

## Only Here for a Little While

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*Ecclesiastes 7:1-4 A good reputation is more valuable than the most expensive perfume. In the same way, the day you die is better than the day you are born. <sup>2</sup>It is better to spend your time at funerals than at festivals. For you are going to die, and you should think about it while there is still time. <sup>3</sup>Sorrow is better than laughter, for sadness has a refining influence on us. <sup>4</sup>A wise person thinks much about death, while the fool thinks only about having a good time now.*

When I was at New York Theological Seminary, I took a class called “Death and Dying” taught by a professor, named Martha Jacobs, who I also now call a friend. Martha was teaching the class because, after years of working as a hospital chaplain, she had discovered that too many ministers were not trained in death and dying, and therefore, tended to be poor shepherds for members of their churches as they journeyed that road. The material for the class was largely drawn from Martha’s doctoral project, which she entitled, “Death is not the Enemy,” and in the class, she taught from that same perspective, that death is not our enemy.

Now, I have to tell you, I got an A in the class, but I’m not sure I really bought into Martha’s claim. I mean, it’s a pretty hard concept to swallow that this experience that turns our lives upside down, rips a hole in our hearts, and plunges us into the depths of grief, despair and sometimes even depression, is not the enemy. After all, isn’t death the *opposite* of life? How is that not the enemy? The very notion seemed to fly in the face of my lived experience, because an enemy is exactly what death feels like when a friend commits suicide, when a child is killed by a drunk driver, and when a mother of four dies all too soon. But, like my friend Martha, the writer of Ecclesiastes also thinks death is not an enemy.

Today’s scripture from Ecclesiastes 7:1-4 may sound strange, counterintuitive, or confusing; you may not want to think about it, or you may choose to reject it altogether, because, as you’ve heard, the writer of this scripture, which is part of the Bible’s wisdom literature, expresses the *virtues* of death, even contrasting them with more pleasant activities. And, in a

sense, that's what wisdom literature does; it takes generally accepted truths and restructures them, contrasts them and refracts them in the light of experience in order to learn from them. The writer wants to shake up our foundations, not simply for the sake of making us feel uncomfortable, but so that we can grow by challenging our current notions.

And, I have been challenged by this scripture, and now I want to challenge you. You see, this scripture challenged me to reflect seriously on what I believe. I *did* think of death as an enemy because of what it's done to my life, what it's taken from me and my family, and how it's made me feel, but while all of that is most certainly the *result* of death, if I'm truly honest with myself, I have to say that I don't believe it was the *intent* of death. An enemy is one who intentionally attacks or purposely seeks to do harm, but while death does often *feel* like an attack, and can cause enormous hurt and even sometimes harm, I can no longer say that death is truly an enemy, because, in truth, I can't find where death itself holds any malicious intent. Having a tooth pulled often causes pain and sometimes even swelling, but the dentist has no intent to attack or inflict harm, the pain is simply a result of the loss.

So, then, what *is* death if not the enemy? I don't believe it has *no* purpose; that it's simply a cruel reality we all must deal with. No, I think death is as this scripture about death is, a challenger. Think about it, death can have a lot of affects on us, usually depending upon how close we are to the person who has died, but one thing death almost always does, regardless of how it's presented to us, is challenge us. Unless we intentionally shut it out and avoid it, death has a way of forcing us to struggle with issues like what's really important in life, how we're spending our time, who is special to us, and how we interact with them. This is why the writer tells us that it's better to spend time at funerals, where there's an opportunity to reflect seriously on life, rather than at parties, which literally in the Hebrew means reckless frivolity, where thoughts are shallow and short-term. And, it's why he says sorrow, or thoughtful vexation, is

preferred to laughter, which here really means, not joyous fun, but senseless hilarity, because Godly sorrow can lead us to inner reflection and life-changing insight and action, whereas laughter, as wonderful as it can be, generally exists for itself and in the moment. One commentator put it this way, “Laughter can be like medicine that heals the broken heart, but sorrow can be like the nourishing food that strengthens the inner person.”

Don’t be confused; the writer is not saying we shouldn’t laugh, or that we should spend all our time at funerals, or even that we should dwell on the subject of death. He’s not asking us to make an absolute choice between the two, he’s simply arguing for a balance, a balance that serves both our short-term needs and those that are long-term. This is wisdom, because it’s seeking to answer the question of what makes a good life.

Now, we don’t often hear of death associated with living a good life, but maybe we should, because it’s really the reality of death, the fact that we won’t live forever, that makes life so precious and gives it its value. So what the writer is urging in today’s scripture is not a morbid pre-occupation with death, but rather an awareness of the finality of life so that we will truly appreciate that life and live it to its fullest. Let’s face it, some people act as though they have an unlimited number of years to live, and the problem with that thinking is that when something is unlimited, what’s our motivation to value and cherish what we have? If we waste some of it, who cares, there’s plenty more where that came from. And, without an awareness that there is an end, we can be tempted to think, well, if I waste today, or put something off, who cares, there’s always plenty more time, instead of seeing each new day as a gift, and living each of those twenty-four hours to their fullest, not wasting away time, or postponing relationships.

The truth is, we do not have unlimited time, in fact, ever since Adam and Eve sinned in the Garden of Eden, death has become the destiny of every living person. We don’t know when we will die, but it’s about the only sure thing we can count on in life. As Charles Meyer, author

of A Good Death puts it, “With the possible exception of Elvis, the death rate on this planet is 100%.” Like it or not, accept it or not, life is terminal; one day, each and every one of us will die.

But now, my intention is not to depress anyone, or to ruin your day. I share this reality with you, not as a fatalistic doomsayer, but as a loving pastor, because when we have an awareness of death, we will be inspired to live. And this is how death becomes, not an enemy, but a challenger for us, and why the writer of Ecclesiastes focuses so much on the topic of death, not only in our text for today, but throughout the book. When we are alive in our awareness that, as the writer pens earlier in chapter 3, verses 1 and 2, “For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven: a time to live, and a time to die;” then we will begin to develop the habit of not putting off until tomorrow what should be done today. We won’t wait to send flowers until the address is that of a funeral home, we won’t hold that grudge that separates us from someone we love, we won’t delay spending time with a friend, or telling them how much they mean to us. When an awareness of death brings us to a greater appreciation of life, we will live our lives with urgency and intentionality; in short, we won’t continue to take life for granted, but rather we will seize each day as the gift it really is.

Tim McGraw explored the intensity of a life lived in the awareness of death in his song, “Live Like You Were Dying,” but I’ve been privileged to witness the courage and benefit associated with living this way first hand. Several years ago, I was the wood shop lady, that’s what the kids called me, for Camp AmeriKids, a very special camp for children living with HIV/AIDS. It didn’t take long before some of us grew to know a bunch of teens at the camp who had become a pretty close group. In the winter following my second year at the camp, I received an email that DaShawn, one of the teens, had died. I drove with a couple of the other counselors to the wake, and sure enough, all of the other teens were there. After paying our

respects to DaShawn's family, we sat with the teens to offer them some comfort in the loss of their friend. They talked about DaShawn and we shared memories from camp, and then, after a brief lull in the conversation, one of the kids said, "So, I wonder which of us is next." My heart fell into my stomach and I wanted to cry. In the midst of thinking about DaShawn's death, I had forgotten that all the rest of these teens were still living with the very same virus that had claimed DaShawn.

But now, don't do what I did, don't be sad, because the conversation that followed was not a depressing one, it was a hopeful one. Believe it or not, a group of teenagers sitting at the wake of their friend talking about their own illnesses and mortality was a hopeful conversation. And do you know why? Because the focus was *not* on death, it was on life. You see, they lived with a daily awareness of death. Each time they had to take that cocktail of meds to keep the virus in check, they were reminded that life is not forever, and that, in fact, all we ever really have is today. These teens understood, in their own experience, the old saying that it's not the days in your life that matters, but the life in your days, and this is what the writer is talking about in his rather disturbing comment that the day you die is better than the day you are born, because if you do die with a good reputation, as is promoted in the previous breath, then you have died fulfilling all of the potentiality of your birth, you have left this world having made an impact on the lives of other people and having lived well in the sight of God. That is living a good life, and that's what death challenges us to do, not to die, but to live.

Think about it, if we're willing to accept that there might not be a tomorrow, then we'll really appreciate today and seize the opportunities an awareness of death presents us with, opportunities to embrace life in every moment, to reflect upon our lives in a meaningful way, to inventory and to grow within ourselves, to be intentional in nurturing our relationships with others, and to passionately develop our faith and love of God. And, if there is a tomorrow, if

there are hundreds of tomorrows, as I hope there will be, then we will have lived in the fullest possible potential of each and every one of them today. It's win-win. The awareness of an end opens doors to new beginnings, and transforms death into an agent of life. Isn't that what we celebrate on Easter, Jesus' resurrection and triumph over sin and death, so that our physical deaths are actually a new beginning that ushers us into eternal life with God?

The good news is that death, as difficult and painful as I know it is, has truly been overcome by life. So, this is my prayer for you, that you will be open, not to dwell on death, but to be open to an awareness of death, so that you will be inspired through that awareness to seize every second of every day; that you'll make that phone call, mend that relationship, offer that help, extend that forgiveness, give that hug, say that prayer, and spend that time with others and with God that will leave you with no regrets. Trust me, I learned this the hard way, but I have been challenged by death and I now live more fully, now there is not one phone conversation I have with my mom that I don't end without telling her I love her. Won't you embrace life and do the same?

In the words of an old song by Billy Dean my prayer for all of us is that we'll be inspired by an awareness of death to a greater appreciation of life, so: "let - us - live - like we'll never see tomorrow, treat each day as though it's borrowed, like it's precious as a child. Take my hand, let us reach out to each other 'cause we're only here for a little while. So let us hold who needs holdin', mend what needs mendin', walk what needs walking' though it means an extra mile. Pray what needs prayin' and say what needs sayin' 'cause we're only here for a little while." We are only here for a little while. Amen.