

When Life Runs Out of Steam

Ecclesiastes 12:1-8, 13

Series: Tough Texts of the Bible

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If we're going to explore some tough texts of the Bible, we need to spend some time with Ecclesiastes. I'm not thinking of any particular chapter. I'm thinking about the whole book.

Ecclesiastes is a Wisdom book. It consists of wise sayings, like the book of Proverbs. But it's not as random as the book of Proverbs. The wise sayings are organized by themes, like the pursuit of wisdom or the pursuit of wealth or the pursuit of pleasure. But the overall theme is that all of these human endeavors are like a puff of smoke. The favorite word of this book is "vanity," which literally means "vapor" or "a puff of smoke." You get a good wind, and it can blow everything away. And the final chapter of the book begins this way:

¹Remember your creator in the days of your youth, before the days of trouble come, and the years draw near when you will say, "I have no pleasure in them"; ²before the sun and the light and the moon and the stars are darkened and the clouds return with the rain; ³in the day when the guards of the house tremble, and 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; ⁴when the doors on the street are shut, and the sound of the grinding is low, and one rises up at the sound of a bird, and all the daughters of song are brought low; ⁵when one is afraid of heights, and terrors are in the road; the almond tree blossoms, the grasshopper drags itself along and desire fails; because all must go to their eternal home, and the mourners will go about the streets; ⁶before the silver cord is snapped, and the golden bowl is broken, and the pitcher is broken at the fountain, and the wheel broken at the cistern, ⁷and the dust returns to the earth as it was, and the breath returns to God who gave it. ⁸Vanity of vanities, says the Teacher; all is vanity.

And then this final verse:

¹³The end of the matter; all has been heard. Fear God, and keep his commandments; for that is the whole duty of everyone.

For the better part of my life, I have been surrounded by people much older than me. My parents always had friends who were older than they. In youth or in college, I always had friends who were older. And for nineteen years, I have served as a Presbyterian pastor. I wish I had a quarter for every time somebody said to me, "Don't ever get old."

Well, what's the alternative? I would like to grow old, even though the book of Ecclesiastes knows that aging is not for sissies. Did you hear the text? ***"Remember the Creator in the days of your youth, because sooner or later the evil days will come."***

This is one of those passages that must make Robert Schuller flinch in his old age. He has enjoyed an entire career of jump-starting people's joy, of pointing to the possibilities. But right here in the middle of the Bible, we are reminded that days of decline will come, that body parts will not outlast their warranty, that life will limp along and dark clouds return.

There are preachers who speak of joy and health and salvation, but the Preacher of Ecclesiastes is not one of them. At the end of his book, any possible efforts to develop life under your own ability have been explored and

dismissed. Any attempt to secure God's favor or extend our longevity does not matter. Here's a Preacher who is cynical and negative. And maybe he's just a little too honest.

“Remember the Creator in the days of your youth before the evil days come.”

That sounds like one of those high school baccalaureate services that some of you have told me about. By the time I came through school, most of those services had long disappeared. But in former days, a preacher would often stand and warn the graduates about keeping God in their hearts and minds, as they stood on the threshold of freedom. Some of those sermons would attempt to ruin a perfectly good prom night with the words, “Don't forget about God. Remember the Creator in the days of your youth.”

But just as chapter twelve paints a chilling view of old age, chapter eleven says, “Those who live many years should rejoice in them all” (11:8), and “Youth and the dawn of life are vanity” (11:10). There is no protected time when we are safe from trouble.

“Remember the Creator in the days of your youth before the evil days come.”

Sooner or later, all of us are going to have to face up to this text. The children are born. The children go off to school. The children come home from school. The children go off again, and one day they don't come back. The children return to get married. The children move into their own place. The children begin to bear children of their own. The children encourage the grandparents to try e-mail, but it doesn't go very well.

You're left pretty much to yourself, with the bed you make. You keep thinking the empty nest will get better when the children slip away, but you're stuck with yourselves. You think, “maybe if she dies, I'll have a little peace and quiet,” but she doesn't, so you're stuck with yourselves. The evil days come sooner or later. It's not simply a matter of depressing; this is reality.

Some of us think we can go to church to get away from reality. And then the scriptures fall open to Ecclesiastes, and we realize there's no escape. Even those who so glibly proclaim that *Christ is Lord, Christ is Risen, God's in charge of the world, Be joyful, O saints* – even these people are prone to depression. Sometimes it means clinical depression.

I heard about a study that somebody did of those people who prefer energetic, joyful worship services, where the music is happy, and the budget supports a weekly pep rally, with someone to excite us, someone to beat that drum and get the tempo going faster – the study, which was rather exhaustive, announced there is a higher rate of clinical depression among the members of that kind of church.

I have felt that way myself. Go to a football game and the home team is losing 44 to nothing. Some cheerleaders stand up and shout, “OK, come on, let's cheer them on! Let's get them going!” And the more they cheer, the more depressed I feel. Because it just seems not to fit the circumstance.

“Remember the Creator in the days of your youth before the evil days come.” Is it too much to suggest that some, maybe all, of those evil days are self-inflicted?

The southerner Walker Percy graduated from medical school and practiced medicine for a while. He worked as a pathologist in New York until he contracted tuberculosis. During his recovery, he slowed down long enough to deal with his own soul. His father had committed suicide. His mother had died early. Percy began to realize that most people don't need another doctor; they need another kind of diagnosis. So he became a novelist. A novelist, he once noted, is somebody who tells the truth even when he is making up a story.

In his novels and essays, he often saw the paradox of life. He saw people who were living lives that look good by all worldly standards and yet who somehow seem more dead than alive. Ten years before Dr. Phil ever

went on TV, Walker Percy observed, “Whenever you have a hundred thousand psychotherapists talking about being life-affirming and a million books about life-enrichment, you can be pretty sure there is a lot of death around.”¹

One of the great curiosities is that life is diminished in the midst of plenty. Life is impoverished in the face of riches. As Percy saw so clearly, “There is something worse than being deprived of life; it is being deprived of life and not knowing it.”²

I think that’s true. In a time and place where we have so much, there is so much despair in our neighborhoods. I’ve begun to collect my own anecdotes. Let me tell you what I’ve been hearing:

- A woman has more money than God. She travels to Alaska on a cruise, but returns early because she is bored.
- A household upgrades its cable television agreement. Now they have 395 channels. The kids still complain that there’s nothing to watch.
- A young man lives on fast food, and gains an enormous amount of weight. Rather than eat an apple, make a salad, or go for a walk, he sues Ronald McDonald.
- Did you know that the largest consumers of gangster rap music are not black kids in the ghetto, but white kids in the suburbs? What’s going on inside of them?
- A family goes to Orlando. They spend thousands of dollars and have a lousy time. Then they make plans to go back next year.
- Two people work hard, make a lot of money, buy a couple of nice cars, get a bigger house, and spend more money on lawn care. The whole time that they’re enjoying these things, their teenage son gets busted for smoking dope and their daughter dries out in rehab.

None of this would surprise the writer of Ecclesiastes. While other biblical writers speak of sin, the preacher of Ecclesiastes points to the limits of human existence. God has planted a sense of eternity in our minds, he says, but we cannot move beyond our mortal limits (3:11). We are stuck with ourselves. We always pack ourselves in the suitcase whenever we take a trip.

Dogs, cats, and turtles seem content to be themselves, but we humans are always looking for ways to be something more than what we are. We explore for excitement. We search for meaning. We shop for pleasure. But nothing ever quite advances our situation. Some people throw in the towel early. Others keep flailing away at it. But the whole enterprise of trying to improve ourselves is a form of vanity. It’s a bunch of smoke.

Here in the dog days of summer, in the dog days of life, we’ve grown weary with one another, weary with church, weary with God. Weary with life. Some people might wish for some burst of excitement, some little burst of something different.

I preached a couple of sermons last week in Virginia. I’ve been speaking at a Bible Conference down there for four years now. Go down for an overnight, preach a couple of sermons, and head back. It breaks up the summer, and it reinforces the truth that everybody is an expert ten miles from home. Every year, they have about ten preachers speak in this open-air amphitheater, kind of a big shed without walls. Some nights, about seven hundred Presbyterians come out to hear what I fondly call the Pillsbury Preach-Off.

This year a lady gets up to introduce me. She drones on for a while: *Rev. Carter is the author of five books with a sixth book on the way, he has preached on the Protestant Hour seven times, he spends his vacation on the road with a jazz quartet, he drives a mini-van, yada, yada, yada.* I look out, and most of these people are

¹ Walker Percy, “Novel-Writing in an Apocalyptic Time,” in *Signposts in a Strange Land* (New York: HarperCollins, 1991), 162.

² *Ibid*, 163.

nodding off. Who can blame them? They've been listening to sermons all week. The whole place is already yawning, and I haven't even started yet. That's a bad sign.

I jump into my sermon – it was that sermon I preached back in June about the lady who puts the tent spike through the guy's head – I thought that one would keep them awake. But they're yawning and looking weary of sermons.

Suddenly a cat wanders in, walks down the center aisle, stretches out in front of the pulpit, and begins to purr. Nobody's listening to the sermon anymore. Pretty soon, I'm not even paying attention. Afterwards people are saying, "What did you think of the sermon?" "Well, I liked that part when the cat came down for the altar call." Some things can be so tedious that we look for a little excitement.

A man went with friends to see the Indianapolis 500. He had never gone to see a race like that before. It was so exciting to hear them start their engines, and watch them start roaring around the track. They went around, and around, and around, and around, and around, and around. Pretty soon he secretly began to pray for a crash. Just something to break up the routine.

The Ecclesiastes Preacher believes that life is a routine. "There's nothing new under the sun," he declares. It is one season after another. There's a time for this, a time for that. There's a time for peace, a time for war, then a time for peace, a time for war, a time for peace, and so on. Nothing new about the futility of war and peace.

He says there's a time to plant, a time to harvest, a time to let the field go fallow. Then you plant, then you harvest, and then you let the field go back to sleep. And then you plant, and so forth and so on. Nothing new about the cycle of seasons.

There's a time to throw stones, a time to gather stones together. A time to throw stones, a time to gather stones together. Every four years in this country, people throw stones at one another; it's called campaigning.

And then there's a time to gather stones, and build something new. We went to an archeological site in Israel. Somebody had uncovered this big mound of dirt, and cut a cross-section along the side. They discovered a series of ten cities built on top of one another.

The Preacher says, "***Whenever somebody says, 'Hey look, it's something new,' they have a short memory. It's been around before; we've merely forgotten.***" (1:10-11).

Life gets to be like that. Put food on the plates. Wash the dishes, put food on the plates. Wash the dishes, put food on the plates. On and on, two or three times a day, more if you have teenagers.

All this seasonal thinking – one thing after another – the Ecclesiastes Preacher tells the truth. Sooner or later, life becomes one enormous routine. Somebody else sets the schedule. There are limits to how long we'll go, and how long we'll stay.

About all we can do, says the preacher, is to take whatever pleasure when it comes. To enjoy whatever good comes our way, whenever it comes. To suck the marrow out of the bones of life, and to thank God who gives it.

I'm grateful for the other sixty-five books of the Bible. They speak in a different voice. They speak in a different tone. They proclaim the possibility of hope. They announce the possibility of joy. They remind us that we are not lost unto ourselves. They proclaim a God who breaks through the routines, who breaks into the schedules, and comes with some startling good news. I'm delighted that is what the other sixty-five books of scripture say, in one way or another.

But this one book of Ecclesiastes is also there, as a reminder that every morning is not Easter morning. Some days are Good Friday. Sooner or later the clouds roll in. The rains return. The cord is cut.

The Preacher reminds us that no matter how hard we work and labor, we get to the top of the ladder and realize it's only the top of a ladder, and that's as far as it goes.

The Preacher reminds us that we strike on our own and leave home, and the door closes behind us, and there are cherubim with flaming swords who will not let us back into Eden.

The Preacher reminds us that, no matter who we are, no matter how right we think we are, no matter how correct we are in our opinions, no matter how hard we labor, we are limited by ourselves. We are stuck with ourselves. And if any joy dribbles down from above, well, we had better not miss it. Because that's all that we might ever find.

Eugene Peterson says Ecclesiastes is not a meal; it's a bath. In his words, "It is not nourishment; it is cleansing. We read Ecclesiastes to get scrubbed clean from illusion and sentiment, from ideas that are idolatrous and feelings that cloy. It is an expose and rejection of every arrogant and ignorant expectation that we can live our lives by ourselves on our own terms."³ Only when we get cleansed are we ready for God.

That's about all we can expect out of the book of Ecclesiastes. At the end of the book, the Preacher says about all we can do is fear God, and remember that God is more important than we are. He tells us to honor God, who is beyond our capacity to comprehend or understand. That's the end of it all, says the Preacher. Life is not about gloom. Life is not about doom. Life is about accepting our limits, and worshiping a God who stands beyond them.

Maybe you heard the story about the Jewish rabbis who gathered together for a meeting. They were going to prove that God doesn't exist. They'd had it. One after another, they recounted stories of how the Jewish people had been neglected, abused, put down, and even murdered. They remembered the Spanish Inquisition. They remembered the Holocaust. They told one story after another, and finally they concluded, "There! God doesn't exist. We've proved it by our own history."

Just then, one of them spoke up. "Excuse me," he said, "but we will have to finish this conversation later. It's time for our prayers."⁴

³ Eugene Peterson, in the author's introduction to Ecclesiastes, *The Message* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2002) 1162.

⁴ Thanks to Fred Craddock for passing along this parable.