LIFE-CYCLES by Andy Diestelkamp

The philosopher in Ecclesiastes observes, “To everything there is a season, a time for every purpose under heaven: a time to be born, and a time to die; a time to plant, and a time to pluck what is planted,” etc. (3:1,2). Likewise, the Hebrews author soberly writes that “it is appointed for men to die once, but after this the judgment” (9:27).

As we age, we become more acutely aware of the reality that we will not live in these failing bodies forever. Just as surely as babies continue to be born, more and more people we know depart this life. Birth and death bookend the life-cycle for all of us. It is the way of our present condition in this present world.

However, the reality of the end of life as we know it need not be hopeless. Indeed, of all people, we who believe that Jesus Christ is the risen Son of God and follow Him should be the most at ease with “a time to die.”

Life is a series of beginnings and endings; with many of these life-cycles comes some natural discomfort in the ending of anything and the uncertainty of what will follow. Whether we are graduating from school, moving out on our own, getting married, changing jobs, retiring, or losing a spouse, there is apprehension about what might come next and how we will cope.

This observation about life-cycles is true for churches as well. While the church that Jesus promised to build would be unfazed by “the gates of Hades” (Matt. 16:18), local groups of Christians have come and gone over the last two millennia. The one body of Christ continues to grow, and the membership of those added to it by the Lord is unaffected by their physical deaths. Yet, we see that local churches that were once vibrant can very much be affected by death and may dwindle into obscurity.

While some may think this observation depressing, it is a reality that is quite obvious to any reader of Scripture. Whatever happened to the many churches we read about in the New Testament?

Paul worked hard to spread the gospel and establish churches throughout the Roman Empire, but some may wonder to what avail he labored seeing that not one of those churches exists today. Where are the seven churches of Asia to which Jesus instructed John write? All of these early churches (including the one in Jerusalem) had varying life-cycles and eventually succumbed to the inevitable demise that comes to all people (and groups of people) in this world.

Does this reality mean that Christ’s church has failed? God forbid! While earthly churches and those who comprise them have life-cycles, the body of Christ the eternal One does not.

Therefore, let all saints remember that neither the end of their lives nor the end of their local churches is a reason for despair. While it is right that we press on with diligence in this life while we have the strength to do so, we need not conclude that the end of a cycle of life in this realm equals failure. The philosopher cryptically observed, “The end of a thing is better than its beginning” (Eccl. 7:8). In Christ, the end of a thing is the beginning of something greater (cf. Phil. 1:23).