

Getting Better All the Time

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[0 : 00] The following message was given at a Sunday celebration at Trinity Grace Church in Athens.! For more information about Trinity Grace, please visit us at TrinityGraceAthens.com.

! In which she recounts scenes from her life in each verse.

The song begins with her saying, I remember when I was a little girl and our house caught on fire. I'll never forget the look of my father's face as he gathered me up in his arms and raced through the burning building out on the pavement.

And I stood shivering in my pajamas and watched the whole world go up in flames. And when it was all over, I said to myself, Is that all there is to a fire?

Is that all there is? Well, the third verse recalls the pain of a broken romance saying, Quote, Then I fell in love with the most wonderful boy in the world.

[1 : 13] We take long walks by the river or just sit for hours gazing into each other's eyes. We were so very much in love. Then one day he went away and I thought I'd die, but I didn't.

And when I didn't, I said to myself, Is that all there is to love? Is that all there is? Well, the song is more than a series of random vignettes.

It's a meditation on human life. See, Miss Lee is saying that life is nothing more than a series of disappointments. In fact, in her final verse, she grapples with the implications of her philosophy.

She says this, I know what you must be saying to yourselves. If that's the way she feels about it, then why doesn't she just end it all? You see, Miss Lee understands that the sense of meaninglessness and disappointment could easily sway someone to want to cash it all in.

After all, what's the point? She's being challenged to think about a philosophy we call nihilism. Nihilism is an extreme cynicism of life that concludes everything is meaningless.

[2 : 27] However, she responds in the song saying, Oh no, not me. I'm not ready for that final disappointment. Because I know just as well as I'm standing here talking to you that when that final moment comes and I'm breathing my last breath, I'll just be saying to myself, Is that all there is?

Is that all there is? Is that all there is?

Is that all there is? Is that all there is? She's chasing after pleasure, things like dancing and drinking. And why? Is to escape the inevitable disappointment just around the corner.

Miss Peggy Lee is not the only one being challenged to live out a philosophy of life. Every one of us in here this morning is being confronted by reality. At any given moment, we are interpreting life and we are living in response.

So Miss Lee's song provides a couple of well-worn paths into either meaningless depression or meaningless pleasure seeking. But are these the only paths?

[4 : 03] How are we to understand the world? How are we to live? Well, the preacher, he is calling out to us from these pages. He wrote Peggy Lee's song long before she sang it in 1969.

The preacher has been providing us with his own vignettes of life. He's been asking us at every stop, Is that all there is? Well, this morning, we have the privilege of sifting through the realities of life through the lens of the preacher.

He not only gives us his first-hand interpretation of life under the sun, But he also gives us an alternative vision for how to understand and live in the world.

So let's read together Ecclesiastes 2, starting in verse 12. So I turned to consider wisdom and madness and folly.

For what can the man do who comes after the king? Only what has already been done. Then I saw that there is more gain in wisdom than in folly, As there is more gain in light than in darkness.

[5 : 10] The wise person has his eyes in his head, And the fool walks in darkness. And yet I perceive that the same event happens to all of them.

Then I said in my heart, What happens to the fool will happen to me also. Why then have I been so very wise? And I said in my heart that this also is vanity.

For of the wise, as of the fool, there is no enduring remembrance, Seeing that in the days to come all will be long forgotten.

How the wise dies just like the fool. So I hated life, Because what is done under the sun was grievous to me. For all is vanity and a striving after the wind.

I hated all my toil in which I toil under the sun, Seeing that I must leave it to the man who will come after me. And who knows whether he will be wise or a fool.

[6 : 09] Yet he will be master of all for which I toil, And use my wisdom under the sun. This also is vanity. So I turned about and gave my heart up to despair Over all the toil of my labors under the sun.

Because sometimes a person who has toiled with wisdom and knowledge and skill Must leave everything to be enjoyed by someone who did not toil for it. This also is vanity and a great evil.

What has a man from all the toil and striving of heart With which he toils beneath the sun? For all his days are full of sorrow And his work is a vexation.

Even in the night his heart does not rest. This also is vanity. There is nothing better for a person Than that he should eat and drink And find enjoyment in his toil.

This also, I saw, is from the hand of God. For apart from him, who can eat? Or who can have enjoyment? For to the one who pleases him, God has given wisdom and knowledge and joy.

[7 : 20] But to the sinner, He has given the business of gathering and collecting Only to give to the one who pleases God. This also is vanity and a striving after win.

Well, for all who have wondered, Is this all that there is? Our passage this morning has good news for you.

The preacher helps us to see that The futility of placing our hope In earthly wisdom and the work of our hands. It's meaningless. Instead, he calls us to lift our heads up to the Lord And see not only the creation, But the creator for whom all things exist.

The preacher invites us away from striving And meaninglessness And into contentment and joy. I believe the main passage, The main message of this text is that Everything is meaningless without Christ.

But with Christ, we can enjoy everything. We're going to break this into three points. I trust follows the structure of the passage. The meaningful life doesn't rest in wisdom. The meaningful life does not rest in work.

[8 : 29] The meaningful life rests in enjoying God and His gifts. So let's start with the first. The meaningful life does not rest in wisdom. Well, if you've been here the last few weeks, You'll remember that we've already been walking With the preacher through his life experiences.

In chapters 1 and 2, He wrestled with a search for meaning In both wisdom and in pleasure. And the takeaway was that These things in and of themselves Lead to nowhere.

They're futile. But now, the preacher aims to take a new approach. Verse 12 says, He turned to consider wisdom, madness, and folly. And these words, madness and folly here, They mean the same thing.

It's behavior that is senseless and irrational. He's contrasting a life dedicated to the pursuit of wisdom And the life dedicated to the pursuit of wisdom.

And he's asking, Is there really any difference between these two things? Well, to answer this, He invites us to think about the king Who has tons of wisdom and resources at his disposal.

[9 : 34] Well, it's a difficult passage to translate, But it seems that he's actually pointing to himself As an example of having unending resources. And even he is still coming up short.

So if the king can't gain any headway, Then what can be done by those who come after him Who don't have all the resources? It's as if he's saying to us, Don't try to outdo me on this one.

Because you can't. Solomon has tried it all. He lived wisely, And he lived foolishly, And none of it worked. He's warning us with this kind of Been there, done that, Got the t-shirt kind of statement.

So then in verse 13, He concludes that wisdom and folly Are not created equal. He says that there's actually more gain in wisdom Than in folly, As there's more gain in light than in darkness.

So, in the preacher's understanding, Wisdom has relatively greater value than foolishness. So what this means is that The preacher is not a nihilist. He's not a nihilist.

[10 : 34] He actually sees value in wisdom. There's a definitive difference between these two things. There's good and there's bad. There's light and there's dark. And the preacher is wanting us to know, Ahead of time, That he does not agree With the conclusion that there's no meaning at all.

He carries over the analogy of light and dark, And he applies it to the vision Of the wise and fool. Look at verse 14. It says, The wise person has his eyes in his head, But the fool walks in darkness.

So what's this contrast meant to show us here? Well, without the light of wisdom, The fool fumbles around in darkness. I personally have a good bit of experience Fumbling around in darkness.

We have four kids at my house under the age of eight, Which means sleep is sacred. As many of you know, We do all that we can not to wake anyone up. This includes trying to navigate the house Without turning on any lights.

One night, I tried to make it from one side of the house To the other side of the house Without turning on any lights. And I stepped directly onto a die-cast tractor With the spout sticking up, The exhaust pipe sticking up, Directly into the arch of my foot.

[11 : 44] You would have laughed If you could have seen me Writhing on the ground, Trying to silently scream To not wake the kids up. So the idea of a fool In darkness is the picture of lacking knowledge In how to live successfully.

This is the fool. Okay? So the wise person is different. He has his eyes in his head. So what does that mean? The one who is wise Has clarity To perceive How to negotiate life With all of its challenges.

So wisdom Is better than foolishness Because it helps you navigate this world Without stumbling. So wisdom is relatively Better than foolishness. But the value is only relative.

Why? Well the preacher is struggling With this great reality. Whether wise or foolish They both die. Death Is the great equalizer.

So even though the preacher Is not a nihilist, He is pressing the question Why have I pursued wisdom If I'm going to end up Just like the fool? Look at verse 15. The very end it says It's vanity.

[12 : 54] It's futile. Well empirically that's true. It is true. Both the wise and the foolish die. And from what we can observe This is the end for both. The problem the preacher sees here Is that wisdom's gain Over foolishness Seems fleeting Because both the wise and the fool Share the same fate.

There is seemingly nothing That endures by trying to live wisely. Right? Verse 16 says For of the wise As of the fool There is no enduring remembrance Seeing that in the days to come All will have been long forgotten.

Both the wise and the fool Will be forgotten in the end. They're exactly alike in that regard. Not too long ago I started trying to trace My family's origins On my dad's side.

And I met my Great grandparents Physically I literally met them And I've heard some stories about them So I kind of know them But once I moved beyond them I have no clue What kind of people My ancestors were.

I don't know If Seaborn Washington Hollingsworth Was a gentleman or a scoundrel. I do not know If Zebulon Hollingsworth This is his real name Was an industrious businessman Or a bank robber I have no idea.

[14 : 08] There's no enduring Remembrance of these guys. This is what the preacher Is highlighting for us. The meaningful life Can't be based On acting wisely or foolishly.

Because everybody's forgotten. So to put your hope In such things Is like chasing the wind. He's challenging our motivations here. It's not enough To try to be nice people.

It's not enough To earn a good reputation. So if our goal Is to be remembered as wise The preacher wants us to know We are going to die Right alongside the fools.

We're all going to be lumped Into the same graveyards Eaten by the same words And forgotten By the same future generations. That's what he's saying. So maybe you want to ask the preacher If we don't live on And our memory doesn't live on Can't we leave our wealth As a legacy?

Maybe an inheritance To our children? Well the preacher Now shifts his attention To the topic of work. Point two The meaningful life Does not rest in work.

[15 : 12] Look at verse 18. He says I hated all my toil In which I toil under the sun Seeing that I must leave it To the man who will come after me.

The preacher is saying That he hates everything That he's been doing Because he has to simply Leave it behind in the end. And what's worse is In verse 19 He has no say In who it goes to.

It could be someone wise Or it could be some idiot. He doesn't know. And yet this guy Whoever he is Will inherit All the fruit Of the preacher's hard work And it's futile.

Statistics show That 60% Of inherited wealth Is gone by the second generation And 90% Of inherited wealth Is gone by the time The grandchildren die. Think about that.

In the Vanderbilt family Cornelius Who was the patriarch He built a fortune On railroads and shipping During the mid 1800s. If we adjusted it For the size of the economy He was the second richest American ever Worth over 200 billion dollars Well above Bill Gates.

[16 : 18] Yet his children And especially his grandchildren They lived lavishly And they did little To preserve that fortune. And by the 1970s The family held A family reunion With about 120 Family members attending And there wasn't A millionaire among them.

It's been said that One of the biggest reasons Wealth is squandered Is because the people Who built the wealth Don't take time To shape their family's Attitudes about the wealth.

Ironically This is probably Because they were Too busy making money. We may not have Many millionaires In our midst But that doesn't mean We necessarily Have a healthier vision Of our relationship To our work.

It's not unusual To be driven By restless ambition To achieve And to put work Before everything else. Maybe before family dinner Showing up to ball games Serving in the church.

Many marriages And relationships To children Are sacrificed On the altar Of workaholism. Ironically Workaholism Can parade around As being responsible Or being a provider.

[17 : 27] But the preacher Is warning us About our relationship To our work. We must let scripture Confront our motivations. Is there envy Driving you to work?

Is there a desire To outdo Your neighbor Or to one up A family member? Is there a longing For recognition? Or do you find That there's an obsession With a certain Standard of living That's enslaving you To your work?

Do you find that work Is creeping into The rest of life And usurping time And attention From other areas That God has entrusted To you? Let me encourage you To take inventory And listen to the Preacher's plea here.

There's nothing Of lasting value Ultimately gained If we put Our hope In these kind Of motivations For work. We must come Face to face With the reality That the fruits Of our labor Will be turned Over to someone else.

No matter how Intentional you are In your work It does not Last. One of the things I love about Living here In the south Is that we still Pull over Out of respect At funeral processions.

[18 : 37] But in all The hundreds And hundreds Of times That I have Pulled over I have never Seen a hearse Pulling a U-Haul. This is what The preacher Is wanting us To see.

Verse 22 Asks us the question What has a man From all the toil And striving Of heart With which he Toils beneath the sun? What do you Have to show For all The hard work In the end?

Tim Keller Describes our work Like trying To plow Water. This is a very Vivid image. We may churn it up For a moment But once we move on Everything we work for Just settles right Back into place.

Luke 12 Jesus tells of a man Who tried to find The meaningful life And work. The man said To his soul Soul You have ample goods Laid up for many years Relax Eat Drink Be merry But God said to him Fool This night Your soul Is required of you And the things You have prepared Whose will they be?

The one that tries To find the meaningful Life in work Is considered a fool In God's eyes. The meaningful life Does not Rest In work.

[19 : 55] So The preacher's Experiment with pleasures And the good life Including much labor Has not succeeded. It's all futile. So is there any hope?

If not wisdom If not work Then what? Is that all there is? Point three The meaningful life Rests In enjoying God And his gifts.

So when we arrive At verse 24 There is an incredible Shift He begins with These shocking words There is nothing Better. So the preacher's Indicating to us Right here That this is the Ultimate good That a person Can experience And what is The ultimate good?

Keep on reading There is nothing Better for a person Than that he should Eat and drink And find enjoyment In his toil And I want to say What? Didn't he just Expend a ton of energy Right before this Writing about the woes Of finding hope In these things?

What's going on here? Well I think the answer Is actually in the Next part Of this verse It says this This also I saw Is from the hand Of God For apart from him Who can eat Or who can have Any enjoyment?

[21 : 12] This is the linchpin For the preacher's Argument right here The things of this earth Do not change However Our relationship To the things Of earth Are completely Transformed In light Of God God is the central Character in this section If you look back Through verses 1-23 He was not mentioned Even one time Scan it Bringing back Bringing God Back into the picture Makes all the difference This is a massive Paradigm shift here The preacher's showing us That godlessness Leads to futility Engaging the world Apart from him Makes no sense Apart from him We relate to pleasure And wisdom And work as supreme But they were never Intended to be supreme They are gifts Intended to Point us To the giver So apart from him The gifts We treat as gods Only leave us saying Is that all there is?

That's what he's getting at However The preacher He wants To rightly Reorient Our hearts To think To relate To both the gifts And the giver Look at verse 26 For to the one Who pleases him God has given Wisdom And knowledge And joy But to the sinner He has given The business Of gathering And collecting Only to give To one who Pleases God This also Is vanity And a striving After the wind The preacher Introduces a distinction Here Between the one Who pleases God And the sinner The sinner Is literally one Who misses the mark This is someone Who has missed The point of life God has given The sinner Is the person Who seeks The goal of life In himself And the goods That he can store up Under the sun His whole life Is focused on Just gathering And collecting Gathering and collecting And what's the result?

Instead of ending up With riches God gives it To the one Who pleases him So those who end up Missing the mark End up with nothing This is vanity And chasing After the wind But For the one Who pleases God He gives both The gifts And the ability To enjoy the gifts This is what Is missing In Peggy Lee's song This is what's missing From the preacher's Previous four ways And to Pleasure and work Not only to have Those gifts But also the ability To enjoy the gifts This is it So the big question You must face This morning is Who are you?

Are you the one Who pleases God Or are you The sinner? Because the answer To this question Means the difference Between unshakable joy And meaningless toil Well it sounds like The preacher's saying To us God gives good things To good people And takes the things Bad people have And gives them To the good people too Well if that's right You really Really Really Really Don't want to be A sinner But what does The scripture say?

Well even the preacher Later points out In chapter 12 Verse 13 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 So according to the preacher To be pleasing before God Is to keep his commandments But Psalm 14 1-3 says this The fool says in his heart There is no God They are corrupt They do abominable deeds There is none Who does good The Lord looks down From heaven On the children of man To see if there are Any who understand Who seek after God They have all Turned aside Together They have become corrupt There is none Who does good No not even one Not even one That is a universal indictment But you may be thinking I am not that bad I do not think

[25 : 26] I should be lumped in With the thieves And the murderers But the scripture Says that we cannot Compare ourselves To other people We have to compare ourselves To God's perfect standard Romans 3-23 says All All All have sinned And fall short Of the glory Of God So did we come All this way Just to have a stalemate Do we come all this way Looking at all this stuff Just to be hopeless Is that all there is If not you or me Then who is the one Who pleases God I have good news for you This morning There was only one person In all history Who perfectly followed God's design There was only one Who has been told Of God's pleasure Jesus Christ

At his baptism God's voice Broke forth from heaven In adoration This is what he says This is my beloved son With whom I am Well pleased Jesus lived the life That we could not live He died the death That we should have died As lawbreakers He did it so that If we'll turn from our sin And trust Jesus As our savior And the king of our lives Then we can be united With Christ So for those who are in Christ God no longer sees us In our sin But he sees us As his beloved children In whom He is well pleased If you recognize That you are a sinner This morning Let me plead with you And say very loud and clear You do not have to stay there You do not have to stay there Let me invite you To turn from the meaningless life Of living for God's gifts And let me introduce you To the giver of the gifts Trust in Jesus For the forgiveness Of your sins And you will be credited With Jesus' righteousness

For all who are in Christ God pours out All the riches of the world To be enjoyed Hebrews makes it clear That Jesus has been Appointed by God As the heir Of all things And by virtue Of being in Christ Romans 8 says That we are children Of God And if we're children Then heirs Heirs of God And fellow heirs With Christ So if you're a Christian This morning On the basis Of Christ's work You are the one Who pleases God This is wonderful news This is wonderful news Let me give you Three brief reasons Why this is wonderful news For us this morning First For the sinner Death Is the end Everything the preacher Has pointed to Ends at death Nothing can be taken Beyond the grave No pleasure No reputation No wealth It ends At the grave

This is why Legendary baseball player Ted Williams Was cryogenically frozen He entered into a pact With some of his family members With the hope That one day There might be A resurrection So he could be reunited With his loved ones But there's good news For the Christian This morning We already have A resurrection That conquers death For the one Who pleases God Death is not the end But a beginning Biblically Death is a consequence Of sin Romans 6 23 says For the wages of sin Is death But the free gift of God Is eternal life In Christ Jesus Our Lord Christ sets us free From the tyranny Of death 1 Corinthians 15 Describes the results Of Christ's resurrection For the believer When he says this Death Is swallowed up In victory Oh death Where is your victory Oh death Where is your sting The sting of death Is sin And the power of sin Is the law But thanks be to God

Who gives us the victory Through our Lord Jesus Christ So if there is Life beyond the grave We no longer Have to fear death We don't have to Scramble To salvage This broken life A second reason For the sinner Work is the end The preacher made it clear That our work Does not yield Fruit that lasts Instead Everything That we strive for Must be surrendered To another If we attempt To find the meaningful Life and work We will be disappointed But not so For the one Who pleases God Our work is not The end But the beginning How can the preacher Find enjoyment In his toil In verse 24 But in verses 22 And 23 It's all vexation Eating Drinking Enjoying one's work They're not viewed As gods But as a gift

[30 : 30] From God That's the difference They are gifts Kept And they're appropriate Boundaries In Genesis God Commissioned man To subdue the earth To have dominion Over it To work the ground To produce food He was given work Before sin Entered the picture It was a part of God's good design For man To work After sin Entered into the world Work became riddled With difficulty And it became A temptation Just like every other idol However if you are In Christ The way you relate To your work Is now much different We no longer Have to worship Our work Instead we can worship Through our work God's promised To give us Our daily bread He has promised To take care Of our every need So we can be liberated From the driving ambition That takes so many others Captive Instead we can go Into the work God has assigned to us

Knowing that when we Strive for excellence We're doing so Simply to express Our thankfulness To God who saved us We can treat others In the workplace With kindness Because we've experienced The kindness Of our Lord In relation to our sin We can work With integrity To honor the Lord Because he set us free From the corrupt ways Of the world Also we can build On a foundation That actually lasts When we worship Through our work There are eternal Ramifications When we do things With excellence We have the opportunity To bring honor To God When we refuse To gripe And we instead Thank God For our work We demonstrate A kingdom ethic That brings glory To God And when we share The gospel With those God has connected us To in the workplace Just like Vic Was talking a little bit ago We share In the joy Of inviting our co-workers Into our eternal family This kind of work Is not in vain 1 Corinthians 15 58 Says Therefore my beloved brothers

Be steadfast Immovable Always abounding In the work Of the Lord Knowing that In the Lord Your labor Is not in vain There can be joy In our work When working As unto the Lord And lastly For the sinner Pleasure Is the end And though there can be Temporary satisfaction It will not Ultimately Satisfy It wasn't intended To ultimately Satisfy So what are we to do With the things Of the earth Embrace them Reject them Use them Forget them Look at them With suspicious eyes Enjoy them But feel a little bit Guilty while doing it Well for the one Who pleases God Pleasure is not the end But a beginning The preacher Commends Creaturely human life

As God has made it Eating Drinking Working These are all Fundamental Embodied Human activities The preacher Wants us To see that This Is an alternative Vision set In contrast To a godless Reality God is not Let me be very clear God is not A cosmic killjoy The goal of the Christian life Is not To eradicate Pleasure That's not it Quite the opposite In fact The goal of the Christian life Is to restore us Into right Relationship To God And his creation Irenaeus Once said That the glory Of God Is the human Person Fully Alive Full humanity Will involve Eating and drinking And enjoying One's work Well many of us I can look around I know stories Just like Like my own Many of us Are really well Acquainted with Sinful overindulgence In the pleasures Of this world And we understand All too well The repercussions

Of drunkenness And addiction And gluttony And workaholism And fornication We know those things But in response I fear That many of us Have overcorrected Only to veer off Into another ditch We begin to believe That the godly life Is to shun The things of the world As inherently evil But friends This This is one of the False teaching That the bible itself combats It goes by the name Gnosticism This is a philosophy That believes The spiritual things Are inherently good And earthly things Are inherently evil But we are not Gnostics We are Christians We believe That god created The physical world And said That it was Good We believe Being human With five senses And desires Is not Sinful In itself We believe God created us This way On purpose Before sin Entered the world And said That it was Very good

[35 : 33] We believe That Jesus Christ Died And was raised To new life In a physical body We believe That all Who place Their hope In Christ Will also Be raised To new life And receive New physical bodies On the last day We do not We do not believe That we will be Disembodied spirits Rocking on harps Standing out in clouds That's not what we believe Instead We believe We will physically Live on the new earth For all eternity The difference Is that our minds And our bodies Will be unobscured By sin Sin is defeated Not earthly pleasure Christ has come To put us In right relationship With God And his gifts In the story Of the prodigal son Many think That the prodigal son's Sin was partying Too much And that when he Came to his senses He wanted to just Leave all that Partying behind But we forget That the story Doesn't just begin With partying It ends with partying

There's a party In the far country That leaves the son Broken But there's a massive Party when he Gets back home The difference Is that the son Cannot enjoy The party rightly Until he is Satisfied In the father's Love So contrary To Gnosticism We do not Shun Earthly things No As Christians We engage In the gifts Fully With appropriate Thankfulness To the God Who gives them 1st Timothy 4 4 For everything Created by God Is good And nothing Is to be rejected If it is received With thanksgiving So as Joe Joe Rigney An author Puts it We need not Necessarily fear The intensity Of our joy And created things Provided We are anchored In a supreme Love for God Then When our love For one Of his gifts Shoots through the roof

Like a rocket It carries Our love for God Along with it Lifting it to new Unforeseen heights In this sense We actually rob Ourselves Of potent Worship If we detach From the gifts Or rush Through the enjoyment Of creation It's good To be reminded That love For the giver God Is ultimate But then Once the supremacy Of the giver Is settled The right And fitting response Is to dive Back into the Pumpkin crunch cake And enjoy Every last bite Woo Praise the Lord So When we hear The chorus Around us Asking the question Is that all There is Let us Be a people Who cries out Everything is Meaningful Without Christ But everything With Christ Is meant to be Enjoyed And let's live it out Let's live it out Let's party Let's work And enjoy God's good gifts With all Of our hearts

As we anticipate Eternity With him Let's pray Oh Lord Thank you That you are A good Giver Of gifts That you Created us To Engage them As a form Of worship In our work And in our pleasure Lord we ask That you Help us To Appropriately Enjoy them With full Vigor And full joy As we celebrate The good things That we have As a foreshadowing Of life with you For all eternity And we commit This day To you And we say Amen You've been listening To a message Given by Walt Alexander Lead pastor Of Trinity Grace Church In Athens, Tennessee For more information About Trinity Grace Please visit us At