



"Most folks are as happy as they make up their minds to be."
—Abraham Lincoln

10-Feb-06

Under Green at the Crossed Flags

If you will, please indulge me, as I am about to give some advice. Today, I begin my fifth decade, and since this opportunity presents itself so rarely, I want to take advantage of it. Call it my chance to take stock of my life at its halfway point, [God](#) willing, and having done so, to share some of the lessons I have learned.

Many of you have heard me say that one of my favorite psalms, perhaps my favorite, is Psalm 90, a contemplation or prayer by [Moses](#) about time, particularly about God's timelessness as compared to man's brevity. It can also be seen as a comparison between God's power and man's frailty. After mulling these matters over, Moses' conclusion appears in verse 12 as a plea to God: "Teach us to number our days, that we may gain a heart of [wisdom](#)."

In today's vernacular, we would say, "Help us to realize that our time here is short so that we will prioritize rightly." Seventy or eighty years seem like a long time, but as one ages, a lifetime appears to become shorter and shorter. Elderly people tell me with frightening regularity that they really wonder where all their time went - and that they have noticed that it speeds up as they get older. They just shake their heads in disbelief, perhaps regretting misspent days and weeks and months and years in futile endeavors. With

human life so brief, like grass that sprouts in the morning and withers by evening, we have to put life's big issues first.

So I have come up with a few tidbits based on my forty years of experience that may help others, particularly younger people, in prioritizing life. They are in no order of importance.

- **Do not read when [afflicted](#) with measles.** I contracted measles when I was fifteen, and no teenager wants to be out of commission for the few weeks it takes to get over them. But there was really nothing else to do but read. I remember at least one of the books I devoured during my convalescence, and I regret every word of it every time I put on my glasses. I probably had weak eyes anyway, but reading while plagued with measles hastened their decline.

The bigger picture is, when sick, it is a good idea to rest and recover. Sickness is the body's rather painful way of telling us that we need to slow down. Rushing to get back into circulation could cause worse problems down the road.

- **Be sure that your [sin](#) will find you out.** I would rather not go into any of the grisly details of my sins, but I have learned that, if we are a child of God, He does not let us get away with anything. Sin always comes back around to bite us - and often when it will hurt most. Suffice it to say that, not long before my encounter with measles, I lied to my parents about an activity I really wanted to go to. Of course, circumstances just "worked out" that they ended up at the same place, and my goose was cooked!

Things like this have happened too often to be mere coincidence. God is watching out for us, and desirous to build character in us, He forces us to acknowledge what we have done wrong and to feel its bitter effects.

- **Ups and downs are normal, and the downs provide momentum to get us to the top.** There were times during my college years that life seemed to be a neck-spraining rollercoaster ride. One day I was mowing

grass, pruning shrubs, and blowing off sidewalks, and the next I had the cushiest job on campus - as a rising sophomore! A short two years passed, during which I had to navigate lesser hills and valleys, and then I was back to pruning shrubs, having fallen from grace. Yet, less than a month later, I was hired at the campus radio station - what a cool way to spend one's senior year!

Looking back, I can see that God was completely in control of my trajectory and that the low spots were interludes that enabled me to prepare or be prepared for upcoming high spots. A slice of humble pie is often a good thing.

- **The glass is half-full.** I cannot remember when I decided not to let life's brickbats turn me sour - perhaps there was never a conscious decision but just my personality. I do know that, during a period of reading Ernest Hemingway novels, I really pondered the meaning of [Ecclesiastes 1:5](#): "The sun also rises," the title of one of his books. To me, it can mean the same as Little Orphan Annie singing, "The sun'll come out tomorrow." One might as well expect every day to be sunny.

Life is too good to spoil with negativity. Sure, there are times to be serious and even grave, but perpetual pessimism is bad all around. It lines the face with wrinkles, frays the nerves, inflicts splitting headaches, crushes hope, and could send one to an early grave. A life full of *joie de vivre* is so much more appealing.

- **Stay away from the edge of the cliff.** A person is most likely to get into trouble when he puts himself in harm's way. The best way to avoid trouble, then, is to play it safe. I took at least three defensive driving courses while at college, and they have proven invaluable. Until now, of which I am thankful, I have never been in a car accident - never been ticketed even. Besides having God's blessing, I credit it to focusing on driving when I am behind the wheel and steering clear of potentially dangerous situations.

Sometimes, life's course takes us through dangerous country, but we can choose to follow the safe path or the risky path. Temptations lie along the risky route, which is lined with

precipitous cliffs that portend neck-breaking falls. [Jesus](#) says the way to His Kingdom is difficult enough as it is. Do not make it any harder.

- **Everyone needs an avocation.** Most of us spend a great deal of time and effort finding, preparing for, and building a career, a vocation, but too few of us pursue an avocation - commonly called a hobby or diversion - with anywhere near the effort. This, I have heard, makes Rich a dull boy and fills his life with stress. My vocation (minister and editor) and my avocation (writer) are complementary. I also enjoy NASCAR racing, which allows me to let off a little steam every once in a while.

Americans are world-renowned for their work ethic, but in too many cases, it results in burned-out, relationship-challenged men (and sometimes women too). Having an enjoyable pastime helps to round a person out and bleeds off the pressure of life.

Well, there it is, for what it is worth. I hope my few drops of wisdom brighten your day and enhance your life. They have mine. Thanks for indulging me.

- Richard T. Ritenbaugh

From the Archives: Featured Sermon

[The Unleavened Life Is a Happy Life!](#)

by John W. Ritenbaugh

Some misguided individuals have denigrated the practice of putting out leaven as childish and something to be outgrown. The fruits of their lives indicate that they never learned the subtle lessons these customs or practices were supposed to teach. The annual rehearsal of these practices is analogous to a musician or athlete who must faithfully practice or lose his skill. The Days of Unleavened Bread define our responsibility in God's plan to purge out habits, attitudes, and teachings that do not conform to God's way.

Paradoxically, as it must seem to our human nature, God's way of self-mastery, self-discipline or self-control (purging those unwholesome things we think we cannot live without) actually leads to greater zest and joy than from following our carnal impulses.

From the Archives: Featured Article

[Valentine's Day and Real Love](#)

by Staff

Valentine's Day is supposed to foster and advance true love between men and women. Its origins—and its tenuous association with the so-called Saint Valentine—clearly point to something other than true love, the love of God!

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