

A Sermon for DaySpring Baptist Church
By Eric Howell
“God Is the Creator”
Ecclesiastes 12
August 8, 2010

On September 18, 2007, a little known professor of computer science at a prestigious college not known well to most of us stepped in front of a microphone in front of 400 or so students, colleagues, and family to deliver a speech that was part of a series asking popular professors, “If you could give one lecture before you died, what would you say?” Something amazing happened that day that captivated everyone who has seen it or read the lecture since it was given.

Randy Pausch gave his *Last Lecture*. It was much, much more than a review of the latest accomplishments in computer animation by an energetic and charismatic teacher. What Randy Pausch did was give his take on the meaning of life. He titled his lecture, “Really Achieving your Childhood Dreams” and traced with humor and insight his own journey from childhood through his career doing the work he loved and doing it with people he respected. Whatever he might have said, the lecture had deep significance because Pausch was actually dying of pancreatic cancer and was upfront about it. He began his lecture with pictures of the tumors on his CT Scan. He then did pushups to show how healthy he felt, although he’d been given 3-6 months to live comfortably. Ten months after giving the lecture that would become a phenomenon, he died. He was 47 years old.

One day I clicked over on my computer to watch a few minutes of this lecture I’d heard so much about. An hour and a half later I was still sitting there with cheeks full of tears absorbing this remarkable reflection on life. He talked quite a bit about the work he did and the advances he and his students and teams made in their field. He was proud of those. But very obviously, the whole point of his message, talking about mis-directions in life, he called them head fakes, how you think you are going one way but then life takes you another, even better way, was that he did what he loved and tried to do it with passion and integrity. At the end of the lecture he said the final mis-direction, head fake, was that his *Last Lecture*, full of his lessons for life, given in front of the most esteemed faculty and staff and leaders in his successful professional career, wasn’t for his esteemed colleagues. His *Last Lecture*, about achieving childhood dreams was for his three children. And he left the stage.

Keep the image of a *Last Lecture* in mind when you read Ecclesiastes. It’s also a *Last Lecture* from someone who is about to leave the stage, someone who has lived life, accomplished a lot, and is now advising young people on how to understand and live life before they get too far into it. Now, the author of Ecclesiastes does not have the charisma of Randy Pausch, or of Atilla the Hun for that matter. Ecclesiastes reads like a dark book, lots of talk of how the stuff in life you think is important is really just a head fake, a mirage, like, as one of you put it, “like the heat that you can see rising off a mid-August parking lot.” Randy Pausch’s *Last Lecture* is funny and poignant. Let’s be honest, Ecclesiastes isn’t particularly funny, but it is poignant.

It is the voice of one who has lived life and gained a deep wisdom about life, not just from reading books or having discussions, but from living life, making mistakes, chasing dreams. The author is an old man who is searingly clear about what it means to grow old. At the end of chapter 11 and through chapter 12, we are taken on a journey through three stages of life. You get the clear sense that this is a reflection from someone who has lived it.

At first, we see youth. It is pictured as full of sunshine and brightness and hope. It's actually surprising that the line "the future's so bright I've got to wear shades" is actually not in the Bible. The one thing the youth cannot know is what it means to be young. When we are young, we have nothing to compare our youngness to, so youngness seems like life. It's only when we are older that we can look back and say, "Ah, that was youth." For me, it's started to happen more often in the mornings after playing basketball the day before. Here's my thought process first thing in the morning, "Man my feet hurt. Where did that bruise come from? I don't remember wrenching my back. I only played two hours. I used to do that all the time. Oh, my feet hurt. It must be the shoes." One person when asked how it felt to be 70 years old replied, "I don't feel like I'm 70. I feel like I'm 25 and it's just that something's wrong with me."

The author of Ecclesiastes has lived a lot longer than me. In chapter 12 we see a poetic description of the infirmities of old age. Each of the descriptions is a metaphor—

- the keepers of the house tremble—you get the shakes, your muscles go weak
- the strong men are bent—your legs, your back aren't straight
- the grinders cease because they are few—you've lost your teeth
- the windows are dimmed—eyesight begins to fail
- the doors on the street are shut—your hearing diminishes
- one rises at the sound of the bird—old people wake up early in the morning
- the almond tree blossoms—your hair goes white
- the grasshopper drags itself along—you shuffle your feet

Here's how the Message translation puts it, "Honor and enjoy your Creator while you're still young, before the years take their toll and your vigor wanes, before your vision dims and the world blurs and the winter years keep you close to the fire. In old age, your body no longer serves you so well. Muscles slacken, grip weakens, joints stiffen. The shades are pulled down on the world. You can't come and go at will. Things grind to a halt. The hum of the household fades away. You are wakened now by bird-song. Hikes to the mountains are a thing of the past. Even a stroll down the road has its terrors. Your hair turns apple-blossom white, adorning a fragile and matchstick body. Yes, you're well on your way to eternal rest, while your friends make plans for your funeral."

Sounds depressing, huh? I'm not at all convinced that it is meant to be depressing. I think it's meant to be true -- to be real about something that we don't think about, especially when we are young. I think he's just saying, "this is life—it's life for everyone that lives long enough to experience old age."

The passing of time is not an enemy, it's just reality. It's not to be lamented, just accepted. Youth is to be enjoyed while it's here, but it can't be reclaimed by those who are older, not physically anyway. Life goes on. For everything there is a season and a time under heaven.

We see three eras in a person's life: youth, old age, and then death: "the silver cord is snapped, the golden bowl shattered, the pitcher shattered at the fountain, the wheel broken as the cistern, the dust returns to the earth the way it was, and the spirit returns to God who gave it."

This is the one place where Ecclesiastes really bugs me. After picturing the culmination of life, I want him to say, "And glory be to God who brings our life to completion and fulfillment. Life is God's from beginning to end and thank God for it. Have faith in God and go to your heavenly reward. Praise be to God. I'll fly away O glory, I'll fly away!" But instead, we get "Vanity of vanities, all is vanity." It's like, come on, give us a break. Give us something good, give us some hope. Talk to us about the sweet by-and-by, don't just leave us there.

But the message of this book is relentless—everything in this life passes—time passes, so do possessions, and power, learning, and experiences. It all passes—the good days and bad days. Only God is eternal. Nothing we do in this life is.

Whether you particularly like this book or not, there's something deeply insightful and important here. Soren Kierkegaard calls Ecclesiastes an example of *Concerned Truth*. He says the words of Ecclesiastes, particularly that of "Remember your Creator in the days of your youth" are examples of such a *Concerned Truth*. "If you could hear the voice of the one who said it, you would be assured as to how moved he himself was; and if you could see him in person, and you yourself were a young person, you certainly would be gripped by the sympathy with which he concerned himself about you, but more particularly he would awaken you to concern about yourself. . . Who is this man who spoke these words? We do not know, but if you are young and the heir to the throne, he wore purple too, and was of the opinion that the thought of the Creator is the youth's best thought. And if you are young, even if your life is lowly and without glittering prospect, you have his royal word that despite this, the thought of the Creator is youth's most beautiful splendor. (*18 Upbuilding Discourses*, 234).

Why are the youth singled out? Why would he point his craggly finger and scowl from under his bushy eyebrows at the young people with this message, "Remember your Creator?" Don't we all, at any age need that message? Surely it's not the case that at some point in life it's just too late and there's no hope for you. The gospel is full of examples of people coming to faith at all sorts of times in life, through all sorts of experiences—young and old. Maybe it's because in life many people don't think of God when they are young and do so only when they are older.

It is a fairly common experience for couples to return to church when the children start getting old enough to go to Sunday School, and you want them to grow up in church like you did. What that leaves often are whole missing years, a decade or more of life when major challenges are being faced regularly, decisions are being made about the direction of life and major reflection is being done on how you will live your life, and that's often done sadly outside of a faith community, apart from spiritual disciples, and away from a growing, intimate relationship with God. "Remember your Creator in your youth" is a good word for those who we call youth, for those about to go off to college, for those about to begin a career or a family, when God is so often forgotten at those points in life.

Maybe "Remember your Creator in your youth" is because too that the young years can be years of extraordinary spiritual growth and maturity. Some of the most faithful, courageous, and devoted Christians today are people in their 20s who are asking serious and important questions about what it means to be a follower of Jesus, and they are ordering their lives by the call of Christ in ways that will shape their faith and many others for generations. Sometimes we forget that Jesus was only about 30 years old when he began his ministry. It's possible that the first disciples were in their late teens to early 20s. What can God do with young people today whose hearts are completely His? Some of the evidence is in: the hungry are fed, the poor are sheltered, community is explored, churches are grown in living rooms, under bridges, and on campuses. There's a lot at stake in "remembering your Creator when you are young."

But, in the context of Ecclesiastes, there's something else. When you are young, you think you will live forever, that the reality of this world is really real. You don't really think you'll live forever. You are smarter than that. But, you don't evaluate life in terms of seeing the end of it on the horizon. As we get older, it's just different. To "remember your Creator when you are young" is to remember that we are created, that our lives are contingent on the One who gave us breath. It is to cultivate that deeper wisdom about life that goes beyond what you can merely see, or earn, or build with your own hands. It is to know that God is eternal and we are not. Jesus gives this same insight, "Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also."

The Last Lecture by Randy Pausch has been called by others a way to show others "how to deal with mortality." The same is true of Ecclesiastes. You are mortal. You are mortal. You are mortal. The message resounds through the book and even through the whole Bible. You are mortal. But God is not.

But this is not what Dr. Pausch said his lecture was about—"how to deal with mortality." The lecture was titled "Really Achieving Your Childhood Dreams," but at the very end of the lecture, he said that was even a misdirection, a head fake. That the lecture was really about "How to Live Your Life," and that it wasn't for his colleagues; it was for his three young children. This is the wisdom of Ecclesiastes: "how to live your life, your mortal life bound by time and space, birth and death."

You are limited, but God is not. You are bound. God is boundless. You are created. God is Creator, which makes it all the more remarkable that on some night,

somewhere in a stable in Bethlehem a baby cried, and God became what we are, that through Him, beginning at any point in life when we surrender to God's will and God's way and give our lives to Him, that we might become what God is. As we do, we see with that, life can be full of mis-directions—all the stuff that seems so important just isn't, not compared to knowing and growing with our God throughout our lives.