

Faith for Life: 50s  
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I'm sure the question every 50 year old FBCer is wondering is, "Who said I am a Golden Ager at 50? And where does he live?"

It seems the 50s are full of change. If we have kids, most of them move away or will move away very shortly when we are in our 50s. So we have this transition from parenting 24/7 to parenting adult children, which has its own challenges. Our own parents, if God has blessed them with long life, are getting older and need a little more attention and assistance. So, we also make this transition with our parents, too, where we start taking care of them instead of them taking care of us.

Our professional or vocational life starts taking some turns. If you started work in your early 20s, you're starting to feel a little fatigue; you're starting to dream about retirement. Maybe you feel like you've reached your plateau or that younger, less experienced workers are passing you by. Many women enter the workforce in their 50s. They were stay-at-home moms, but now that the kids are gone (or almost gone) they go back to school, learn a trade, and start a career.

In our 50s we start recognizing generational differences with those younger than us. I picked Pastor Tim's brain a little bit about the 50s since he is an expert now in this generation and asked him about this. He chuckled and told me, "Yeah, when I was in my 30s and 40s I looked at younger people and felt like one of them. But now I can see people looking at like I am old." And who are these young people? Why do they think they know so much? Observing the younger generations in the workplace might make us anxious about our future. When I began pastoring my father in law joked with me saying he didn't want me to be his pastor because, he said, "you know you're old when your pastor is younger than you." In our 50s, it's more and more obvious that we're not young anymore and we usually learn that in rather shocking ways.

And what about those years? One of the authors I read said it's in our 50s where we stop counting the years we've lived and start counting the years we think we have left. Maybe those of you in your 50s have been forced to think about your age because you've started seeing signs in your health or from your body that you're getting older. You can't do all the things you used to do. Your body aches when you try and keep up with the youngins'. Your body looks and feels different. Father time always wins; we're not ready to give up the fight, but it's starting to look like he's pulling ahead.

The question I have for our 50s is this: *How do I deal with all this change?* What am I going to do now that my kids are gone? I've reached my career plateau, now what? Why won't my body work the way it used to? Change can be good, especially when we feel stuck in a rut. In fact, like we discussed last week about our 40s, when we realize life isn't working out so well, a change might be welcome. But there's temptation in that; we might make changes for the

worse, at least from God's perspective. Hello mid-life crisis! Rather than repenting and turning to God we turn back the clock and try to relive our 20s and 30s in a new, ungodly way. Will you love me enough, FBC, to tell me "Stop pretending you're 20" when I'm in my 40s and 50s?

Turn with me to Eccl. 3 and let's see what God has to say about this (READ Ecc. 3:1-13). The beautiful simplicity of this poem fools us into thinking that the poem is good news, when that's actually not the point. Ecclesiastes can be a rather confusing book to understand for a variety of reasons. But we get a key to the author's point and mood of the book in the opening proclamation, which is (1:2), "Vanity of vanities, says the Preacher, vanity of vanities! All is vanity." You might have a translation that says, "Meaningless!" That's what vanity means. Think of it: the opening message of this book in the Bible is *everything is meaningless*. That's not an encouraging message; it's dark and depressing. The rest of this book explores this reality, how everything is meaningless when you look at life *under the sun*.

Our poem and passage fits that structure. It sounds like the author is telling us good news, but that's not how he sees it. He's saying, "Yes, everything has its time, and it's even appropriate (or beautiful, as vs. 11 says), but ultimately everything is hard and pointless."

There are some hints in these verses to help us see that the author doesn't really believe he's giving us good news. First of all, notice how so many times in this poem the sad, stressful, and difficult realities of life come first. Vs. 3, "a time to kill, and time to heal; a time to break down, and a time to build up; a time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance." It's almost like the writer wants us to see the unfortunate and difficult realities of life first; like they are more obvious than the good times.

Secondly, and more conclusively, notice the conclusions he makes. Right after he tells us how there's a time for everything, he says in vs. 9, "what gain [what reward, what good] has the worker from all his toil [work and effort]?" So, get what he's saying: God has ordered this world, he has given everything a time and season, but what reward is there in it? What's the point of trying to make sense of it all?

Now, here's a very important thing to remember when you're reading Ecclesiastes; throughout almost the entire book, the writer is exploring these incredibly important questions about meaning and purpose without considering eternity. The author is looking at the world as if everything were *under the sun*; as if there were no forever, no heaven, nothing bigger or greater than what we can see with our eyes, hear with our ears, and touch with our hands. Ecclesiastes is an experiment; the author is exploring if life can be meaningful without eternity, without believing there's something beyond this world to give us meaning, and he fails.

That's something, I'm thinking, many of us eventually discover. One of the articles I read about people in their fifties said this: "Along with the rise of reflectiveness [in our 50s], people described a feeling of wisdom that they had not had before. Many said they felt freer to enjoy life - that they were less irritated by things, spent less time worrying and fought less often." I'm

guessing that many of you in your 50s have started discovering the stuff that really matters. I bet many of you can see the silliness of family squabbles, how the almighty dollar really isn't almighty, what's really worth your time and energy. And you've discovered that by trial and error; through painful experiences with the vanities of life and have seen them for what they are - meaningless.

Look also at the frustration the author sees in vs. 11. He says, "He [God] has made everything beautiful in its time. Also, he has put eternity into man's heart, yet so that he cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end." These might sound like a hopeful, encouraging words. But the conclusion shows the author's frustration. The author says, "Yes, there's something beautiful about the way God has set things up and he has even put eternity in our hearts to seek things out, but [and this the point] he's also put eternity out of reach to understand. Why hasn't God given me the ability to understand his timing? Why don't I have the capacity to find out what God is up to? I have this yearning to know because I have eternity in my heart, but not the ability to discover it."

How frustrating; even painful! So, what do we do? If this is true, if it's true that life is filled with difficult changes and frustrating dilemmas, how should we live? Well, look at what the author concludes, but remember, his conclusion isn't a conclusion based on an eternal perspective. He's looking at life through his experiment of trying to find life *under the sun*; so, ultimately, this is the wrong answer. This isn't what we should do; it's only what we should do if there's no eternal purpose (READ vs. 12-13).

It may not seem obvious, but this is a statement of resignation. He's giving up. "Well," he's saying, "if this is what life is like, let's just eat, drink, and be merry. Let's try to find as much happiness and as much joy now as possible because that's the only thing that makes life worth living. I've put in my time at work, so now let's just enjoy life." If I'm honest with you, this is what the modern, American view of retirement sounds like to me. "I've worked all these years, put in all this effort, saved as much money as possible, now I can enjoy the little bit of life that I have left." Is it possible that the American retirement dream is an unsuspecting loss of hope and trust that there's an eternal purpose that's better than simply enjoying as much free time and travel and grandkids as possible? Is it possible that some of you 50 year olds beginning to truly dream about your retirement are being tempted to forfeit eternal purposes and the rewards of God in eternity to enjoy the crumbs of earth for your last couple of decades?

Now, don't get me wrong here. Retirement from career is not a bad thing at all. There comes a time when we say "goodbye" to our places of employment, to the weekly rigor of work that we've been doing for decades. We now don't have the strength, the energy, or the will to keep going. But retiring from work is different than retiring from the purpose for which Jesus Christ made you a new creation, to do the good works that he has prepared beforehand for you to walk in them. God's rewards for a lifetime of faithful, Christ-like work are treasures in heaven and not endless freetime on earth to do whatever you want for the remaining years you have left; that's called *unfaithfulness*.

What I've been trying to do so far in this sermon is highlight the challenges we might find in our 50s. We might experience frustration, fear, and discouragement with all the changes we are experiencing in life. Maybe, too, there's a loss of hope, of purpose in what we thought God was going to do in our life. And we might be tempted to live for the moment instead of live for eternity. But now, I want to encourage you with some truth and direction from God's word.

The first piece of encouragement is truth - truth about God. James 1:17 says, "Every good gift and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the father of lights with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change." God doesn't change, FBC. While everything else does, many things rather inconveniently, God doesn't. There is an anchor in life when everything is changing; there is something we can stand on. And that is God. His grace. His truth. His mercies and judgments. He is never failing. So, if you're caught up in the vortex of change in your life and it's rather unpleasant, take comfort in that God does not change. He is a rock you can depend on.

Secondly, let's pay attention to the final, ultimate conclusion of the wisdom writer of the book of Ecclesiastes. Remember how I told you that the author of Ecclesiastes was trying an experiment? He wanted to know if there was true purpose, true pleasure in life under the sun - without any consideration for eternity. It's almost like he's writing a research paper for a journal. In his abstract in the beginning he lets us know what he's discovered (1:14), "I have seen everything that is done under the sun, and behold, all is vanity and striving after wind." So, his experiment failed; it's all pointless and meaningless. We can't find a purpose without eternity.

Then, what's his conclusion? If that's true, how then should we now live? That answer is found at the very end of Ecclesiastes. 12:13-14 says, "The end of the matter; all has been heard. Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man. For God will bring every deed into judgment, with every secret thing, whether good or evil."

He doesn't say it explicitly, but can you hear it? There is eternity and God is there. And guess what God will do in eternity? He will bring judgment on every single deed that is done. So, what's the conclusion? Fear God. Obey his commands. That brings meaning when none can be found under the sun. I want to know this God; I want to respect him. Fear him. Obey him. Please him. And what is so utterly amazing is that this God, in great love for you and me, emptied himself of all glory and honor to come to earth to save you and me from our sin.

That's a message I would encourage you with, my 50 year old friends, as you possibly begin dreaming about retirement. As your body is growing tired, as you are mentally fatigued and desperate for a permanent break, remember, God will hold us accountable for what we do with our life, with our time, with our resources. Be careful as you plan your future. And those of you who are retired from working, who have given so much to your places employment, I'm glad for you. I'm glad that God has provided you rest from the grind of working. But don't forget your purpose: to do the good works God has prepared beforehand so you can walk in them. There is

no retirement from serving the purposes and kingdom of God. Resist the temptation to captain your own life, to be your own boss, to do what you want to do. God still is and always will be your captain, your boss, and he will hold you accountable for how you live your life.

One more: don't stop being a learner. Hey, 50 year olds (and 60 and 70 year olds) be teachable. Be willing to take correction. I know you've gained a lot of wisdom and knowledge over the years of your life. You have much to pass on to your little brothers and sisters in the Lord, but tell yourself, "I have a lot more to learn. I still need the help, the advice, the correction of others." Ecc. 4:13 says, "Better was a poor and wise youth than an old and foolish king who no longer knew how to take advice."

Think of the old, foolish king. He thinks he's got it all figured out; he looks at his age, his experience, and says, "been there, done that... nothing new to see or learn here." And it's not that he's completely wrong; he does have experience; he has been around the block. But experience alone doesn't make you wise. Humility makes you wise. And in his pride he has concluded that other people don't have anything to offer him so he closes off his heart and mind from taking advice from others. Oh, my older brothers and sisters in the Lord, don't be like this foolish king.

Things are changing. And oftentimes that change is hard. But God doesn't change; you can depend on him. Look to eternity; don't settle for the things under the sun. And be willing to learn; take advice and be wise.

Key vs. Ecc 1:2

#### Questions for the week

- Generally speaking, do you like change? Why or why not?
- What was the most important or impactful thing you heard today?
- What change is necessary for you to make to keep walking with Jesus in your 50s?