

Sermon preached by Pastor Ben Kuerth on Ecclesiastes 12:1-8 at Victory of the Lamb on September 3, 2017.

**Series: Take Up Your Cross**  
**Today's Focus: In Our Golden Years**

**“Keep Your Soul Safe as the Seasons Change”**

In the upcoming week the eyes of millions across the land will tune in for the start of a new NFL season to watch their favorite players like this one. {pic of Aaron Rodgers} On the cover of this week's Sports Illustrated. Not playing anymore of course is this former quarterback, looking a little weathered and worn. {pic of Brett Favre} Do you realize that many kids under the age of 13 don't even know who he is?

Who here remembers watching this guy play? {pic of Bart Starr} I wore #15 in college because I admired his character and leadership. To this day I admire the dignity and grace that he displays. But before him? Anybody remember who the starting QB of the Packers was? This guy. {pic} Tobin Rote. He's been dead now 17 years. Quarterbacks, you see, come and go. Football seasons come and go. Worldly accomplishments come and go. Seasons of life change. That's true for all of us.

Some of us right now are like quarterbacks in our prime of life. We're enjoying youthful energy and vigor. Others of us are like former quarterbacks thinking about what used to be and pondering what if. Others of us are looking back at what perhaps seems like a lifetime ago (but what might seem to us just like yesterday) while just up ahead is eternity. All of us are in different seasons of life.

One constant though is the cross. The cross that each of us has to carry. Its shape and size and weight may vary according to our season of life, at times lighter and at times heavier, but until we get to heaven we will always feel its presence. Jesus said, **“Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me”** (Matthew 16:24). And so this is a reality for every follower of Christ. Our earthly cross precedes our heavenly crown.

The essence of our earthly cross as we've learned the last couple weeks is self-denial—which, admittedly, is not real popular in America. Our cross therefore is to reject the tendency to think the world revolves me and what I want—my comfort and my success and my personal happiness. Jesus explained that the alternative to this is to act as if the world really does revolve around you and so end up losing your soul for the “fool's gold” of the world.

Now before some of you check out on me today because you're expecting this to be a sermon just for old folks, I want you to consider this: hearing God's Word today when you're young is a vitally important way that God will prepare you for when you are old—unless you want to end up bitter and angry and feeling all alone with a life full of regrets. If that's what you want, then don't pay attention. After all, as leadership guru John Maxwell is fond of saying, “Change is inevitable. Growth is optional.”

And speaking of inevitable change, that's one of the big ideas we find in the book of the Bible that we'll be looking at today. It's called Ecclesiastes. You might think of it as the wisdom learned from King Solomon's happiness experiment and I'll explain what I mean by that in a little bit. But first we turn our attention to chapter 12 today where we start to learn how to keep your soul safe as the seasons change:

**Remember your Creator in the days of your youth.** Again, now is the time for God in your life no matter what season you're in. Now is the time to go to church, to study God's Word, to learn the truths and promises of God because you don't know how long your life will be. You could die tomorrow. And you don't want to meet your Maker unprepared. **Remember your Creator... before the days of trouble come and the years approach when you will say, "I find no pleasure in them"**— So do you understand what Solomon is going to be describing? From his vantage point as a man with a lifetime of experience, he's going to begin describing the onset of old age with a variety of poetic metaphors.

**The sun and the light and the moon and the stars grow dark.** For most people, there is sadness in growing old. Any of you read the obituaries in the newspaper to find out if any of your friends have died? I can't even quite imagine what that would be like to be preceded in death by one's spouse and relatives and friends. Yet as we age we all experience more and more of life's inexplicable tragedies too. Why did this happen? Why did that happen? Why haven't we figured out how to do something about that yet? **And the clouds return after the rain.** When you get older, healing and recovery time are slowed. You don't bounce back from sickness or injury the way you used to. Sometimes folks facing surgery have to wait to hear if their body can even handle the surgery. **When the keepers of the house tremble, and the strong men stoop.** Our arms, hands, legs, and feet grow weak. Muscle mass declines. We shrink a bit and hunch over. We may get frustrated that we can't do things we used to do anymore. When NFL legends attend the Hall of Fame inductions every year in Canton, OH, some of the biggest, fastest, strongest athletes who've ever lived are in wheelchairs. **When the grinders cease because they are few.** In an ancient village the grinders are the women who grind grain to make food. But in our body our grinders are our teeth, right? As we age, the number of useful teeth declines. Many people need dentures. In ancient times it was extremely rare if anyone had all their teeth after age 30. **And those looking through the windows grow dim.** Our eyesight weakens. How many of you need bifocals or even trifocals?

**When the doors to the street are closed and the sound of grinding fades.** This first part describes difficulty speaking. The mouth doesn't work the way it used to. Neither do the ears. Our hearing never gets better, only worse over time, right? We may need hearing aids. **When people rise up at the sound of birds, but all their songs grow faint.** How many of you have trouble sleeping at night? We get up early because of sleeplessness, but we can't enjoy the beautiful music. **When people are afraid of heights and of dangers in the streets.** There's a fear of falling and going out alone whether driving or walking. There's a loss of independence. There are difficult conversations about how long one should have their driver's license, whether one is able to live in their home anymore, how much care will a loved one need. **When the almond tree blossoms.** Sometimes our hair turns white or even falls out in old age. **And the grasshopper drags itself along.** We lose our mobility. Our gait becomes stiff and unsteady. Our joints aren't as flexible as they used to be. We need to get around with a walker or a cane. **And desire no longer is stirred.** There is a loss of appetite. You don't enjoy food and don't eat as much. Our will to do things we used to enjoy doing weakens or disappears. **Then people go to their eternal home and mourners go about the streets.** We die and people mourn our passing.

**<sup>6</sup>Remember him [God!]**—before the silver cord is severed, and the golden bowl is broken; before the pitcher is shattered at the spring, and the wheel broken at the well. These are all different ways that Solomon is describing death. Some of the items used in his comparisons would've been valuable objects at his time. His point? Life is so precious. It is fragile. Every moment of every second that you're alive on this earth is a gift of God's grace—do you recognize this? **And the dust returns to the ground it came from, and the spirit returns to God who gave it.** All of a sudden life ends when a person's soul leaves their body which then decays and turns back to dust.

So how does all this make you feel? Solomon had a reaction. **“Meaningless! Meaningless!” says the Teacher. “Everything is meaningless!”** Some of you are thinking, “Pastor Ben, man, this is the most depressing message I've ever heard. Can't we just hear Pastor Bill's sermon from last week again. That was super comforting!” And I hear you. But let's understand what's going on in Ecclesiastes. Remember when I called it the wisdom learned from Solomon's happiness experiment? That's because the book of Ecclesiastes is written from the perspective of life under the sun. It's how the world looks without God. Without God life is just an empty shell. Without God nothing is capable of giving life any ultimate meaning or purpose. Without God there is no hope for a happily ever after. And without God so much of life is just plain futility and frustration. How much more then aging and death!

Yet Solomon experimented. He tried to find happiness and fulfillment without God. He tried just having as much fun as he could as if that was the meaning of life—pleasure and parties. He pursued beautiful women and his own sexual gratification. He did this further and faster than even Wilt Chamberlain. Yet lasting fulfillment, true happiness remained elusive. He called it a “chasing after the wind.” So he entered a new season of life and thought, “Maybe I'll stop living like a college frat boy (or an ancient near east sultan) and try and help the community.” So he built zoos with exotic animals and beautiful gardens and community centers. He endowed the arts and surrounded himself with culture. “Meaningless” he said. So he pursued the accumulation of knowledge. He poured himself into learning everything he could, reading and learning, observing and compiling. He became an expert on so many things that people from all over the world came to sit at his feet with rapt attention. “Meaningless” still. So he threw himself at his work and built an empire. He accumulated wealth...vast wealth, the wealth of kingdoms. Yet he found neither contentment nor joy. He worried *more*. It made him nauseous as he grew older to think what would happen to all that he had achieved after he was gone. And so life itself became a heavy cross to bear. Life without God became an empty, hopeless shell.

Any of you feeling that way lately? That's why for this sermon I reached out to my dear friend and now retired former Professor, Frosty Bivens—a member of our church. Some of you know him. So I asked him, “Friend, please share some advice with me on preaching this message. Give me some wisdom.”

So although Frosty couldn't be here today, he graciously took the time to share via email a couple insights that I want to pass on to you, ok? First of all he says, *There's a reason the common saying is so well known: “Growing old isn't for sissies.” ... I go regularly to a fitness center for cardio and stretching activities, and it is both a joy and a frustration when I see high-schoolers and young adults using their bodies in ways that I can now only dream about. So much of what I was once able to do is consigned to*

*my memory and permanently in my rearview mirror of life. **But let me be quick to say that all of this is also a huge blessing from our Lord of body and soul. The decrease in physical comfort and increase of pain and limitations serve as God-given sermons to give me warning and renewed hope. Anyone whose fondest hopes and dreams are earth-bound and whose treasures are linked to this life that is so temporary and troublesome is being taught to set their hearts and minds primarily “above, where Christ is seated at the right hand” (Colossians 3).***

*Another cross that the aged often bear is what I would define as **an emotional loss called “invisibility.”** The psychological experience of feeling “invisible” reflects that many younger people simply don't see us as significant or useful or of much value. It's hardly surprising that we live in a youth-fixated culture where people are afraid to age and to grow more vulnerable and where ideals about attractiveness are oriented around those with young, healthy bodies. And with the exception of travel agents, investment advisers, and sometimes scammers seeking to defraud unsuspecting oldsters, much of the advertising world is no longer particularly interested in courting our favor. **Yet in all of this there is blessing from our loving Lord.** I like the progression that Paul provides in Romans 12:3ff. **First is the healthy reminder that we don't think of ourselves more highly than we ought, but rather think of ourselves with sober judgment, reflecting the measure of faith God has given you.** And then the apostle launches into the topic of how **we are all gifted with different gifts and abilities, and are instructed to use whatever gift we have for the common good of the Body of Christ. The basic point is clear: It's not all about me at all (and never was). It's all about Jesus. And then it's all about me being of value to others, seeking ways to serve my siblings in Jesus and others whether they initially see value in me or not.***

Friends, I can't tell you how much I appreciate my friend, Frosty Bivens. There are probably a ton of things he could be complaining about. He could spend his time lamenting how much things have changed since he served in the parish. He could complain about why we're so focused on reaching the next generation and not developing all kinds of programs for people like him. Instead, he keeps encouraging me by pointing me back to Jesus. By demonstrating selfless love like Jesus. By using his time and energy to support me and pray for me. And friends, for those of you feeling less than useful, don't underestimate the power of prayer! Your gift right now may well be the gift of having time to pray very deliberately and specifically for busy parents and people who you know need it. Can you begin to see how the cross that Jesus sends us can be a blessing when it draws us closer to him?

This is why Solomon says over and over, “Remember God.” This doesn't just mean remember some Bible trivia about God once a while. But daily taking time to rejoice in God's mercy and blessings. Whispering heartfelt “Thank-You's” to God when you get to do things others take for granted. To reflect on God's faithfulness throughout our lives—how he has always provided, how he has kept all his promises to send us the Savior that we all need. And to cling to all his promises yet in store when we're afraid of what might lie ahead. You see that is what the cross is for. God sends us a cross not because he wishes to crush us, but to draw us closer to Christ who won the victory over sin and hell, death and despair. So that we remember. That we remember that without him we are dust. Without him our life would be a chasing after the wind. Without him would have to despair of any lasting hope. But with him

there is deliverance—forgiveness for our sins of ingratitude and complaining, of self-centeredness and the squandering of our time...because of the cross of Christ.

So how can you keep your soul safe as the seasons change? Well imagine that this football here represents your ultimate happiness, fulfillment, and contentment. (Forgive the fact that for some of you a Packers logo could never be a part of your happiness!) But for the moment just pretend this football represents everything you've ever wanted in life. Here it rests precariously on this tee. It's safe there though, right? But let's say your happiness is located in good health or physical beauty or your appearance. Well that's great until here comes a sickness or an accident happens...and kicks it away. So maybe you get through that ok and your ball is back here on the tee. It's safe here, right? Let's say your happiness is in financial security. That's great until the stock market crashes or here comes a disastrous event like Hurricane Harvey and kicks it away. So maybe you get through that ok and your ball is back here on the tee. It's safe, right? Until aging comes and kicks it away. You didn't plan on that injury. You didn't plan on your spouse getting cancer and dying. You planned on spending your golden years together. Friends, you see, if your life is earthbound, whatever your ultimate happiness is in...like this football, it can be kicked away and what then of your life? You will be in danger of losing your soul.

But what if your real life, your ultimate happiness, fulfillment, and hope is "hidden in God"? I mean think how many times the Bible describes God as our fortress, our stronghold, our tower, etc. A place to run to and be safe. Hidden away and protected. Because then when sickness comes or aging comes or loss or grief comes to kick it all away? ..... Where's your happiness? Where's your life? If it's in God...it's safe. It's secure.

Psalm 73 says, <sup>25</sup> **Whom have I in heaven but you? And earth has nothing I desire besides you.** <sup>26</sup> **My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever.**

Friends, the key to keeping your soul safe as seasons change is placing your happiness, your trust, your life in God! Then truly nothing can kick it away. Because of Christ's cross and empty tomb, you don't even have to be afraid anymore of aging or dying because you know that there is a happily ever after. All death can now do to Christians is to make their lives infinitely better.

And so if you're not afraid to die, then you're free to really live. To enjoy the moments that you have here on earth however many or few they might be. To treasure the memories. To love God and the people God puts into your life. To accept that the world doesn't revolve around you and that it never really did. Friends, the way to keep your soul safe in changing seasons is to hide it in God. Then one day you will lay down the cross you had to carry here and exchange it for the crown. Amen.