

## **How to Live a Temporary Life (Ash Wednesday Meditation)** **(Selected Verses from Ecclesiastes, NRSV)**

A dramatic event occurred in the state of Hawaii back in 2018. Since I lived in Hawaii for six years, I found it especially engaging. At 8:07 a.m., on January 13, 2018, cell phones, radios, and televisions across the state received a warning message from the state emergency alert system. The message said, “Ballistic missile threat inbound to Hawaii. Seek immediate shelter. This is not a drill.”

Given nuclear tensions with North Korea at that time, it was an easy message to believe. For the next thirty-eight minutes, mayhem reigned in the state. People called their spouses, children, and parents and said goodbye. People drove as fast as they could down the highway trying to get home in order to be with their families. People prayed. People sought emergency shelter. For thirty-eight minutes, thousands upon thousands of people in the state of Hawaii thought their lives were about to end. In their own ways, people prepared for death.

Of course, it turned out to be a false alarm. And it was a horrific mistake, causing a lot of trauma and grief. But I can’t help but believe that, at least for some people, that false warning was a gift. It reminded people—in an extremely vivid way—that life is not forever. That the clock is ticking. That one day, probably before we expect it, we are going to die.

And that reminder is the gift of Ash Wednesday. Every year on this day, we gather in this sacred space to remember that “from dust we come and to dust we shall return.” It’s not a message you want to hear every day. But occasionally, it’s important to be reminded of our mortality.

Which brings me to the book of Ecclesiastes, which is often used on Ash Wednesday. The writer of Ecclesiastes understood that in this life nobody makes it out alive. The reality of death is a major theme of the book. In light of that truth, Ecclesiastes offers crucial lessons about how to live before death arrives. If you look carefully, the book of Ecclesiastes offers five important insights about how to live a temporary life. Please turn to your listening guide in the order of worship (listening guide can be found below), and let’s quickly review them.

**First, Ecclesiastes tells us to work hard.** “Find enjoyment in [your] toil. . . . Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with your might” (Eccl. 2:24; 9:10). In these passages Ecclesiastes tells us to work with enthusiasm, excellence, and gusto. Whatever work we do—at school, home, the office, or church—we should dive in and work diligently, with all our might. Ecclesiastes knew that work was not the most important thing in life. But he also knew that work is a crucial part of being human. Therefore, we should work with excellence; we should work hard.

**Second, Ecclesiastes tells us to enjoy life.** “Eat your bread with enjoyment and drink your wine with a merry heart” (Eccl. 9:7). In this text, Ecclesiastes tells us to celebrate life, have some fun, and appreciate the simple pleasures of living. He reminds us that since we’re going to die one day, it’s important to enjoy life while we are still alive.

**Third, Ecclesiastes tells us to prioritize relationships.** “Two are better than one, because they have a good reward for their toil” (Eccl. 4:9). When Ecclesiastes was young, he was consumed with making money and being successful. But as he grew older, he realized that the key to a meaningful life is our relationships with others. When we come to the end of our life, our resume, diplomas, and financial portfolio will matter very little. What will count most will be our relationships.

**Fourth, Ecclesiastes tells us to give back.** “There is a grievous ill that I have seen under the sun: riches were kept by their owners to their hurt” (Eccl. 5: 13). Ecclesiastes offers an interesting insight here. He paints a picture of people who keep all their resources for themselves. But in the end it hurts them. Hoarding everything for oneself, caring only for oneself, diminishes us. People who live only for their own wants and needs are to be pitied. Why? Because that’s too small a purpose to live for. If we want to have a meaningful life, we must learn to give back, to contribute to others, to give our time, money, and effort in service to society.

**Finally, Ecclesiastes tells us to affirm faith.** “Remember your creator. . . . Fear God, and keep his commandments” (Eccl. 12:1, 13). In order to live a good life and to die a good death, we must give attention to spiritual matters. For example, we must live according to God’s laws and values including love, kindness, service, integrity, and justice. Remembering our Creator doesn’t mean we’ll never struggle with faith, or that we won’t have doubts, because we will. It does mean we will seek to keep faith at the center of our lives.

In just a moment, you will be invited to come forward and receive ashes on your forehead in the sign of the cross. As you do, you will hear the words, “From dust you came, and to dust you shall return.” This ancient ritual serves as a sober reminder that our time is limited, that we will not live forever, and that one day we will die. While that is a sobering thought, it’s also a great gift. It vividly reminds us that we need to fully live while there is still time left to do so.

So, how should we live a temporary life? Ecclesiastes said:

1. Work Hard
2. Enjoy Life
3. Prioritize relationships
4. Give back
5. Affirm faith

If we will do these things, we will live a good life. And if we do these things, we will die a good death. And when we cross over to the other side, we will hear the words of Jesus saying, “Well done my good and faithful servant.”

## **LISTENING GUIDE**

1. Work hard — “Find enjoyment in [your] toil. . . . Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with your might” (Eccl. 2:24; 9:10).
2. Enjoy life — ““Eat your bread with enjoyment, and drink your wine with a merry heart” (Eccl. 9:7).
3. Prioritize relationships — “Two are better than one, because they have a good reward for their toil” (Eccl. 4:9).
4. Give back — “There is a grievous ill that I have seen under the sun: riches were kept by their owners to their hurt” (Eccl. 5:13).
5. Affirm faith — “Remember your creator. . . . Fear God, and keep his commandments” (Eccl. 12:1, 13).