

A Cynic's Search for the Secrets of Life
Part 1: Avoid the Wrong Paths
Ecclesiastes 2:1-11

[Notes: We use a projection system during worship. Throughout this sermon you'll see the notes we used to communicate with the media team.]

Many of you are familiar with Gary Larson. Before he retired, Gary Larson was the creator of the bizarre cartoon series, *The Far Side*. If you are familiar with Larson's cartoons, you know that he loves to depict animals with human characteristics. He especially loves cows. One of my favorite Far Side cartoons depicts an affluent cow wearing fine jewelry and drinking a cocktail. She tells her husband, "Wendell, I'm not content." ***(Note: We showed the cartoon on screen.)***

That cartoon reminds me of the book of Ecclesiastes. In spite of great affluence, wisdom, status, and power, the writer of Ecclesiastes was not content; but he desperately wanted to be. More than anything else, he wanted to live a meaningful life. He engaged in a lifelong quest for the secrets of a good life and recorded his journey in this book. Over the next four weeks we will review highlights from that journey in a series we're calling ***A Cynics Search for the Secrets of Life.***

If you are familiar with the book of Ecclesiastes, then you know that it's not a positive book. Instead, it's mostly cynical and negative. However, in the midst of pessimism, Ecclesiastes shares some extremely positive, life-giving insights. In the end Ecclesiastes discovers some of life's secrets, and shares them with his readers. However, before telling us how to live a good life, he first tells us how NOT to live a good life, which will be today's focus.

Ecclesiastes begins his book with three popular but ultimately dead end paths that people often travel in their quest for a good life. The writer of Ecclesiastes spent most of his adult life walking down these three paths. However, they did not satisfy him, so he warns his readers not to follow his example. If we'll heed Ecclesiastes' warning, we can avoid a lot of unnecessary pain and wasted time. Please take out your listening guide, and we'll review three life paths that may look promising in the beginning, but in the end they only disappoint. ***(The listening guide can be found at the end of the sermon.)***

The first path can be called the path of pleasure. **[slide (carnival image in background with Ferris Wheel): 1. The Path of Pleasure]** Please read with me from the text: **[add to slide: “I said to myself, ‘Come now, I will make a test of pleasure; enjoy yourself.’ . . . I searched with my mind how to cheer my body with wine. . . . I got singers, both men and women, and delights of the flesh, and many concubines. . . . Whatever my eyes desired I did not keep from them; I kept my heart from no pleasure.” (2:1, 3, 8, 10 NRSV)]**

In his quest for contentment, the writer of Ecclesiastes looked to numerous forms of pleasure. For example, he indulged in wine, music, and women. Today people still turn to pleasure to find contentment. And they still look to wine, music, and women—and a host of other things. Of course, some pleasures—like drug and alcohol abuse, gambling, pornography, and adulterous affairs—are destructive. Other pleasures—like sports, vacations, movies, and concerts—can be fun and wholesome. For example, just last week many of us went to the Wilson County Fair. We ate lots of tasty food, went to entertaining shows, rode carnival rides, and looked at interesting exhibits. Some of us even went to the demolition derby! And there’s nothing wrong with that. We all need diversions and fun. Everybody needs to go to the fair sometimes.

But if all we have is another trip to the fair, or another vacation to plan, or another Tennessee Vols or Titans football game, or another movie to watch, or another Broadway play to attend—if that’s all we have, we will never be satisfied. While wholesome pleasures can be positive and healthy, pleasure is not the ultimate meaning of life. As the writer of Ecclesiastes said sarcastically, **[add to slide: “I said of . . . pleasure, ‘What use is it?’” (2:2 NRSV)]** Pleasure, by itself, is not enough. Since pleasure did not satisfy his deep longing for contentment, he tried a second path.

The second path can be called the path of possessions. **[slide (photo of upscale house with expensive car in front): 2. The Path of Possessions]** Please read with me, **[add to slide: “I bought male and female slaves, and had slaves who were born in my house; I also had great possessions of herds and flocks, more than any who had been before me in Jerusalem. I also gathered for myself silver and gold and the treasure of kings.” (2:7-8)]**

In America, accumulating possessions is a popular path for finding contentment. Somehow we believe that acquiring more things will add meaning to our lives. We think, if I can just get

a bigger house, or a newer car, or a home theater system, or a bigger stock portfolio, then I'll be happy. But the path of possessions doesn't work. For example, psychologists have long studied contentment levels among nations. Forty years ago Americans were the most contented people on earth. Since then, we have raised the standard of living in this country in amazing ways. We are the most affluent people on earth. We live in huge houses, drive high-quality cars, have TVs and computers in every room, own closets full of clothes, and have every electronic gadget imaginable.

But recent studies have revealed that Americans are no longer the most contented nation on earth. In spite of all the stuff we've purchased, America has fallen from the most contented nation in the world to the twenty-third most contented nation. In spite of all our consumption and the environmental damage it took to produce it, we are less satisfied with life, not more. Having lots of possessions does not lead to contentment. No matter how much stuff we get, contentment remains elusive.

I'm not naive about money. We are economic creatures and need at least some possessions. Nobody can live a quality life without having basic needs met. But once our basic needs are met, more stuff will not satisfy the deep longing in our souls for meaning and satisfaction. The idea that more stuff buys happiness is an American myth. It just doesn't work. The writer of Ecclesiastes learned that. He said of all his possessions, **[Slide: (same image as above but changes words to:) "Everything was meaningless, a chasing after the wind." (v. 11 NIV)]** Later, in chapter 5, he adds, **[add to slide: "Whoever loves money never has money enough; whoever loves wealth is never satisfied with his income." (5:10 NIV)]** So far the writer of Ecclesiastes tried two paths in his quest for a meaningful life. He tried pleasure, and then he tried possessions. Neither satisfied his longing for purpose, meaning, happiness, and contentment. So he tried a third path.

The third path can be called the path of production. **[slide (image of CEO-looking man sitting at his big impressive desk): 3. The Path of Production.]** Read this verse with me, **[add to slide: "I made great works. . . . I became great and surpassed all who were before me in Jerusalem." (2: 4, 9 NRSV)]**

Since pleasure and possessions did not bring him contentment, Ecclesiastes looked to his career, to his successes, to his accomplishments. He said, "I made great works." Production

is probably the most popular path that people in America follow to find contentment. Americans constantly try to find meaning and happiness through their work. But career production is way overrated. It's not the secret of life. As the well-known quote says, "Nobody ever said on their deathbed, 'I wish I had spent more time at the office.'"

Ecclesiastes learned that truth. He put incredible energy into the path of production. He made it to the top. He produced. He was successful. But all that success did not give him the purpose and meaning and contentment he was seeking. In one of the saddest verses in all the Bible, he said, ***[slide (same image as above but change words to:) "When I surveyed all that my hands had done and what I had toiled to achieve, everything was meaningless, a chasing after the wind; nothing was gained under the sun." (v. 11 NIV)]***

I once visited a successful businessman at the hospital. He was recovering from serious heart surgery. He told me that he had invested his entire adult life into building his business. He said, "I sacrificed my marriage for this business. I sacrificed my relationship with my children for this business. I even sacrificed my health for this business." After a long moment of silence, he said, "It wasn't worth it." This man, like the man of Ecclesiastes, finally realized that career production is not the secret of life. ***[end slide]***

Late in his life the writer of Ecclesiastes realized that the three paths he had spent most of his life traveling—the path of pleasure, the path of possessions, and the path of production—were ultimately bankrupt. They could not satisfy, they could not offer contentment. Each path promised far more than it could deliver.

Don't misunderstand what I'm saying today. I'm not saying that these three things are unimportant—because they are. Everyone needs some pleasure in life. Everyone needs at least some possessions. And, everyone needs to be productive in some way; we all need to work. These three paths are all important, but they are not ultimate; they are not the secrets of life.

[slide: wilderness trail image, with several trails going in different directions] The experiences of the writer of Ecclesiastes reminds me of an old rabbinical story about a man who went for a walk in the forest. After walking for awhile, he got hopelessly lost. He wandered around for hours, going down one path, and then the other, but none of them led

out of the forest. Then abruptly, he came across another hiker walking through the forest. He cried out, “Thank God for another human being. Can you show me the path that leads back to town?” The other man replied, “No, I’m lost too. But we can help each other in this way. We can tell each other which paths we have walked down that led nowhere, and through the process of elimination, we can figure out the path that leads home.” That’s exactly what the writer of Ecclesiastes does early in his book. He begins by telling us that the path of pleasure, and the path of possessions, and the path of production are not the secrets of life. But thankfully, Ecclesiastes not only tells us the wrong paths to the good life; he also shares the right ones. Over the next three weeks we’ll turn our attention to three of those right paths. But for today it’s enough to see the wrong ones.

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LISTENING GUIDE

A Cynic’s Search for the Secrets of Life

Part 1: Avoid the Wrong Paths

Ecclesiastes 2:1-11

1. The Path of _____

“I said to myself, ‘Come now, I will make a test of pleasure; enjoy yourself.’ . . . I searched with my mind how to cheer my body with wine. . . . I got singers, both men and women, and delights of the flesh, and many concubines. . . . Whatever my eyes desired I did not keep from them; I kept my heart from no pleasure.” (2:1, 3, 8, 10 NRSV)

“I said . . . of pleasure, “What use is it?” (2:2 NRSV)

2. The Path of _____

“I bought male and female slaves, and had slaves who were born in my house; I also had great possessions of herds and flocks, more than any who had been before me in Jerusalem. I also gathered for myself silver and gold and the treasure of kings.” (2:7-8 NRSV)

“Everything was meaningless, a chasing after the wind.” (2:11 NIV)

“Whoever loves money never has money enough; whoever loves wealth is never satisfied with his income.” (5:10 NIV)

3. The Path of _____

“I made great works. . . . I became great and surpassed all who were before me in Jerusalem.” (2:4, 9 NRSV)

“When I surveyed all that my hands had done and what I had toiled to achieve, everything was meaningless, a chasing after the wind; nothing was gained under the sun.” (2:11 NIV)



A Cynic's Search for the Secrets of Life Part 2: Prioritize Relationships

Ecclesiastes 4:7-12

[Note: We use a projection system during worship. Throughout this sermon you'll see the notes we used to communicate with the media team.]

If you are a guest today, we are in a short series from the book of Ecclesiastes called, [slide (photo of open Bible showing book of Ecclesiastes): A Cynic's Search for the Secrets of Life.] In today's text Ecclesiastes lays out a key essential for living a good life. However, in keeping with his overall pessimistic and cynical tone, the writer of Ecclesiastes begins on a negative note before he moves to a positive one. Please read with me from today's text: ***[slide: "Again, I saw vanity under the sun: the case of solitary individuals, without sons or brothers; yet there is no end to all their toil, and their eyes are never satisfied with riches. 'For whom am I toiling,' they ask, 'and depriving myself of pleasure?' This also is vanity and an unhappy business." (4:7-8 NRSV)]*** What a sad passage. Ecclesiastes speaks here about people who work hard, make good money, but have no meaningful relationships. They are all alone; they are "solitary individuals." ***[end slide]***

I read about one of these solitary individuals a few weeks ago. A hospital chaplain was working at the emergency room one night when a woman was brought to the ER by ambulance. She and her husband had been eating dinner at a restaurant, and while she was eating, she suffered a heart attack and was rushed to the hospital. While the doctors worked with the woman, the chaplain stayed with her husband, trying to support him during this scary time. A few minutes later a doctor approached the man and the chaplain and announced that, in spite of their best work, the man's wife had died. The doctor handed the chaplain an envelope that contained the woman's wedding ring, necklace, and eyeglasses. Obviously the man was stunned with grief. After a few minutes together, the chaplain offered to call the man's pastor. The man did not have a pastor because he and his wife did not attend church. The chaplain asked if he could call a family member to come take him home, but the man explained that his family was scattered across the country, living hundreds of miles away. The chaplain asked if he could call a coworker to be with him, but the man said he had retired

several years earlier and had no work relationships anymore. The chaplain said to the man, “What about a neighbor? Can I call one of your neighbors to come and take you home?” The man replied that he and his wife did not know any of their neighbors in their apartment complex. The chaplain helped the man with the hospital paperwork, then offered a prayer for him. He handed the man the envelope that contained his wife’s jewelry and glasses and escorted him to the hospital exit. And then the chaplain watched the man walk away, all alone, to cope with his wife’s death. (*Robert Schnase, Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations, [Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2007], p. 19.*)

As tragic as that story is, it’s not an isolated event. The sad fact is, America is full of “solitary individuals.” Why is that? At least three factors contribute to the rampant loneliness found in America. First, we live in **[slide (map of US in background): 1. A culture of radical individualism]** In our effort to lift up the individual, we have lost much of the communal and relational aspect of human life. Second, we live in **[add to slide: 2. A culture of extreme mobility]** People in American move a lot. One out of five American families moves every year, cutting themselves off from family and friends. Third, we live in **[add to slide: 3. A culture of intense competition]** It’s hard to be intimate and close to people when you are in competition with them.

I read a story once about an extremely bright premed student at Stanford University in California. This young premed student fought and clawed and pushed in order to graduate number one in his class. That fall he would begin medical school. To reward him for having done so well in school, his parents gave him a summer trip to the Far East. While he was there, he met a guru who said to him, “You are poisoning your life with your success orientation. Your intense competitiveness, trying to get ahead of everyone else, is killing your spirit. That’s not how people are supposed to live. Come join my commune and live in an atmosphere where there is no competition, where everyone shares and loves.” That sounded good to him, so he called his parents and told him that he was not returning for medical school. Instead, he was going to live in a commune. Six months later his parents received a letter from him.

“Dear Mom and Dad, I know you were not happy with the decision I made last summer to quit school and live in a commune, but I want to tell you how happy it has made me. For the first time in my life, I am at peace. Here there is no competing, no hustling, no trying to get ahead

of anyone else. Here we are equal, we all share; there is absolutely no competition. This way of life is so much in harmony with the inner essence of my soul that in only six months I have become the number two disciple in the entire commune, and I think I can be number one by June!” Well, there are a lot of lonely people today. Our intense competition, extreme mobility, and radical individualism are just a few of the causes.

[Slide: go back to slide of verses 7-8] In today’s text the writer of Ecclesiastes talks about “solitary individuals,” people who lack significant relationships in their lives, people who are all alone. And he says: “This is not the way God intended life to be. People are not meant to live their lives as solitary individuals. Hard work and financial success are no substitute for being connected to other human beings.” Indeed, says the writer of Ecclesiastes, “It’s crazy to toil away at work and miss out on relationships.” That, says Ecclesiastes, is “unhappy business.” Although he comes at it from a negative point of view, Ecclesiastes is saying that one of the primary keys to contentment is being connected with other persons. Although he says that negatively in verses 7-8, he says it positively in verse 9-12. Let’s read that passage again.

[slide (image of children playing together in the background): “Two are better than one, because they have a good return for their work: If one falls down, his friend can help him up. But pity the man who falls and has no one to help him up! Also, if two lie down together, they will keep warm. But how can one keep warm alone? Though one may be overpowered, two can defend themselves. A cord of three strands is not quickly broken.” (4:9-12 NIV)]

Let’s look closely at the passage. Read verse 9 with me. **[slide: underline verse 9]** Although this passage is often read at weddings, it’s about relationships and friendships in general. Ecclesiastes is affirming that if we want to live a good life, we must highly value the people in our lives. Two are better than one. Ecclesiastes then points out some of the benefits of connecting with others. Read verse 10 with me **[slide: underline verse 10]** One of the benefits of relationships is that they give us support when we fall. And we fall a lot. Read verse 11 with me. **[slide: underline verse 11]** Ecclesiastes is saying that relationships give us warmth. And that’s not just true physically but also emotionally. Our lives are warmed by having relationships with others. Read verse 12 with me. **[slide: underline verse 12]** The last benefit of relationships he mentions is that they give us strength for facing life’s battles. Life

is a battleground, we are often attacked, and family and friends help us fight and win those battles.

In short, Ecclesiastes says, if we want a meaningful and contented life, then we must prioritize relationships. **[end slide]** Of course, doing so takes a lot of effort. Maintaining good relationships with family, friends, coworkers, and fellow church members is hard work. It takes a lot of time and effort and energy to prioritize the relationships in our life. Relationships are often messy. They require enormous effort to maintain. But, in the end, relationships, with God and with others, is what matters most. When we get to the end of our life, it's not going to matter how big our stocks and bonds portfolio is, or how many diplomas hang on the wall, or how many career awards we won. No, when we get to the end of our life, what's going to matter is our relationships with God and with the people we love.

One of my favorite authors is a rabbi named Harold Kushner. His book on Ecclesiastes, *When All You've Ever Wanted Isn't Enough* inspired this series and provided several of the stories. In the book, Kushner tells a story about going to the beach for vacation. He was sitting on the beach one summer day, watching two children playing in the sand. They were hard at work building an elaborate sandcastle by the water's edge, with gates and towers and moats and internal passages. Just when they had nearly finished their project, a big wave came along and knocked it down, reducing it to a heap of wet sand.

He expected the children to burst into tears, devastated by what had happened to all their hard work. But they surprised him. Instead of crying, they held each other's hand, laughed a big belly laugh, and sat down to build another castle. Rabbi Kushner said he learned an important lesson from those children that day. All the things in our lives, all the complicated structures we spent so much time and energy creating, are build on sand. Sooner or later a wave will come along and knock down what we have worked so hard to build up. And when that happens, only the person who has somebody's hand to hold will be able to laugh and rebuild.



A Cynic's Search for the Secrets of Life Part 3: Live Fully in the Present Moment

Ecclesiastes 9:3-10

[Note: We use a projection system during worship. Throughout this sermon you'll see the notes we used to communicate with the media team.]

If you have not been here the past two weeks, we are in a brief series on the book of Ecclesiastes. The series is called, ***[slide (photo of open Bible showing book of Ecclesiastes): A Cynic's Search for the Secrets of Life.]*** In today's text Ecclesiastes lays out another secret for living a good life. However, in keeping with the writer's overall cynical tone, Ecclesiastes begins on a negative note before moving to a positive one. Please read with me: ***[slide (cemetery image in background): "This is the evil in everything that happens under the sun: The same destiny overtakes all. . . . For the living know that they will die. . . . Never again will they have a part in anything that happens under the sun." (Eccl. 9:3, 5-6 NIV)]*** Isn't that a heart-warming passage of Scripture! I think you should put it on your bathroom mirror and read it every morning for inspiration!

Ecclesiastes' funk about growing old and dying reminds me of the classic movie *City Slickers*. ***[slide: DVD cover of movie]*** The main character in *City Slickers* was a man named Mitch. Mitch, like the writer of Ecclesiastes, had a great life. He had an incredible wife, two great kids, several close friends, a nice house, and a good job. In spite of his wonderful life, Mitch was in a midlife funk. Instead of enjoying the many good things in his life, Mitch, like the writer of Ecclesiastes, worried about growing old. ***[end slide]*** In one of the scenes from the movie, Mitch goes to his son's grade-school class for career day. His assignment was to talk about his job at a local radio station. But instead he digressed into his midlife crisis. He said to the children:

"Value this time in your life, kids. This is the time in your life when you have choices. It goes by so fast. When you are a teenager, you think that you can do anything, and you do. Your twenties are a blur. In your thirties you make a little money, raise a family, and wonder, 'What happened to my twenties?' In your forties, you grow a pot belly and another chin. The music starts to get too loud and one of your old girlfriends becomes a grandmother. In your fifties,

you have a minor surgery—you call it a ‘procedure.’ In your sixties, you have a major surgery and the music is still loud but that doesn’t matter because you can no longer hear it. In your seventies, you and the wife move to Florida and you start having dinner at 2 in the afternoon, lunch at 10 in the morning, and breakfast the night before. You spend most of your time wandering around malls looking for the ultimate low-fat yogurt and muttering, ‘How come the kids don’t call?’ In your eighties you have a major stroke and end up babbling to a Jamaican nurse whom your wife can’t stand, but who you end up calling, ‘Momma.’ Any questions?” ***(If you have projection capabilities, you’ll want to show this wonderful clip. You can find it under chapter 3, minutes 16:49 to 17:58.)***

Thankfully, by the end of the movie, Mitch worked through his midlife crisis. He quit dwelling on growing old and dying, and he began to enjoy his life again. The same thing happened with the writer of Ecclesiastes. Ecclesiastes finally realized, since life is short, I better enjoy the journey while I still have time. So right after he says that we are all going to die, he immediately adds, ***[Slide: “Go, eat your food with gladness, and drink your wine with a joyful heart, for it is now that God favors what you do.” (9:7 NIV)]***

In this text Ecclesiastes tells us that one of the secrets of life is to live fully in the present moment, before our time is gone. This is not the most important theme in the book of Ecclesiastes. Nor it is a major theme in the Bible. But it’s an important insight. If we want to have a good life, we must learn to live in the present moment. I know that’s nothing new. We’ve heard that a million times before. But very few people do it. Instead, most people tend to focus on the past or on the future. When we focus too much on the past or the future, it robs us of the present, which is all we have. So, Ecclesiastes says, live fully in the present moment while you still have life and breath. Death will arrive soon, so live today while you have the opportunity. Thankfully, Ecclesiastes doesn’t just tell us to live in the present moment, but the writer also gives us four practical suggestions for doing so. Please get out your listening guide, and let’s quickly review them. ***(Listening guide can be found at the end of the sermon.)***

Ecclesiastes’ first suggestion for living fully in the present moment is to ***[slide (in background show a group of people eating dinner together at a restaurant. At the top of the screen put): 1. Appreciate the simple gifts. (under that put): “Go, eat your food with gladness, and drink your wine with a joyful heart.” (Eccl. 9:7 NIV)]*** Read v. 7 with me. . . . To live in

the present moment, we must appreciate the simple gifts. Lunch with a friend. A beautiful sunset. An engaging novel. A creative movie. A walk in the park. The beauty of spring. A game of catch with your kids. Intimacy with your spouse. Dinner around the table with family and friends. Grandkids coming to your house. Grandkids leaving your house! A beautiful song. A funny joke. A glass of strong, sweet, Southern iced tea. To truly live we must appreciate the simple gifts of life.

Ecclesiastes' second suggestion for living fully in the present moment is to **[slide (in background show children having fun at a birthday party, wearing party hats, playing a game. At the top of the screen put): 2. Remember to celebrate. (under that put): "Always be clothed in white, and always anoint your head with oil." (Eccl. 9:8 NIV)]** Read verse 8 with me. . . . White garments and oil were ancient symbols of festivity and celebration. Ecclesiastes is telling us to celebrate life, to have some fun, to have a party or two. That's the advice of a doctor named Bernie Siegel. He said, **[slide: (photo of male doctor with this quote:)] "I've done the research and I hate to tell you, but everybody dies—lovers, joggers, vegetarians, and nonsmokers. I'm telling you this so that some of you who jog at 5 a.m. and eat vegetables will occasionally sleep late and have an ice cream cone."** (Dr. Bernie Siegel, quoted in John Ortberg, *When the Game Is Over It All Goes Back in the Box [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007], 132.*) I came across this quote a couple of weeks ago. I was so inspired by it that I went out and bought two quarts of Baskin Robbins ice cream! Well, Ecclesiastes tells us to have some fun along the way.

Ecclesiastes' third suggestion for living fully in the present moment is to **[slide (in background put photo of an older couple holding hands while taking a walk. At the top of the screen put): 3. Enjoy your relationships. (under that put): "Enjoy life with your wife, whom you love." (Eccl. 9:9 NIV)]** Read verse 9 with me. . . . I know that relationships can be complicated and strained and painful sometimes. But other than our faith, the people in our lives are the most important part of our lives. So Ecclesiastes says to enjoy our relationships—not only with our spouse but also with family, friends, coworkers, neighbors, and church family.

Ecclesiastes' final suggestion for living in the present moment is to **[slide (in background show a nurse at work, looking engaged and enthused. At the top of the screen put): 4. Work with enthusiasm. (under that put): "Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with**

all your might.” (Eccl. 9:10 NIV) Read verse 10 with me. . . . Ecclesiastes tells us to throw ourselves into our work with all our might. Whatever work we do—whether at school, at home, at the office, or at church—Ecclesiastes tells us to dive in and enjoy it. ***[end slide]***

According to Ecclesiastes, one of the secrets of life is living fully in the present moment. Of course, that does NOT mean we won't have trials and struggles and tears along the way. Of course we will. But in spite of the struggles, God wants us to appreciate and enjoy the incredible gift of being alive. Even in the hard times, God wants us to enjoy the journey.

[slide of a beautiful nature scene.] How can we do that? Today's text is a good starting point. According to Ecclesiastes, we can live fully in the present moment by following these four strategies. ***[add to slide, all at once: 1. Appreciate the simple gifts. 2. Remember to celebrate. 3. Enjoy your relationships. 4. Work with enthusiasm.]***

I want to conclude today's sermon by reading one of my all time favorite essays, written by Joe Kemp. It's called "*The Best Time of My Life.*" ***[slide (grandfather clock in the background) "The Best Time of My Life" by Joe Kemp]***

It was June 15, and in two days I would be turning thirty. I was insecure about entering a new decade of my life and feared that my best years were now behind me. My daily routine included going to the gym for a workout before going to work. Every morning I would see my friend Nicholas at the gym. He was 79 years old and in terrific shape. As I greeted Nicholas on this particular day, he noticed I wasn't full of my usual vitality and asked if there was anything wrong. I told him I was feeling anxious about turning thirty. I wondered how I would look back on my life once I reached Nicholas's age, so I asked him, "What was the best time of your life?"

Without hesitation, Nicholas replied, "Well, Joe, this is my philosophical answer to your philosophical question: "When I was a child in Austria and everything was taken care of for me and I was nurtured by my parents, that was the best time of my life.

"When I was going to school and learning the things I know today, that was the best time of my life.

"When I got my first job and had responsibilities and got paid for my efforts, that was the best time of my life.

“When I met my wife and fell in love, that was the best time of my life.

“The Second World War came, and my wife and I had to flee Austria to save our lives. When we were together and safe on a ship bound for North America, that was the best time of my life.

“When I was a young father, watching my children grow up, that was the best time of my life.

“And now, Joe, I am 79 years old. I have my health, I feel good and I am in love with my wife just as I was when we first met. This is the best time of my life.”

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LISTENING GUIDE
A Cynic’s Search for the Secrets of Life
Part 3: Live Fully in the Present Moment
Ecclesiastes 9:3-10

“This is the evil in everything that happens under the sun: The same destiny overtakes all. . . . For the living know that they will die. . . . Never again will they have a part in anything that happens under the sun. . . . Go, eat your food with gladness, and drink your wine with a joyful heart, for it is now that God favors what you do.” (Eccl. 9:3, 5-7 NIV)

1. Appreciate the _____.

“Go, eat your food with gladness, and drink your wine with a joyful heart.” (Eccl. 9:7 NIV)

2. Remember to _____.

“Always be clothed in white, and always anoint your head with oil.” (Eccl. 9:8 NIV)

3. Enjoy your _____.

“Enjoy life with your wife, whom you love.” (Eccl. 9:9 NIV)

4. Work with _____.

“Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with all your might.” (Eccl. 9:10 NIV)



A Cynic's Search for the Secrets of Life
Part 4: Remember Your Creator
Ecclesiastes 12:1-7, 13

[Note: We use a projection system during worship. Throughout this sermon you'll see the notes we used to communicate with the media team.]

According to an old legend, a small boy once asked his father what holds up the world. The father, a creative man, told his son that the world rests upon the back of a very large turtle. The next day the boy asked his father, "What holds up the turtle?" "The turtle," said the father, rests upon the back of a very large tiger." The next day the boy wanted to know what holds up the tiger. The father, growing tired of the question, said, "The tiger rests on the back of a very large elephant." Inevitably, the question arose, "What holds up the elephant?" The father, thoroughly exasperated by now said, "Son, its elephants all the way down!"

Well, what holds up the world? More specifically, what holds up your world? What elephants do you stand upon? What are the foundations of your life? People answer that question differently.

Some people make finances the foundation of their life. ***[slide: image of finances like stock market ticker tape]*** They work hard to attain financial security. They put money into stocks and bonds and real estate and IRAs and Roth IRAs and 401Ks. The problem is, finances are not very dependable. A crash in the market, a layoff, a business failure, a disability, the death of a spouse, a recession—any of these can wipe out our financial security. If finances are the elephants that hold us up, we could be in real trouble.

Some people make their job the foundation of their life. ***[slide of professional woman working at computer at her desk]*** They work hard to earn job security. But job security is a myth. In this day of outsourcing and corporate downsizing, we can lose our jobs literally overnight. If our job is the elephant upon which we stand, we could be in real trouble.

Other people make health the foundation of their life. ***[slide: person or persons jogging or exercising in gym]*** They walk and jog and go to the gym and eat healthy food and watch

their cholesterol. The problem is, our health is not dependable. It can go south at any time and at any age. If health is the elephant upon which we stand, we could be in real trouble.

Many people make their loved ones the foundation of their life. **[slide: of family together, maybe even family with grandparents, children, and grandchildren]** We depend so much on our family, as we should. The problem is that loved ones are not always dependable. They grow up, they move away, they die, and sometimes they leave and say they want a divorce. As important as relationships are, if our loved ones are the foundation of our life, we could be in real trouble. **[end slide]**

Finances, work, health, loved ones—these are all very important. But if these are the ultimate foundation of our life, we could be in real trouble. Why? Because these things are not dependable. None are completely secure. All are tentative, temporary, easily lost.

So I ask again, what holds up your world? What is the foundation of your life? The writer of Ecclesiastes struggled with this question his entire life. For a long time he was confused; he could not figure out his foundation. As we saw four weeks ago, he tried clinging to pleasure and money and success. But pleasure, money, and success did not satisfy his deep longing for contentment, so he kept searching. Eventually he did learn at least two keys to a contented life—relationships with others and living in the present moment—which we reviewed over the past two weeks. Still he was not fully content, so he kept searching. Finally, near the end of his life, the writer of Ecclesiastes gave attention to spiritual matters. Ultimately he learned that if we want to have a good and meaningful and contented life, then we must affirm faith in God. We see that in today's text. Let's read it together, **[Slide (church steeple in background): "Remember your Creator. . . . Here is the conclusion of the matter: Fear God and keep his commandments." (Eccl. 12:1, 13 NIV)]**

Like many of you, I watched the television series *Lost* **[slide: Lost series image]** before it ended in 2010. I found it interesting that one of the main characters, a doctor named Jack, began as a totally secular man of science. However, by the end of the series, Jack was speaking about destiny and mission and purpose. In short, this man of science became a man of faith—not traditional faith but faith nonetheless. The series, which began with a violent plane crash on an island beach, ended in a church. The final episode included themes of love, forgiveness, grace, faith, and even hope for eternal life. The creators of *Lost* ended their

six-year journey by pointing to faith. **[end slide]** Ecclesiastes ended his journey the same way. Ultimately, said the writer of Ecclesiastes, if you want to know the secrets of life, you must look to faith. And that reminds me of a story about George Harrison.

Like most baby boomers, I was a huge Beatles fan. About a year before he died, I heard an interview on the radio of ex-Beatle George Harrison. **[slide: photo of George Harrison]** During the interview George talked about his experience with the Beatles. He said that when they first started out, it was all about the fame. And of course, the Beatles had more fame than they ever dreamed of having. However, the excitement of the fame finally wore off. After that, said George, it was all about the money. And my goodness did they made money. But in the end, fame and money did not satisfy George Harrison. “At this point in my life,” said George, “it’s all about finding God.”

What an interesting comment. It was all about fame. Then it was all about money. But later in life it was all about God. When that interview occurred, George had been fighting cancer for several years. Mortality was very real to him so spiritual issues were crucial. In another interview, not long before his death, George said, “Everything else can wait, but the search for God cannot wait.” **[end slide]**

The writer of Ecclesiastes came to the same conclusion as George Harrison. He realized that in the end what mattered most was finding God. So Ecclesiastes’ closing advice at the end of his book was: “Remember your Creator.” Make faith the foundation of your life.

But hear Ecclesiastes well. The writer isn’t not talking about some kind of naïve, simplistic, happy-go-lucky faith. He’s not talking about faith that always smiles and says everything is wonderful if you’ll just love Jesus. I came upon that kind of faith last week. I pulled up behind a car covered with religious bumper stickers. They said things like, “God Is Alive” and “Jesus Is the Answer.” But that kind of bumper-sticker theology isn’t enough, at least not for me. Why? Because I’ve preached too many hard funerals. I’ve seen too many broken dreams. I’ve prayed with too many cancer patients. I’ve seen too many of the terrors of the world.

My faith has a lot of ambiguity, unknowns, and mystery. Faith is not always black-and-white and simple and easy. Sometimes faith is hard. One of my favorite verses in the entire Bible is, “Lord I believe, help my unbelief!” (Mark 9:24 NKJV). And yet, at the core of my being, I am a

person of faith. In spite of struggles and doubts and unanswered questions, I know that God is alive and that I belong to him. Like the writer of Ecclesiastes, I do believe, I do have faith, and that faith makes all the difference. Like the man of Ecclesiastes, I've learned that faith is the only true foundation of life.

What is the ultimate foundation of your life? I hope it's faith in God. Because ultimately, faith is all we can stand upon—in life and also in death. In today's text Ecclesiastes again speaks of death. At first his references to mortality are vague and poetic. He speaks about the moon growing dark, the silver cord being severed, and the golden bowl being broken—all veiled images of death. But then Ecclesiastes speaks about death directly. He says, "And the dust returns to the ground it came from, and the spirit returns to God who gave it" (v. 7). When the writer of Ecclesiastes came face-to-face with the reality of death, he said, "Our only hope is God. God alone can help us face the valley of the shadow of death. God alone can carry us home to the other side."

I once visited a woman in the hospital who was recovering from cancer surgery. It was her eleventh cancer surgery in ten years. She had fought a nonstop, decade-long battle with cancer, and her prospects were bleak. I knew her well, so this visit was not spent in small talk. We talked about the chances of her living, and we also talked about the probability of her death. She was honest. She wanted to live. She had a husband, three children, seven grandchildren; and she wanted more time with them. But she was also a woman of deep faith, and she was spiritually prepared for death. We talked about life, and death, faith, and hope. Hope for life and hope for eternal life. Near the end of the conversation, she said something to me I have never forgotten. She said, "Either way. Live or die. With God you win." This was not some kind of pious talk to impress the preacher. After ten years of relentless cancer, she knew all about pain and struggle and questions and doubt and the looming reality of death. Yet she could say, "Either way. Live or die. With God you win." Amazing isn't it. Live or die, with God we win. That is the beauty of faith. And ultimately, that is the secret of life.

