

## “And Cast a Wishful Eye”

*“So we do not lose heart.  
Even though our outer nature is wasting away,  
our inner nature renewed day by day . . .  
We look not on what can be seen, but at what cannot be seen.  
For what can be seen is temporary, but what cannot be seen is eternal.”  
(2 Corinthians 4:16, 18)*

A sermon by Siegfried S. Johnson on the 17th Sunday after Pentecost, **September 16, 2018**  
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I feel enormously blessed in that tomorrow, September 17, is my father’s 101<sup>st</sup> birthday. Making his way into a new century, he says that he feels like a growing boy. Dad’s crossing of this milestone has me thinking about our human journey of aging through the passing of time. *(This is a photo from last year of dad with mom – a mere 92 years old -- and his three boys.)*



Fifty-three years ago Frenchman Andre-Francois Raffray found an extraordinary real estate bargain. It’s not uncommon in France for elderly people without heirs to enter into a contract called an *en viager (for life)* agreement, in which the elderly owner continues to occupy their house while receiving a monthly payment from the buyer. The owner is able to supplement their income while living in their own house. The buyer, on the other hand, has seen what they want eventually to possess and has begun paying the price, but can’t yet possess it.

The contract is open-ended, its termination not being a total figure to be paid, but the death of the owner. The deed is transferred to the buyer at the owner’s death, even if death occurs after only a few payments. Theoretically, it’s possible to buy a property for a tiny fraction of its value.

In 1965 Andre-Francois, a forty-six year old lawyer (born in 1919, two years after my father) found just such a deal. Finding the apartment he wanted, he gambled that its elderly occupant wouldn’t live much longer. After all, when the contract was drawn up the woman was already ninety years old, born in 1875. As a child she had worked with her father in the downstairs shop. She remembered selling colored pencils to their famous neighbor, Vincent Van Gogh. She was fourteen when the Eiffel Tower was completed. Andre reasoned, *“How much longer could she have? She’s already past the three-score and ten, surely she is close to her Promised Land. It’s*

*a deal good for both of us, a win-win situation, a safe bet. I'll be helping her. She'll be helping me."*

So the contract was drawn up. The woman was to receive \$500 per month for the rest of her life and, whether making a mere handful of payments or, should the occupant turned out to be Methuselah, hundreds of payments, Andre-Francois would receive the property upon her death. His reasoning seemed sound. Surely he would be moving into his new apartment within the next few years. Even in the unlikely event the woman lived ten years, all the way to 100, he would have paid only \$60,000, far less than the market value of the property, he still a young 56.

Well, as Yogi Berra said, *"It's not easy to make predictions, especially about the future."* That woman happened to be Jeanne Calment, listed in *Guinness Book of World Records* in 1997, the years she passed away at 122 years old, as the oldest person in the world able to authenticate their age.

One genetic scientist labeled her *"the Michael Jordan of aging."* At 100 she was riding her bicycle through her home town of Arles, where she was born and lived her entire life!

What of Andre? He moved into a nursing home, and on February 25, 1995, he opened a rather unusual 77<sup>th</sup> birthday card. It was from Jeanne, then 120. On the card she wrote, *"Happy Birthday, Andre. I'm sorry I'm still alive."*

Andre would pass away later that year. On the day he died, Jeanne dined on foie gras, cheese, and chocolate cake. Andre had made 368 monthly payments (\$184,000) on the condo worth much less that he was never able to possess.



In Psalm 90 Moses speaks of the passing of time, contrasting the eternal God with the creatures of time we humans are. *"Lord, you have been our dwelling place in all generations. Before the mountains were brought forth, or ever you had formed the world, from everlasting to everlasting, you are God."* Of humankind, though, he suggests the days of our life are 70 years, or perhaps 80 if we are strong.

Year by year we mark the passing of time as the seasons sweep by. I love autumn, the season we begin this Saturday, Sept 22. Already our early mornings offer a hint of autumn and soon we will see the brilliant coloring of leaves ready to snap away from the source of their life, fall to the ground, crackle under our step, eventually to be swept up and wither away. *"You sweep (the years) away, they are like a dream, like grass that is renewed in the morning . . . in the morning it flourishes, in the evening it fades and withers."*

Several years ago I lead a cruise along the Rhine River and offered lectures on Reformation history. The journey offered more than a few opportunities to think about time and its passing,

especially viewing the majestic town cathedrals begun in the Middle Ages. This photo is actually one I took while enjoying lunch and coffee in the plaza beneath the famed cathedral of



Strasbourg, France. Begun in 1277 and towering 45 stories (466 feet), it was the tallest building in the world from 1647 to 1874.

The cathedral houses the famous astronomical clock, a marvel of technology in the history of the measuring of time, tourists still lining up to see it, especially at solar noon when the clock has an automated procession of Christ and the apostles.

Happening to be here precisely at noon, I forsook the long line to stay in the plaza below, taking this photo as the clock chimed for 13 minutes with beautiful tones that held the crowd in awe.

I wondered, looking at the cathedral's massiveness and, yet, intricate

decoration, how long-erased and left to our imagining are the lives of the people who first dreamed, designed, built, and marveled at the Strasbourg Cathedral. I imagined Middle Age workers 700 years ago arriving here through alleys and streets, the plaza where I was sitting a muddy work zone of workers freezing in the winter and scorched in the summer, seasons of their lives now long past. And I remember the words of Isaac Watts:

*Time, like an ever-rolling stream, bears all who breathe away.  
They fly forgotten, as a dream dies at the opening day.*

Moses reminds me of Jeanne. The Bible describes his life as a full 120 years, then neatly divides those 120 into thirds: 40 years in Egypt, 40 years in the desert, and 40 years as the hero of the Hebrews, wandering in the Sinai as they progressed toward the Promised Land which, like Andre, he himself would never possess, but only his heirs. Moses' life seems like an astronomical clock, perfectly dividing time, as if time itself were as much at Moses' command as had been the waters of the Red Sea.

At the end of his life, Moses ascends Mt. Nebo to view the Promised Land, which lays before you like at etching of a map – Jericho, the Jordan River, the Galilee, Jerusalem. He saw it, but could never possess it. Instead, after Moses' death, Joshua would lead the Hebrews to cross the Jordan and conquer Jericho with the sound of the shofar, the ram's horn. Moses, though, heard a different trumpet sound. We sing of it, "*When the trumpet of the Lord shall sound, and time shall be no more.*"

That hymn, “*When the Roll Is Called Up Yonder,*” may have a folksy feel, large on sentiment and low on intellect, but I think that phrase alone makes it one of the most sophisticated hymns in existence and one of the most perceptive with respect to our views of life eternal. This is the trumpet Moses heard, death ushering him out of Time/Space dimensions into the presence of the eternal God.

We all march toward that moment, each one of us, though thankfully our scientifically-oriented Western civilization has made significant advances in postponing the inevitable, as evidenced by our expanding life expectancies. We’ve adjusted the speed of our demise, the quest for the Fountain of Youth not without its successes, squeezing as much as possible out of these clay shells. Still, the fact remains that no matter how cleverly we learn to manipulate DNA we are dust, and to dust we shall return. If science can help us hold these particles of dust together longer, so much the better!

This is the cover of LIFE magazine’s October 1992 issue, a photograph of Sally Woodbridge of Burbank, California. It’s a composite image in identical pose, one side of her face from a 1944 photo and the other from 1992. Five decades sweep by in this image, a portrait of human life as Moses described it in Psalm 90, renewed in the morning, fading and withering toward evening. Both are beautiful in their moment, which is why Moses prays, “*Satisfy us in the morning, so that we may rejoice and be glad all our days*” (Psalm 90:14).



Psalm 90 urges us to contemplate Time. In our clock-studded society, contemplating Time isn’t difficult, never more than a glance away. It flashes on our bedside tables in the neon reds by which we begin and end our day. We hang it in elegant circumference on the walls of our homes. We strap it on our wrists and display it on our dashboards. We wedge it into the side bar of our computer screens. We set it into our televisions so our technology can mark the time and entertain us upon command. We add it to our microwaves with a beeper, so as not to scorch our hastily prepared meals, for time’s a-wasting. We program it into our smart phones so we can record the precise time of every call.

Time is ever with us and our desire to control it is part of our human make-up. The psalmist segmented time into large chunks, years and days. We’ve become ever more adept at the task, dividing our days into ever smaller increments. The Roman philosopher Titus Plautus, nearly 200 years before Jesus, cursed the technology that segmented time into a unit so brief as hours. He wrote, “*(May) the gods confound the man who first found out how to distinguish hours. Confound him, too, who in this place set up a sundial, to cut and hack my days so wretchedly into small portions!*” Oh, dear Titus, how much more eloquent your complaint might have been could you have envisioned the atomic instruments which now splice and dice time into smaller portions than you could ever have believed possible.

An hour is sixty minutes. Light from our sun reaches earth in about eight of those. A minute is composed of sixty seconds. In a second you have a healthy person's heartbeat, the time it takes the earth to zip thirty kilometers in its path around the sun. Nor are we even nearly done slicing and dicing. One tenth of a second is the duration of the fabled "*blink of an eye.*" In a tenth of a second the hummingbird feeding of your back deck beats its wings seven times.

Still, we've hardly begun cutting and hacking. One millisecond divides the second into 1,000 parts. A millisecond is the shortest exposure time in a typical camera. A housefly flaps its wings once every three milliseconds. The moon travels around the earth two milliseconds slower each year as its orbit ever so gradually widens. And, have you ever wondered what a *jiffy* is? Well, in the terminology of modern computer science, ten milliseconds equals one *jiffy*.

Nor are we yet done. A microsecond is one millionth of a second. In a microsecond light travels the length of three football fields. Then the nanosecond, the billionth part of a second. In a nanosecond, light travels not quite a foot. The microprocessor inside your PC typically takes two to four nanoseconds to process a single instruction such as adding two numbers.

And finally (drum roll, please), the smallest unit of time yet measured with precision is the attosecond, a billionth of a billionth of a second! The most fleeting events scientists can clock are measured in attoseconds, researchers having created pulses of light lasting just 250 attoseconds using high-speed lasers. Behold in the splicing of the second into ever smaller parts our human desire to control Time.

A few years ago Sherry and I traveled to Mississippi State University and as we explored the campus on the day before Game Day we visited the Wade Clock Museum, a collection of 400 clocks, some dating back to the 1700s, all donated by Cullis and Gladys Wade, renowned antique clock collectors. It wasn't long into the visit before one notices the ticking of the seconds of 400 clocks. As in Strasbourg it just so happened that we were there precisely at noon, and the chimes of the many clocks was a bit surreal. Time itself seemed to envelop us.



Time's paradoxes are ever with us. It heals all wounds, we say, but is also the great destroyer. Time flies and time crawls. Time is our most precious, irreplaceable commodity, yet we confess we don't know where it goes. Time is as personal as the pace of your heartbeat, but as public as the clock tower in the square. If the sermon this morning intrigues you, time is moving fast. If it is boring you, time crawls on swollen knees toward the benediction.

If you are in that latter category, perhaps it will encourage you to know that the passing of time may be merely an illusion! Were you aware that one of the hottest topics of debate among theoretical physicists today is Time, some suggesting that the passing of time is illusory? I find it intriguing that the bible enticingly suggests the same, that from a divine perspective time is an illusion, God observing time as one standing outside of time, looking on from the outside as Moses looked over the Promised Land from Nebo, Pisgah's lofty height.

We, on the other hand, experience time close up and real. Perhaps this is why we speak of measuring time, squeezing time, making the most out of time, managing time, creating more time, running out of time, pressed for time. Such phrases reflect our quest to share, with God, an "Otherness" with respect to time.

Shall we, one day, share God's view of time? Shall we, like God, of whom the Bible says, "*A thousand years in your sight are like yesterday when it is past, or like a watch in the night. You sweep them away, they are like a dream.*" How shall a thousand years be swept away like a dream? Physicists are, in a sense, imagining that now, conjecturing Time as illusory. I love it that the poet covered that ground long ago.

Perhaps this is why to live for even a few days without clock-consciousness is the stuff of which spiritual retreats are made. While at Mississippi State I picked up Mitch Albom's novel, *The Timekeeper*. "*Try to imagine a life without timekeeping. You probably can't. You know the month, the year, the day of the week. There is a clock on your wall or the dashboard of your car. You have a schedule, a calendar, a time for dinner or a movie. Yet all around you, timekeeping is ignored. Birds are not late. A dog does not check its watch. Deer do not fret over the passing of birthdays. Man alone measures time. Man alone chimes the hour. And, because of this, man alone suffers a paralyzing fear that no other creature endures. A fear of time running out.*"

Being free of the clock has the potential to be a profound religious experience. When I lead people on a retreat, asking them to put away watches and cell-phones, what they experience is at first very uncomfortable. We are extremely fond of our imagined control of the clock. It's agony for us to consider living even a few hours without our constant companion. Gradually, though, the experience of clocklessness becomes liberating. To be clock free is to taste a tiny morsel of heaven, a pre-cursor of the Eternal Now when "*time shall be no more,*" to experience a moment in which space/time dimensions no longer possess relevancy.

Now, perhaps such talk makes you uncomfortable. To us, living hour by hour, and day by day, time seems hardly an illusion. A glance in the mirror reminds us that we live in a world of Grecian Formula and Botox, of sit-ups at the gym and walks around the track, of blood pressure medicine and Races for the Cure – all in order to better control time, to extend our time.

We live in a world of Space/Time dimensions, but life with God transcends that. So Paul directs our eyes to another, truer reality. I end with the words of St. Paul: "*So we do not lose hope. Though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature renewed day by day . . . So we look, not on what can be seen, (it's illusory!) but at what cannot be seen. For what can be seen is temporary, what cannot be seen is eternal.*"