



As the Old Year Passeth...

An old song comes to mind as the old year passeth. The song, in turn, brings to mind a lesson from that marvelously down-to-earth book of the Bible, Ecclesiastes. If you have not, as a tactful old preacher used to say, read Ecclesiastes "lately," I will say only that it expresses the sadness of a wise man who observes the brevity and futility of life and attempts to discern what it is good for a man to do in his few days of toil and trouble under the sun.



He comes to not one but a number of conclusions along the way, but at one point (chapter 2, verse 24), he observes that:

There is nothing better for a man, than that he should eat and drink, and that he should make his soul enjoy good in his labor. This also I saw, that it was from the hand of God.

In other words, "Enjoy yourself; it's later than you think." It is not, however, an invitation to a headlong plunge into hedonism, an overture to the lost weekend. He is simply saying we should enjoy the good things of life while they last, for they do not last long. The Preacher of Ecclesiastes had been young and now is old, has been poor and now is rich. It is better to be young and rich than old and poor, but we cannot but grow old and we cannot die but poor. "Naked came I into the world; naked I shall depart," said the long-suffering Job, who died a long time before morticians learned the art of making the deceased look as if he had merely lain down to take a nap dressed in his best suit. And when the deceased is Catholic, he always naps with a rosary wrapped around his hand. Alas, for some Catholics, the first time the rosary is in their hands is when the hands are as cold and lifeless as has been their devotion to their Lord and his Blessed Mother.

It is later than we think because for Catholics and many other Christians, we have come to the end of the Church year, with next Sunday being the beginning of Advent. Nature also gives a not-too-subtle hint of it, as the last of the brightly colored leaves have fallen from their trees and are, like the speeches of our politicians in election campaigns concluded a few short weeks ago, fit only to be buried or burned. They are, as the Psalmist said, "like the chaff, which the wind driveth away." Or the chaff fit to be burned, as John the Baptist warned, "with unquenchable fire." Yes, our lives are like that. And it's later than we think.

It is one of the great ironies of modern life that so many of us come to the end of life's journey without ever having considered the road we are on. A friend of mine likes to tell people who are drifting through life without the true faith: "The bridge is out on the road you're on." It is, of course, a variation of, "The end is near," and often gets the same reaction. The gentleman may be well meaning, but is clearly a fanatic. But a few may take seriously what he says. The fear of the Lord, the Good Book tells us, is the beginning of wisdom. My friend is, indeed, a zealous servant of Christ and his Church. But he is also a disciple of Socrates, reminding those he meets that "the unexamined life is not worth living."



Written by [Jack Kenny](#) on November 26, 2010

Is he a fanatic? Or is the man who devotes all his time, thought and energy into amassing a fortune that he can't take with him to Eternity the greater fool? A fanatic, a wise man has said, is someone who "redoubles his efforts when he has forgotten his aim." We want to live well and, whether we admit it or not, we all want to live forever. The Creator has guaranteed the latter. But how we live in this world will determine the condition of our life in Eternity. If smallness of mind, delusions of grandeur and suspicions of every motive but our own characterize our life here on earth, it is hard to imagine how we would be happy with the saints in Heaven.

Some few will deny the possibility of a life after this one and will even rail against it. The late Bishop Fulton Sheen was particularly gifted at pointing out the irony of someone railing against something he or she is convinced does not exist. In one of his many delightful books he recalled meeting such a woman in the vestibule of a church in London. She boasted of having preached against the "illusion" of God in Hyde Park and in pamphlets she had distributed throughout England, Scotland and Wales. The bishop asked her what she thought might happen to him if he had similarly published and preached against 20-footed ghosts and ten-legged horse-men. She replied that he would probably be committed to an insane asylum. Exactly, he said, because he would be wasting his time and effort and troubling those about him by writing and preaching against things that do not exist and never have existed. The woman, on the other hand, was preaching against something that was as real as the thrust of a sword or the warmth of an embrace. It was, he told her, the reality of God that kept her out of the asylum.

"I hate you," she replied, offering further confirmation of what he had been saying. "Atheism is not a doctrine," Sheen wrote. "It is a cry of wrath."

In his days as a young atheist, C.S. Lewis was caught up in what he later described as a whirlwind of contradictions. He was, he thought, certain that God did not exist. "I was angry with God for not existing," he confessed. "I was angry with God for creating a world." The world today seems reluctant to accept that "fear of the Lord" that is "the beginning of wisdom." We do not like a Lord we should have to fear. We prefer, as Lewis also observed, a God like kindly old Father Christmas, smiling and benevolent and approving of whatever we do, so long as we are having a good time doing it. But that is rather like wanting a law of gravity we need not fear even if it should please us to walk off housetops or stumble over the edge of a cliff. We fear God because we know so well our own tendencies to walk away from Him in whom "we live, move and have our being." It is not that He will desert us; rather, in our freedom, both real and imagined, we may well walk away from Him — and over the edge of that cliff.

Ted Williams, arguably baseball's greatest hitter, wrote a book called *The Art of Hitting*. Later in life, he was amazed by how few players had read it. Ever the intense student of the game, Williams reasoned that if such a book had been around when he was a young player—written, perhaps, by Ty Cobb or Rogers Hornsby—he would surely have read and studied that book and devoured its contents. Experience may be the best teacher, but the course is long and the tuition ruinous. Williams, as manager, once told his players:

By the time you hitters figure out what to do, you're too old to do it!"

God has given us a book even better than the one Ted Williams wrote. Its title, if not its contents, is familiar to us. It is called The Holy Bible, and by the time most of us get around to opening it, we may be too old to read it and follow its instructions. So enjoy yourself while you can.

"It's later than you think."



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