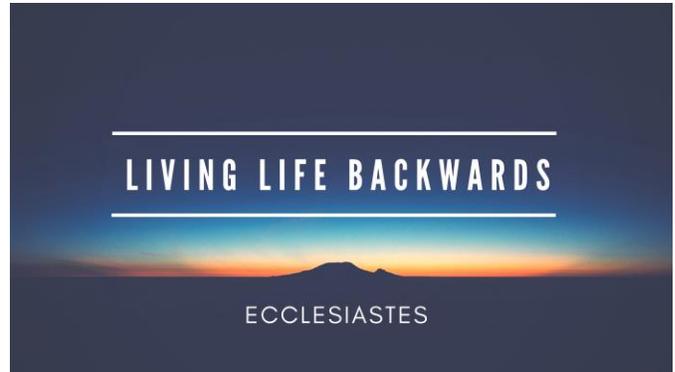


The Joy of Life

Ecclesiastes 9:1-12

Living Life Backwards, Part 8
David Sunday August 5, 2018



Let's open up our Bibles to Ecclesiastes 9. Children, in your bag you'll find a little worksheet where you can draw some pictures. As you're listening to the sermon, I want you to focus on how we see that creation is a good gift of God that we can enjoy. There are questions to answer, or maybe you could draw a picture of some gifts of God in creation that you enjoy or write down what those gifts are. What does marriage look like to God? Listen for that. What is something you like to do to serve God and serve others? If you write that out or draw some pictures, then show it to me afterwards, I'll sign your bulletin for you and congratulate you on the good job you've done.

Let's read God's Word together. Ecclesiastes 9:1-12:

But all this I laid to heart, examining it all, how the righteous and the wise and their deeds are in the hand of God. Whether it is love or hate, man does not know; both are before him. ² It is the same for all, since the same event happens to the righteous and the wicked, to the good and the evil, to the clean and the unclean, to him who sacrifices and him who does not sacrifice. As is the good, so is the sinner, and he who swears is as he who shuns an oath. ³ This is an evil in all that is done under the sun, that the same event happens to all. Also, the hearts of the children of man are full of evil, and madness is in their hearts while they live, and after that they go to the dead. ⁴ But he who is joined with all the living has hope, for a living dog is better than a dead lion. ⁵ For the living know that they will die, but the dead know nothing, and they have no more reward, for the memory of them is forgotten. ⁶ Their love and their hate and their envy have already perished, and forever they have no more share in all that is done under the sun.

⁷ Go, eat your bread in joy, and drink your wine with a merry heart, for God has already approved what you do. ⁸ Let your garments be always white. Let not oil be lacking on your head. ⁹ Enjoy life with the wife whom you love, all the days of your vain life

that he has given you under the sun, because that is your portion in life and in your toil at which you toil under the sun. ¹⁰ Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with your might, for there is no work or thought or knowledge or wisdom in Sheol, to which you are going.

¹¹ Again I saw that under the sun the race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, nor bread to the wise, nor riches to the intelligent, nor favor to those with knowledge, but time and chance happen to them all. ¹² For man does not know his time. Like fish that are taken in an evil net, and like birds that are caught in a snare, so the children of man are snared at an evil time, when it suddenly falls upon them.

This is God's Holy Word. Thanks be to God. Let's pray together.

Living God, Your Word is alive, but our hearts are naturally dead, our affections sluggish, our obedience mediocre and inconsistent. So we pray, living God, that You would make this Word come alive to us. Without Your Holy Spirit taking these words, illuminating our minds, awakening our appetites for You and enlivening our obedience, we will not be changed. Most of all, we pray, bring us to Christ, Your Son, in Whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge, for it's only through Him that we can enjoy life and have hope for a life beyond this fleeting one. So we ask for this in the name of Jesus. Amen.

Recently our older daughter moved to Memphis, where she's had an opportunity to pursue a vocation. Kate and I were really excited for this opportunity and encouraged her to go do this. We're happy she's in Memphis—for now. But I've got to confess, I do hope she's just a little bit homesick. Not so homesick that she's miserable. I want her to fully enjoy being in Memphis, but I don't want her to live there the rest of her life.

So I tell her often, "Remember the magnetic field." That's how I describe this geographical area that goes from Chicago up to Milwaukee over to Madison and back down here to the suburbs. I said, "This is your magnetic field. This is home for you. And some day the magnetic field is going to draw you back home. Sure, spend four years in Memphis, but someday, come back and live near us. Maybe not with us, but near us."

Friends, God wants His children to be homesick for our eternal home with Him. Not with a homesickness that makes us miserable in this life, for He commands us in this passage to enjoy the life He's given us. But the key to enjoying the life He has given us is to remember that the gifts of this life are not going to last forever. The joys and pleasures of this life are meant to whet our appetite for the life to come. It's good for us to feel homesick for our eternal home. So to cultivate

in us this homesickness for our eternal home with God, God uses two tools that we find like bookends on either side of this passage. One of them is blunt and the other tool is soothing.

1. The inescapable outrage of death (9:1-6, 11-12)

Let's look first of all at the blunt tool which we see in verses 1-6 and 11-12. It's talking about the inescapable outrage of death. In this life, one of the only things we can count on for sure is that we all are going to die. The one thing we know for sure is that we're closer to death today than we were last night when we went to bed. In verse one we see that tomorrow cannot be known. We want to know it all. We want to have it all. We want to achieve it all. We want to figure it all out.

But none of us knows even if we're going to be here tomorrow. None of us is in control. We can have a perfect driving record, we can eat lots of kale, we can do CrossFit, we can practice mindfulness, but we cannot escape death, nor we cannot control our circumstances. We don't know what tomorrow will bring and our lives are going to be full of lots of different kinds of circumstances. Some of them are going to look like love, as it says in verse one.

We're going to face some really hard times in our lives in this fallen world and if you try to gauge God's heart toward you by your circumstances, you're going to have a hard time being assured of God's love. Circumstances are not a reliable barometer of God's love for you. You need that assurance to come from somewhere else, because you don't know whether love or hate lie before you in this life.

We see in verse two that death cannot be avoided. The brutal truth is that the good and the evil, the honest and the shady, the nice and the nasty, the church member and the secular agnostic—all of us will end up six feet under. Death is indiscriminate. It comes after everyone. It's unavoidable.

Then verse three tells us that the way death does its work is evil. It mows down young people in their prime. It swallows up whole populations with one grand disaster. Sometimes it tortures without mercy. Can you sense the outrage in the preacher as he says in verse three, *"This is an evil in all that is done under the sun, that the same event happens to all"*? What's that event? It's death. If you expect the grim reaper to treat some people nicely because they're so good, then you have a lot of disappointment ahead of you. You're living in a fairy tale world.

Death is a bitter pill to swallow, but swallow it we must. We can't avoid it, because the wages of sin is death (Romans 6:23). We've already seen in Ecclesiastes that all of us have earned those wages. Last week we read in Ecclesiastes 7:20, *"Surely there is not a righteous man on earth who does good and never sins."* We've all earned death. In this chapter, the assessment of human

depravity is even more grim. Look at the middle of verse three: *“Also, the hearts of the children of man are full of evil, and madness is in their hearts while they live, and after that they go to the dead.”*

That’s actually pretty easy to prove by observation—madness and evil are in the hearts of men. So death is not just something that happens to us. Death is something we brought upon ourselves. We’ve earned it. We deserve it. Our sin demands it. Death is inescapable, unavoidable, and when it comes, death’s damages cannot be reversed.

In verse four, the preacher says that even a living dog is better than a dead lion. He’s not making an argument that dogs are better than cats, even really big cats. He’s just referring to the fact that in this culture, a dog was one of the lowest of the animals. They weren’t domesticated. They were dirty. But if a dog who’s dirty is alive, he’s in a better position than a lion who’s regal but is dead.

He’s not arguing for annihilationism in verse five when he says, *“For the living know that they will die, but the dead know nothing, and they have no more reward, for the memory of them is forgotten.”* He’s not saying that when people die, they just vanish or disappear and that’s the end of it all. That’s not his point here. You have to go other places in the Bible for a well-developed doctrine of the afterlife. He’s not trying to tell us a whole lot about heaven and hell in this passage.

What he’s trying to do is make a simple point. When you are alive, you have opportunities you will never have once you’re dead. That’s his point. There’s going to come a day when everything you felt passionately about in this world will grow cold and vanish and be forgotten. We see that in verse six. What you’ve loved in this life and hated in this life, what you felt jealous about in this life or feared in this life—your job, your ambitions, your hobbies—none of that will matter anymore. One day you will be dead to this world and this world will be dead to you. Once that happens, you’re never going to be able to get it back. You can’t reverse it. Death is final. Once death prevails, its damage cannot be undone.

We don’t like to think about this, partly because it scares us. Also, it’s because death is foreign to us. This was not part of God’s original design. Death was not on the agenda when God created the world and humankind. God’s desire was that we would live with Him forever in His presence. But then came Genesis 3—the sin of man—and death came into the world. This rude intruder, this hostile terrorist that stalks all of us, is foreign to us. We were made to live forever. This is not the way things are supposed to be, yet death is certain.

It’s interesting how we try to avoid it, isn’t it? In the words of David Gibson, “We tend to live as if the one thing that is certain will never come, while the many things that are uncertain are certain.” That’s very true. We see in verses 11 and 12 that in this life we cannot guarantee success.

So he talks about a runner in a race. We think that the fastest runner is the one who's always going to win—and nine times out of ten he does. But it's always possible for someone who's behind to get their second wind and right at that final lap to just barely make it past the one who was in the lead, winning the race against all odds.

Or he talks about a soldier in verse 11. You'd think the strongest soldier is the one who's going to prevail. But sometimes a David slays a Goliath. Or you think the wisest would be the ones who are well-fed, because they know how to manage their money and how to put food on the table. But sometime fools dine at fine tables and the wise go hungry. You'd think that the highest paying jobs would go to the intelligent, but sometimes they struggle paycheck to paycheck to make ends meet, and sometimes those with knowledge are rejected, while the ignorant are elevated.

He says at the end of verse 11, *"Time and chance happen to them all."* He's not denying the sovereignty of God here that he so eloquently describes in Ecclesiastes 3: *"There's a time for every matter under heaven."* So we're not living in a world that's ruled by random fate. Things happen to all of us that don't make sense. Unforeseen circumstances arise. Despite our best plans, we can't control the outcome. And sometimes it's just a matter of being in the right place at the right time. Time and chance happen to all of us.

We cannot know the future. According to verse 12, we can have lots of dreams and plans and visions of what our life is going to be like, then suddenly, like a fish that's caught in an evil net, or a bird that's taken in a snare, death ensnares us at an evil time and we didn't even see it coming. So death exposes our proud illusion that we're in control of our own lives. Death just mocks that. Death says, "Oh, you think you know it all? You think you can control it all? You think you can have it all? Ha. Just wait 'til I come hunting you. You'll see who's in control. It's not you."

In World Magazine, there is a section where they list the people who have died recently. Always over that section they write, "Man knows not his time." That's what Ecclesiastes says here. You do not know your time. So whenever death touches you, whenever it comes close to you—and sometimes it will hammer you—when it does, God is speaking. He's saying, "Don't get too comfortable here. Don't think this is your forever home. It's not. Make sure you're in a right relationship with Me, because on a day you do not know, death will come for you." Or as God says in the James 4:13-15:

Come now, you who say, "Today or tomorrow we will go into such and such a town and spend a year there and trade and make a profit"—yet you do not know what tomorrow will bring. What is your life? For you are a mist that appears for a little time and then vanishes. Instead you ought to say, "If the Lord wills, we will live and do this or that."

So is there any good news in these bookends of this grim passage? Yes, there is, and it's right there in the first verse. There is good news. Look back at the first verse. He says he laid it to heart, examining it all, and here it is: "*How the righteous and the wise and their deeds are in the hand of God.*" That means that even though death is inescapable and circumstances are uncontrollable and it's all very unpredictable, salvation is possible. It is possible in this fleeting life to know that you are right with God.

Friend, I want to say to you that nothing matters more in this lifetime than that you settle this question. Because, you see, every single one of us is going to stand before God, but you don't know when that will be. He's telling you very clearly here that it could happen at a time you do not expect. When you stand before God, you're only going to want to know one thing: will He accept me? Am I right with Him? We've already seen that each of us have sinned and that's why we die. The wages of sin is death.

But what he's telling us here in verse one is that God has not cast humanity away. He has not rejected us. There is a way to be made righteous in His sight and that way is through Jesus. That's what we celebrate here at the Lord's Table. Jesus is the way. Jesus is the truth. Jesus is the life. Through Him we can come to the Father and be at home in His presence forever. The death that Jesus died has the power to conquer death for you and to give you eternal life. That's the gospel we find throughout the Scriptures.

Here in Ecclesiastes 9:1 we see God as a tender Father Who holds His children in His hand. He's saying to us, "Trust Me, My child." All kinds of bad things are going to happen in this life. Sometimes it's going to look like love; sometimes it's going to look like hate. And every single one of you is going to walk through the valley of the shadow of death. But there is a God Who, if you trust in Him and in His Son, will hold your hand and walk you through that valley and shelter you so well that you will fear no evil in death, because you know His goodness and mercy are leading to His eternal home (Psalm 23).

Trust Him. Put your hand in His hand. Say, "God, I need You. I need Your Son to save me. I need what You've done for me in Jesus." Otherwise, death is dreadful. There is salvation. Salvation is possible. Make sure you're right with God today. Make sure you've put your trust in Jesus today. His hand is the only hand strong enough to lead you through that dark valley. Think of death like a raging river and Jesus is the Lifeguard who dives in and says, "I'm going to safely carry you across to the other side." That's the hope we have as believers.

2. The simple gifts of life (9:7-10)

Now, when you know that death is no longer your enemy, and you're no longer trying to avoid it or ignore it—you know you're ready to die—then you can really enjoy life. That's when the middle section of this passage really starts to sing. When you've dealt with the bookend reality of death, the hammer blow of death, then you can enter into the fullness of joy in life, even in this life. So there's a second tool God uses to make us homesick for heaven. The first is death. That's a hard hammer. But the second is pretty gentle. It's the simple gifts of life that God gives us.

Through those gifts, God is saying to us, "Get to know what I'm like. I'm good. I'm generous. I'm kind." He's saying, "These gifts I've given you are foretastes of a life that is coming. If you trust in Me, you will enjoy being with Me forever."

Remember last week we talked about how everything is broken and that people rage against God because of the brokenness of this world. But there's another side to this truth: God is incredibly generous and kind, and we are blessed every day and have ten thousand reasons to give thanks to Him. He reminds us in this passage that He wants us to enjoy His blessings.

We see it in the first word in verse seven. What's the first word? "Go!" In other words, "Get moving! Quit hesitating!" God doesn't want you to be shackled to your past, fearful of your future. If you trust in Him, you are righteous in His sight. God is with you and God is for you right now. So get up, get going, live the life He's given you to live. Enjoy it.

Go and do what? *"Eat your bread in joy, and drink your wine with a merry heart."* Yes, this is in the Bible. And yes, this is important for us. This isn't one of those verses where we say, "Oh, that's too unserious." No. As Christians we can get so serious that we become somber. We start brooding over all the problems in this world and in life, but God is saying, "Never be so serious that you can't appreciate the simple gifts I've given you every day."

Yes, this world has been tainted by sin and death, but we must never forget that this is the world God has created. Sin has damaged it, but sin hasn't uncreated creation. When God created this world, He said, "It is good." And when He created man and woman, He said, "It is very good." The physical world is good because God created it. It's broken because we've sinned and we've marred it, but it's going to be renewed and restored because God's Son entered into it, and He lived here, in human flesh, the perfect life we failed to live. He died here so that we could be delivered from death and given eternal life.

He's living now forevermore and He's going to return to make a new heaven and a new earth. Not some planet up there in the sky where we're going to float around like spirits. No, a real creation, where we're going to live as human beings with the God-Man in bodies, enjoying the gifts God gives us forever. That's our future.

So God didn't save us to make us less physical and more spiritual, less human and more angelic. He saved us in order to restore our full humanity. That's why Irenaeus, an early church father, said, "The glory of God is a human being fully alive." That's what glorifies God. He saves us so that we can be the human beings He originally created us to be, who enjoy food and drink and beauty and pleasure and culture and relationships. God says, "Enjoy it."

God is not a killjoy. He's with you and His face smiles upon you when you pour out your bowl of Special K in the morning. I've just been delighting in the new varieties, like the strawberry one or the lemon blueberry Special K. I love it. God is saying, "This is a gift of my creation. Enjoy!"

Or a week ago, when Kate and I enjoyed a picnic in St. Mary's Park on a Friday night. It was just perfect weather. It was beautiful beside the Fox River. We went to that Polish deli and got their delicious hot plate, put it into something we could carry with us, found the perfect picnic table and saw the beauty of creation. We enjoyed that meal as a gift from God. Then we walked all the way to Geneva to the All Chocolate Kitchen, where we enjoyed the gifts of creation some more. And then we walked back as it was getting dark.

Think of this. God is good and He gave us these gifts because He wants us to enjoy them—"Not," in the words of Phil Ryken, "as guilty pleasures, but as godly pleasures." This text says you can eat and drink with a merry heart, for God has already approved your works. In other words, you don't need to prove yourself worthy to enjoy God's gifts. If you trust in Him, He's holding you in His hand. His wrath has been removed and His favor rests upon His children who trust in Him. He approves of us in Christ. He embraces our humanity. He became one of us. And when we trust in Jesus, the God-Man, we get our humanity back. We don't have to earn God's love or favor. We can eat and drink with a merry heart.

Then he talks a little about our clothing. If you ever wonder what a Christian dress code should look like, here it is in verse eight: "*Let your garments be always white.*" This refers to festive clothes, clothes of celebration. It's what the war heroes wore in a victory parade. It's what slaves wore on the day they gained their freedom. It's what the priests wore on the high holy days of worship in Israel. Then, "*Let not oil be lacking on your head...*"—like a sweet perfume. God is saying, "I don't just want you looking good, I want you smelling good too."

Remember what Isaiah the prophet said in Isaiah 61? He spoke of the Messiah and what He will say. "*The Spirit of the Lord is upon Me, because He has anointed Me. He has anointed Me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent Me to comfort the broken-hearted, to bind up all who mourn, and to provide for those who grieve in Zion, to bestow on them a crown of beauty*

instead of ashes, the oil of joy instead of mourning, and a garment of praise instead of a spirit of despair, and to show forth the glory and the splendor of the Lord.”

When Jesus began His earthly ministry, He went into the synagogue in Nazareth, opened up Isaiah’s scroll to that passage and He read those words. He said, “I am here. I’m the One Who came to clothe you in white garments. I’m the One Who came to pour the oil of gladness on your heads.” So put away the drab clothes. Stop looking like you’re miserable, sad and gloomy, because your Father is not a moody or sullen father. His kindness toward you isn’t some fickle mood swing. His love for you is secured through the blood of Christ. God is saying, “I will never turn away from doing you good with all My heart and with all My soul.”

Let your garments be white and enjoy life with the wife whom you love (verse nine). God’s will is that we would enjoy His gifts, not as solitary, isolated individuals, but in companionship with one another. He tells us here, “Live with your wife with joy, not just put up with your wife, not just tolerate her. Enjoy life with your wife.” If you’re too busy to do that, you’re too busy. If you want to enjoy the wife He’s given you, then you need to love the wife He’s given you. Loving her is the pathway to enjoying her.

If love is growing cold, remember, we love because He first loved us (1 John 4:19). Surely He Who first loved us is able to pour His Holy Spirit into our hearts and flood our hearts with a love we never knew was possible. God can rekindle that love for your wife. Remember, your marriage is short. You said when you made those vows, “Till death do us part...” He reminds us here that this life is vain. That doesn’t mean it’s meaningless; it means it’s fleeting. It’s short. So while you have her, love her and enjoy her. Cherish her. Treasure her. Fall head over heels in love with her again and again and again. That’s God’s will.

Then work, verse ten: “*Whatever your hands find to do, do it with your might.*” Because there’s coming a day when you won’t be able to work anymore on this earth, or think, or know, or be wise, because you’re going to go to the grave. That’s what Sheol means. It’s not talking about hell here; it’s just talking about the grave. You’ve got an opportunity right now in a world where God is not praised and worship to live for God and do the work He’s given you to do, then doing it with all your might.

So take advantage of it. Work and receive it as a gift from God as long you’re able—eating, drinking, dressing, loving, working. It’s not an exhaustive list. It’s a representative sample of the simple gifts of life. You could add a lot of others. Like, “Go to the Grand Canyon. Learn how to surf. Be a blessing to your neighbor. Start a new ministry. Plant a church. Adopt someone into your family.” The list can go on and on and on. Live life to the fullest. Don’t let your days slip

away in idleness or sloth, or let your heart get cold toward those you love, or brood and ruminate in anxiety, so much so that you can't enjoy life anymore.

Life is short. Death is certain. It's all fleeting, like the wind. All the gifts God has given us are foretastes of the life to come. Have you ever noticed how people who know they're going to die soon, and who know where they're going to go when they die, are sometimes the most fully alive of all people? Think of Jan and Ross in the years before they died, how focused they became, how much they poured themselves out in love, how much they enjoyed life.

Think of Phil Bloom. I remember him calling me about a month and a half before he died, which was actually the last time I was with him face to face, but I didn't know it would be. He said, "On your way up here, stop at Portillo's and grab me a Polish sausage." So I brought that over to his house, we sat there and he relished that thing. He gave me, and God, his undivided attention for an hour and a half, blessing me in a way that will forever be etched on my heart. He was living life fully. He knew his death was already conquered. He knew where he was going.

David Gibson makes a very important observation. He says, "In the created world, you can only truly enjoy what you do not worship." All these gifts can be gods to us. Food can become your god, and then you're a glutton. Wine can become your god, and then you're a drunkard. Fine clothing can become your god, and then you're a materialist and vain. Relationships can become your god, and then you're co-dependent and you destroy those relationships. Work can become your god, and it's a terrible god. Tim Keller says:

Sin is not just the doing of bad things but the making of good things into ultimate things. It is seeking to establish a sense of self by making something else more central to your significance, purpose and happiness than your relationship to God.

So as you look at these good gifts of God, you might recognize that one of these gifts—maybe it's food, maybe it's drink, maybe it's a relationship—has too much of a grip on your heart. You may say, "In order to not be ruled by this, I need to abstain from this." But do not think that you are going to achieve happiness or holiness by following rules like, "*Do not handle, do not taste, do not touch.*" Colossians 2:23 says, "*These have indeed an appearance of wisdom in promoting self-made religion and asceticism and severity to the body, but they are of no value in stopping the indulgence of the flesh.*"

The only thing powerful enough to stop the indulgence of the flesh, the only thing powerful enough to keep these created things from being your god, is to worship the true and living God, to have your heart ablaze for Him, longing to be with Him and homesick for Him. When that's where

your heart is, then all these gifts become foretastes of the life to come. They become evidences of His goodness and kindness. They become appetizers for the new creation.

I love how C.S. Lewis describes it in The Chronicles of Narnia: “The new creation, heaven—the final heaven—it’s a deeper country, where every rock and flower and blade of grass looks as if it meant more.” When the children and the animals all move from the old Narnia, the old creation, to the new Narnia, the unicorn sums up what everyone is thinking. Listen to how Lewis puts it:

He stamped his right forehoof on the ground and neighed, and then cried, “I have come home at last. This is my real country. I belong here. This is the land I’ve been looking for all my life, though I never knew it until now. The reason why we loved the old Narnia is that it sometimes looked a little like this. Come further up and further in.”

The joys of this life are just faint evidences of a much better, much brighter, much clearer, much more beautiful world. If you don’t know the Savior, all you can say is, “Let us eat, drink and be merry, for tomorrow we die.” But if you know Jesus, you can say, “Let us eat and drink and be merry, for yesterday we were dead, today we are born again, and soon and very soon we will be with Him in a world where death is no more.” That’s what Jesus gives us. Let’s praise Him for it.

Lord Jesus, apart from You, life is vain and empty; the outcome of life is dire. But You have conquered death so that we can enjoy the life You’ve given us in the hope of knowing that truly the best is yet to come. So we praise You for all these gifts obtained through Your life, death and resurrection. Amen.

Bless the Lord O my soul
O my soul
Worship His Holy name
Sing like never before
O my soul
I’ll worship Your Holy name

The sun comes up
It’s a new day dawning
It’s time to sing Your song again
Whatever may pass
And whatever lies before me
Let me be singing
When the evening comes

You’re rich in love
And You’re slow to anger
Your name is great

And Your heart is kind
For all Your goodness
I will keep on singing

Ten thousand reasons
For my heart to find

And on that day
When my strength is failing
The end draws near
And my time has come
Still my soul will
Sing Your praise unending

Ten thousand years
And then forevermore

(10,000 Reasons by Matt Redman)

New Covenant Bible Church

4N780 Randall Road, St. Charles, IL 60175

(630) 584-2611 ♦ www.newcbc.org

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