

1 November 2020
Ecclesiastes 9:1-10, Ecclesiastes 12:1-8
Terminal Living
First Mennonite
Church

We all want to be healthy and stay healthy. According to the World Health Organization (WHO) health is

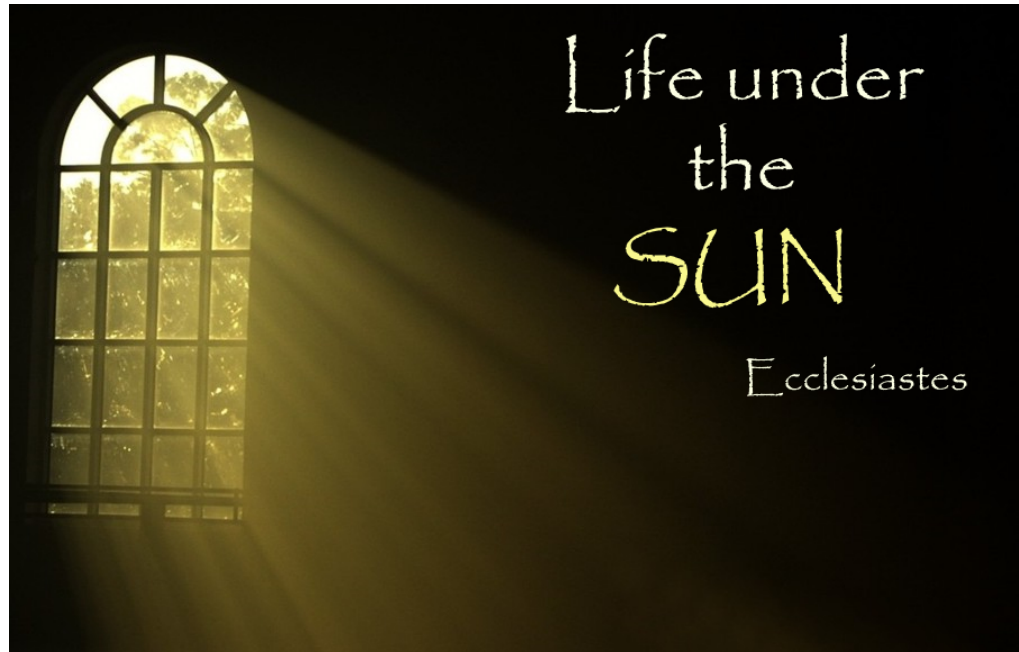
“complete physical, mental, and social well-being—and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity.”¹ Healthy living means making positive choices that enhance your personal, physical, mental and spiritual health. You make these choices when you:

- Eat healthy food
- Are involved in a supportive and caring community, like a church
- Exercise, keep physically active so that your body stays strong, and so that you reduce stress, and improve your energy. Our FIM programme focusses on this.
- Get enough sleep
- Meditate and pray

During the Covid-19 pandemic we as individuals and society are also doing things to stay safe and keep people healthy. Things like:

- Physical distancing
- Wearing masks
- Washing hands
- Keeping our social bubbles small
- We are all thankful for an incredible health care system and health care workers

Despite its gloomy and dark reputation, Ecclesiastes also counsels us to enjoy life and relish living in the present. For example, the author writes,



¹ <https://www.who.int/about/who-we-are/frequently-asked-questions>

Go, eat your bread with enjoyment, and drink your wine with a merry heart; for God has long ago approved what you do.

Bread and wine represent the staples of life, what everyone needs to live. I hope you know how enjoyable it is to smell freshly-baked bread, cut that first slice while it's still warm, spread some butter on it, watch it melt, and then take that first wonderful bite. I love that.

There is profound human connection around a table of food. We're often most fully alive to life when sharing a meal around a table. We shouldn't be surprised, then, to find that throughout the Bible God has a way of showing up at tables. In fact, it's worth noting that at the centre of the spiritual lives of God's people in both the Old and New Testaments, we find a table: the table of Passover and the table of Communion. New Testament scholar N. T. Wright captured something of this sentiment when he wrote, "When Jesus himself wanted to explain to his disciples what his forthcoming death was all about, he didn't give them a theory, he gave them a meal."

Ecclesiastes' rationale for enjoying the basics of life is *that God has long ago approved what you do*. This is neither a statement that all of life is a matter of predetermined fate, nor a blank cheque of God's approval. Rather, it reminds us of Ecclesiastes' conviction that God is the source of opportunities to enjoy life and that living should be embraced with enthusiasm.

The reason Ecclesiastes counsels us to enjoy life now, however, is **NOT something** our culture is keen on hearing. Our culture participates in what is sometimes called, "the cult of youth", the stereotypical strength, beauty, enthusiasm, and hopefulness of youth are not just celebrated; this picture is held up as the ideal against which much else is measured. Products and procedures are marketed to convince us that without them we are unfit for public display. Television commercials cry the shame of horrid age spots on the back of maturing peoples' hands. People get plastic surgery and liposuction in order to maintain a youthful appearance.

Someone once joked, "people say good things always come to an end: with that logic, I'm probably going to live forever!" This isn't Ecclesiastes reason for enjoying



life now. Rather, the reason Ecclesiastes encourages us to enjoy life now because **it will all end at some point.**

There are **two main themes** in Ecclesiastes. Last week I talked about one of them. It's the Hebrew word, *hebel*. In Ecclesiastes it's translated as vanity in most bible translations. In my research,

I found *hebel* can also be translated as **vapour, mist, or breath**—something which is real, yet is hard to get your hands on; it comes and goes and doesn't last long. It's transitory, fleeting, and short-lived. Like when you go outside in the cold and breathe out, you can see your breath for an instant, but then suddenly it's gone. Like the mist that is coming out of the vapourizer—it's there but suddenly disappears. This is *hebel*.

The **second theme**, is closely related to this, and is constantly lurking in the background of Ecclesiastes. It's something common to all life on earth. Everything on the earth is **vapour because it is short-lived**. In other words, all life is terminal. We will all die.

Life is short, fleeting, like vapour or mist: the generations come and the generations go. We come, we go, time marches on, leaving us behind. To be human is to be aware of our mortality. None of this goes on forever. Life is fragile. In fact, the very fragility of life, the transitoriness of the moment, makes moments more precious. This is why Ecclesiastes encourages us to enjoy life now. Something about us would love to freeze each good moment, to preserve it all, just as it is today, but we can't. "Time, like an ever-rolling stream," says the Psalmist.

Sometimes people describe the human condition as hanging by a thread. My grandfather on my dad's side was 76 when he died. After lunch one day, he went for a nap and never woke up. That thin thread separating life and death, suddenly broke, and he died in his sleep.

Or a cyclist enjoying the cool, clean air, the physical activity while riding down the road is suddenly hit by a car, ending the cyclist's life. Hebel. Life is short. Transitory.

The Psalmist describes the human condition as grass:

*As for mortals, their days are like grass;
they flourish like a flower of the field;
for the wind passes over it, and it is gone,
and its place knows it no more. (Psalm 105:15-16)*

Ecclesiastes uses the word, hebel, vapour to describe human condition. We are here on day, and then—poof—the next day we are gone. Death happens to us all. Death is the great equalizer.

Now there are two reasons why this stark reality frustrates the author.

First, it's the simple fact that death happens to everyone.

Everything that confronts them is vanity, since the same fate comes to all, to the righteous and the wicked, to the good and the evil, to the clean and the unclean, to those who sacrifice and those who do not sacrifice. (9:1b-2a)

The same fate comes to all. Basically, Ecclesiastes says it doesn't matter if you are diligent about eating right, getting proper exercise, leading a healthy lifestyle or spending your days sitting on the sofa, eating junk food, and watching endless hours of reality TV. In the end it doesn't matter if you were a saint like Mother Theresa or an arrogant sinner like Joseph Stalin or Mao Zedong, who my Chinese friend called the greatest mass murderer in history. In the end it doesn't matter if you wear or don't wear a mask. In the end it doesn't matter if you are a sinner or saint because the simple fact is that **we all die**.

Death is the great equalizer.

Now, of course, we are reading Ecclesiastes on the other side of Jesus' resurrection from the dead. Our hope is in God whose power is stronger than death. We have assurance that death is not the final answer, but that God's power is even stronger than death. As I said last week, I affirm what the apostle Paul says:

that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all

creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Romans 8:38-39)

The resurrection of Jesus from the dead is a concrete sign that God is still in control and is working to restore all things to how God intended them to be.

Second, Ecclesiastes is frustrated because the journey towards death requires us to become old. Why is Ecclesiastes upset about this? The Bible talks about aging in a couple of different ways.

First, there is great appreciation for the wisdom of the aged in the Bible. When the Israelites left the land of Egypt, they were given the Law. And in the Law, the people were reminded that they were supposed to honour their fathers and mothers *“so that your days may be long in the land that the Lord your God is giving you”* (Exodus 20:12).

I remember parents using this passage on their small children when they wanted their children to obey. But the message is not directed at small children, but at grown children. It's a reminder to adult children in the prime of their life, to respect and honour the wisdom of their aging parents.

Later, before the Israelites were to cross over into the promised land Moses reminded the people of the treasure of wisdom and experience that lay within the older adults in the community. *“Remember the days of old, consider the years long past; ask your father, and he will tell you; your elders and they will inform you”* (Deuteronomy 32:7).

When Kathi and I lived in Asia, we were amazed at how the elderly were respected for their wisdom, honoured for their experience, and given a high place in that society.

Second, there is the other side—the darker side—to the reality of aging that Ecclesiastes highlights throughout the book. Listen to this one example from Ecclesiastes:

“in the days when the strong men are bent, and the women who grind cease working because they are few, and those who look through the windows see dimly” (Ecclesiastes 12:3).

Of course, we can name retirement homes for seniors at the “Sunset Estates, talk about old-age in terms of “the golden years”, or how great it is to get those senior’s

discounts at the store, or have the unique privilege of choosing cheaper items on the restaurant menus. But the fact is, when you get old **your body doesn't work the way it used to!**

Men who used to be strong are bent over. Some commentators I read wondered whether the phrase, "*women who grind cease working*" was a reference to old women no longer having any teeth to grind together. Maybe instead of naming a senior's home, "sunset estates", an equally good name might be Bygone Farm, Bleak Sunrise, or Gnarly Knolls!

The reality is that physical ailments get worse as we age. For example, Eli, the old priest who took care of young Samuel, was blind. Jacob was able to trick his father Isaac into giving him the blessing instead of his older brother Esau, because the aging Isaac was blind. David, mighty king David, suffered chills in his old age. Barzilla, a friend of King David, complains that he can't recognize the taste of food or hear very well. "*Today I am eighty years old; can I discern what is pleasant and what is not? Can your servant taste what he eats or what he drinks? Can I still listen to the sound of singing men and singing women (2 Samuel 19:35)?*"

Is this what the golden years are like? Ecclesiastes says this vanity. In other words, time does not stand still. Time moves on, and it seems to do it more quickly as we get older. Life is vanity. It's vapour. Life is fragile. We get old. Eventually, we all die.

In the book of Philippians, the apostle Paul was in prison, nearing the end of his ministry and life. And as he sat in that prison cell, he wrote this letter to the church at Philippi reminding them that our value does not lie in doing all kinds of things. Rather our value lies in God's grace, in the fact that each one of us is a child of God.

In the end it's finally up to God to gather all of our seasons, efforts and moments, and make them mean what we ourselves can never, by ourselves, mean. Most of us, most of the time, don't think much about it, and probably that's just as well. But at times like this Sunday, the wise step back, take stock, before stepping up and stepping out. In any beginning, there is an ending. A door opens, a door closes. And there is joy, but also, some regret, for something is always lost, even when something good is gained. Life is beautiful, even more beautiful for its brevity. Live with the limits rather than deny or lament them. Our days are numbered, are vapour, so go savour, risk, and delight in the gifts that God has given you. Love someone now, for tomorrow may never be. Find a warm and fresh loaf of bread to

eat with a friend or loved one. Praise someone for his or her God-given gifts today, because you may not be able to tomorrow. Life is short—like vapour.

The mist continues to come out of the humidifier. You can see it, but after a few seconds it disappears. It's so fleeting, transitory, and insubstantial. At the end of the day, our lives are fragile and transitory. Knowing



that we are terminal can make a difference in the way we live each day. Because the time of our lives does not go on forever, we can learn to treasure the time being, to live today in gratitude for the time that God has allotted us. Amen