheel is broken at the well; and the dust returns to the ground it came from, and the spirit returns to God who gave it,"*—the end result is the same: We die. Unless Judgment Day comes first, we all die.

But life on earth goes on. *"Mourners go about the streets,"* Solomon says. I detect a hint of bitterness in Solomon's sentiments. Using strong words and vivid imagery, Solomon is reminding us that a day is coming when it will be too late to focus on God. *"Remember your Creator in the days of your youth,"* he says. If we wait, that day may never come. For every penitent thief on the cross, there are countless impenitent ones who end their lives in the same way that they lived them—unprepared to meet their Creator. And when that happens, life truly becomes what Solomon describes in our text: *"Meaningless! Meaningless! Everything is meaningless!"*

2. So, how do we approach life in what we call the Golden Years, especially when they seem to be more rusty than golden? How do we go about living when our bodies remind us that we're closer to death today than we were yesterday, and that after death comes the Judgment? How can we find joy and contentment and purpose in our living when Jesus tells us to take up our cross and follow him in the sunset years of our life? If there's anything that comes through from Solomon's instructions today, it's this: Without God life here is an empty shell. Without God there's no reason to hope for a happy afterlife in heaven. Without God everything is meaningless, utterly and completely meaningless. As Jesus confirms in our Gospel today. *"What good is it for someone to gain the whole world, and yet lose or forfeit their very self? (Lk 9:25)"*

What's interesting about the book of Ecclesiastes is that it doesn't give us the right answers, but the wrong, answers. It doesn't give us the right information, but it opens our eyes to the wrong information. Simply put, it serves as a reality check. It seals off the one-way streets that we might otherwise be tempted to take, so that we go to the Lord, listen to what he tells us in his Word, and learn from him those things that are really important, those things that are meaningful and that last forever. What are some of these things?