

Introduction

I'd like to begin by recounting several memories. In August of 1966, I drove my sister's Chevrolet Impala to the grocery store. In July of 1967, I preached a sermon at my home church in Van Wert, Ohio. In April of 1972, I kissed Jill (now my wife) in the lobby of Woolman Hall at Malone College. And finally, on December 11, 1977, I saw my son Aaron in the Lutheran Children's Services building in Cleveland. I have a poor memory. But I do recall those experiences because of something they have in common. They were "**first times**": the first time I drove a car; the first time I preached a sermon; the first time I kissed Jill; and the first time I saw Aaron. I'll likely drive a car, preach a sermon, kiss Jill, and see Aaron many more times. But our text reveals a fact of earthly life that I (and you) need to take to heart in that regard.

The Text

We begin with the words "**evil years**" in verse 1. Not long ago, a senior citizen commented that he has to take a nap in order to get ready for bed. He was joking, I think, but I got his point. As many senior citizens have told me, "**These aren't the golden years.**" Solomon is saying the same thing in describing old age. It's "**evil years,**" referring to the physical and material challenges the elderly face.

Now look at verse 7. I always allude to its first line at graveside services. Referring to the dead person, I declare, "**We commit his or her body to the ground – earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust.**" That's the fate of us all, Solomon observes here.

Verses 1 and 7, as you can see, are about aging and death. That's important to know because it establishes a context for interpreting the verses in between, 2-6. They record a series of metaphors that conjure up various aspects of aging and death.

Verse 6 is one of those. It pictures a deserted well, long unused and deteriorating. Notice that the pitcher into which the water from the

this well was poured is broken, and that the wheel with which the water was drawn is crushed. The sheer passing of time and the working of the elements have broken and crushed them.

Wells were the scene of one of ancient life's most routine activities – the drawing of water. They met life's most basic need and so were a focal point of villages, towns, and cities. There wasn't a busier or more important place than they were.

At one time, this well in verse 6 was just that. But now it's deserted and unused. Someone, years before, had drawn the very last bucket of water from it that would ever be drawn.

A Last Time for Everything

Notice the adjective I used there, "**last.**" It's opposite, "**first,**" sheds light on the meaning of verse 6. Life is filled with beginnings. There's a first time for everything. Those first times, by virtue of their novelty, are often memorable to us. I've preached over 2000 sermons, for instance, but I still remember the first I preached as a 17 year-old, the text and topic. The text was Romans 8:9-11 and the topic was sanctification. All of us have vivid memories of "**first times.**"

But it's a fact of earthly life – not eternal life, which is a different story but earthly life. For every "**first**" there is a "**last.**" Everything that begins sooner or later, in one way or another, ends. That's the message of verse 6. Life's endings match its beginnings. Simply put, *there's a last time for everything.* There was a first sermon I preached those 50 years ago. There will be a last one. I'll step out of the pulpit and never return. There is a last time for everything including the most basic activities and experiences of earthly life.

Stop for a moment and seriously personalize what I just said. There is a last kiss you'll give your spouse, a last day you'll go to work, a last meal you'll eat, a last step you'll take, a last worship service you'll attend, a last word you'll speak, and on it goes.

I read an article about Dallas Willard's death after battling Stage 4

Cancer. Two of his defining qualities were humility and gratitude, which likely prompted the last words he spoke on earth, **“Thank you.”** There was a first word you and I spoke. Be assured, like Willard, there will be a last one as well.

Think about some of the things you routinely experience and do. There will be a last time you experience and do them. There’s a last time for everything in our earthly lives.

How the Last Times Come

Now let’s move to another metaphor in our text. Verse 5 pictures a grasshopper, its leg injured, dragging itself along. It doing so represents an elderly person whose muscles and bones the years have weakened. His walk is unnatural, slow, and stiff. It will continue worsen until he finally takes his last step and can’t walk at all.

This metaphor implies how **“last times”** often come upon us. It’s naturally and slowly with the sheer passing of time. The longer we live, the more we realize that’s true don’t we? I’ve played in my last softball game, taken my last vacation with my sons, run my last 10K race, taken my last academic test, and so on. Those last times came naturally, slowly, with the passing of time.

But there’s another way they sometimes come, which Solomon pinpoints in Ecclesiastes 9:12, **“Moreover, man does not know his time: like fish caught in a treacherous net and birds trapped in a snare, so the sons of men are ensnared at an evil time when it suddenly falls on them.”** Envision a fish getting caught in a net or a bird in a snare. How did it happen to them? The answer is **“suddenly”** and **“unexpectedly.”**

That’s exactly how some of the **“last times”** come upon us – suddenly and unexpectedly. We thought we would experience or do something many more times but now we won’t. An extraordinary event occurs, **“out of the blue”** as we say it, and immediately we’ve experienced or done it for the last time. So my healthy brother-in-law

went to bed, awakened in the middle of the night, and couldn't walk. He had had an aneurysm in his neck that paralyzed him. The step he took to his bed four hours before was the last he'd ever take.

Anyway, however it happens, naturally and slowly or suddenly and unexpectedly, there is a last time for everything we experience and do.

Gratitude

That's a fact and there's a reason I've shared it on this Sunday before Thanksgiving. It gives us a means for cultivating gratitude.

Robert Emmons is a leading expert on gratitude. He claims in an essay he wrote that it has two components or parts. The first is "**an affirmation of goodness**" – that what we're experiencing or doing is good. The second is the recognition "**that the sources of this goodness are outside of ourselves.**" His comments are helpful in defining gratitude except the word "**goodness**" is feeble. G.K. Chesterton used a stronger word in his book *A Short History of England*. He wrote, "**Gratitude is happiness doubled by wonder.**" I agree with him and so define gratitude this way. It's an attitude that affirms two things: the wonder of something we experience or do and that someone else made it possible. That someone else is always God and sometimes people, when He works through them to make it possible.

Robert Vrabel, for instance, often gives me bags containing three or four varieties of apples, each of which he labels for me. Robert and I have something in common. Most people think that apples are good. But he and I think they're more than good. They're wondrous. So, my happiness when he gives them to me is, as Chesterton said it, doubled. And I'm deeply appreciative to God first and Robert second as a result.

That's gratitude and I'd make a critical observation about it. It's a defining quality of the good person and the good life that the Holy Spirit creates. It's actually a fruit of the Spirit. I'm not exaggerating its place in saying that. The Bible and countless people in the know down through the centuries have emphasized it – how vital it is to the spiritual,

psychological, and physical health of humans. As Aesop concluded after his fable of the slave pulling the thorn out of the lion's paw, "**Gratitude is the sign of noble souls.**" Or as Martin Luther said it, gratitude is "**the basic Christian attitude.**" No person or society will function well unless gratitude is one of their defining qualities.

Cultivate Gratitude

Let me ask you a personal question in that regard that you can answer to yourself. Is gratitude a defining quality of yours? If it isn't, the good news is that it can be. In their *Handbook of Positive Psychology*, Robert Emmons and Charles Shelton contend that gratitude is a psychological state and that because it is, it's subject to development and change. We can cultivate an attitude of gratitude in other words.

And the truth is we need to. I say that because most people either aren't grateful or aren't as grateful as they should be. One of the primary reasons for that is something that's part of our psychological makeup. It's that familiarity breeds apathy. That's a fundamental principle of communications that reaches far beyond it. The pull of our personality is continually toward indifference. No matter how extraordinary or wondrous something is, it becomes ordinary to us as experience or do it over time. And the more ordinary it becomes to us, the less grateful we are for it.

It takes effort, initially at least, to overcome the pull of our personality toward indifference and be grateful. That effort is to purposefully cultivate an attitude of gratitude. That's how we cooperate with the Holy Spirit in Him making us grateful. We cultivate an attitude of gratitude.

The best way I know to do that is to think. I quoted G.K. Chesterton earlier, "**Gratitude is happiness doubled by wonder.**" But listen to his sentence before it, "**I would maintain that thanks are the highest form of thought.**" Jewish philanthropist Moses Montefiore agreed. He emblazoned a motto on his family's coat of arms, "**Think and**

thank.” Those two actions, he taught, are inseparable, and he was right. Thinking leads to thanking. It’s the root or source of gratitude.

There are several methodologies of thinking that cultivate an attitude of gratitude. The reality in our text suggests one of those. It’s to routinely keep in mind that there’s a last time for everything.

Imagine that you are experiencing or doing something for the last time and you know that. It’s the last time. Imagine that you’re giving your spouse the last kiss you will ever give him or her or eating the last meal you will ever eat or driving the last time you will ever drive or going on the last vacation you will ever go on or taking the last jog you will ever take. Knowing that you’d never experience or do it again, most of you would cherish the kiss, meal, drive, and so on and be grateful.

Well, keeping in mind that there is a last time for everything helps us capture the dynamics of that. As the result of a brain event, a man suddenly lost his sense of taste. He commented about that: **“I miss it so much. I’d give my right arm to taste food again.”** I often bring that to mind as I’m eating. What if I knew this was the last time I’d ever taste food? I’d gratefully treasure it.

Conclusion

The moral of the story is this in closing. Routinely bring it to mind that there’s a last time for everything. We’ll cherish the blessings God has given us and be grateful if we do.