

“The Traveler”
Ecclesiastes 3
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Today we talk about one of the great wisdom books of the Bible. Ecclesiastes, like scotch, is kind of an acquired taste. I get Ecclesiastes. I don't get scotch. It is a book that requires introspective thought. If you're not the type who finds introspection easy, finding meaning for life in Ecclesiastes won't be easy. Bear with me and I think you'll get something out of this.

It has been said by many that this life is a pilgrimage. Like any pilgrimage journey we have to find our way where we have never been before, without a GPS. It was first said by the ancient philosopher Heraclitus that life is a river you cannot ever enter twice. The water you entered before is now downstream somewhere. The water you will enter five minutes from now is still coming from upstream. Time, from our human perspective, flows just like a river.

So we humans are restless and we travel. We never stay long in one place. We all say we want things to stay the same, but they never do. We pilgrimage, always trying to find a scrap of the sacred, a glimpse of the Holy around the next bend. It is not often easy to find our way through life. There are twists and turns and we get lost sometimes, but we find our way back.

Finding your way, especially while actually walking, is good for you. It is good for your brain, for all people, and especially for older people, to have to figure out directions while walking on the ground, in real time and space, to have to navigate our way down the road. It is good for our brain for us to walk in pilgrimage in unfamiliar territory, finding your way. It is good for our brain to walk labyrinths and mazes, like the corn maze in Springfield. Dr. Jules Joy informs me that the neuroscience brain researchers have discovered that it absolutely is good for your brain, walking and finding direction at the same time. It actually generates *new* neuron growth in your brain. Yes: *brand new brain cells*. Who couldn't use some brand new brain cells?

As we journey through life and through chapter 3 of Ecclesiastes, it seems pretty safe and easy to understand. That's the way we have usually thought about Ecclesiastes three. What comes to mind? How many hymns are there based on Ecclesiastes in our hymnal? 6? 12? Nope. 3. Only three and only one you would recognize. *For the Beauty of the Earth* for some reason is considered relevant for Ecclesiastes. I'm not sure about that, but we used it anyway. What music comes to mind, instead? We find ourselves humming the catchy little 1960s folk song by The Byrds, *Turn, Turn, Turn*. The words are taken right from the first eight verses

of the third chapter. We might know them by heart and can join with the now old hippies and sing along. Jolane, *hit it!*

The teacher of Ecclesiastes tells us there are different times for different perspectives in the different experiences in our lives. You know, as a pastor, there's a time to keep digging and searching for more sermon fodder for a Sunday, and then there's time to give that up and go for a walk with a family member, rake leaves, or listen to your daughter play music. We know there's a time to embrace and be close to family and friends, and a time especially with COVID, to refrain from embracing at all. A time for socializing and a time for 10 days of isolation. There's a time for couples to be close, and a time, even before marriage, to *keep your hands to yourself*. There is a time to mourn, to cry, again and again, if we have to, depending on how badly our heart is broken, and a time to dance with your daughter on her wedding day and forget all the sadness for a time.

There is a time for all these different experiences, if we live a genuine, authentic, human life. There is the very false assumption out there, and it is common, that if we are spiritual enough, if we just stick close to God, we'll be happy all the time. Nothing will be able to get us down. But Ecclesiastes preaches that if we are wise and godly people, we *can't* be happy *all* the time. If we have lost someone, to Alzheimer's, or cancer, or a miscarriage, or a divorce, it is the exact time to weep as much as you need to weep. Cry until the tears don't come out anymore. If you don't, you will not heal. So, cry away. There will come a time to laugh.

There is a time to scatter stones. Do you remember these words? "Mr. Gorbachev, tear down this wall!" And the people of both Germanys literally did exactly that on November 9, 1989. It was the right time.

If only it was that simple for most of life! What is difficult about life is we don't always know which times are which, do we? Say you have a relative who needs confronted over a very dysfunctional behavior. When is it the time to speak or the time to be silent? Be wise about that. Timing can be everything, and everything has its time.

When we dig into Ecclesiastes, we start to see what the preacher was getting at. The world is not so neat and tidy and positive and easy. The world closes in on us. It confuses us. It leads us astray and into . . . nothingness.

The author explores every pleasure in life, and seeks to get every bit of wealth, every bit of power she can, even works at getting a type of religion. The preacher tries to get everything, from a human viewpoint, that makes life successful and meaningful. She gets all As in life, for achieving and getting, but she ends up flunking life anyway. He's at the forest, but he can't see it. Too many trees in the way! I have a book by the Freudian psychoanalyst C. G. Jung entitled, *Modern Man in Search of a Soul*. Aside from the dated title, the title says it all about where

many people are these days. They have everything. They have achieved much. But they still end up feeling empty and lost.

Actor Jim Carrey said in an interview: “I think everybody should get rich and famous and do everything they ever dreamed of so they can see that it’s not the answer.” (*Reader’s Digest*, March 2006). And that is exactly what Ecclesiastes is all about. Go ahead. Get all the money and all the wisdom and all the power and even do all sorts of selfless service for others, and still, *it’s not the answer*.

The preacher in Ecclesiastes talks a lot about time. You can’t save it or preserve it. Ecclesiastes says *time is meaningless*. This passage pictures time as circular, maybe a spiral we are all caught up in. We laugh, we cry, “it was better than *Cats*,” and then we laugh and cry again. We tear it down. We build it up. Then we tear it down again. In the end, there’s no progress. Life seems meaningless. It goes nowhere. Astrophysicists say time can actually bend backwards because time and space are related. Both can be warped. I don’t understand that. But Ecclesiastes seems to support that idea. Verse nine (look at it) throws up its hands in frustration. “What gain have the workers from their toil?” There’s no profit. There’s no meaning. In the end, nothing gained. Time wasted.

In the last part of this chapter it gets *even more hopeless*. There is a phrase on which we need to focus that can ultimately lead us out of this stuck place. It is “under the sun.” It happens 37 times in this little book. What that means is a world without God anywhere in the picture. The preacher, and all of humanity, is focused on what is “under the sun.” What we do, what we work at, there is nothing more, so enjoy it, eat at Homestead, drink at Birdfish, enjoy what you can, enjoy your work, because *that’s it*. Th-th-that’s all, folks! Can you see sending off your child to college with that advice: “Hey! Go eat and drink and enjoy it all, ok? There’s no meaning to any of it.” In the end, life is empty, meaningless, a joke. Wow. Should a preacher say this or should we only and always look on the bright side? Well, I was always taught that what the Bible says comes first, first before any agenda I might have or society has, or I have nothing to say. And then there is the fact that a lot, and I mean *a lot* of people, think life is ultimately hopeless and meaningless, like the preacher in Ecclesiastes. Many focus only on what is “under the sun.” What we see. What we experience. What we can lay our hands on. It all comes to nothing anyway.

Modern philosophers like Camus and Sartre and Nietzsche said it and wrote it. It’s called nihilism. Even rock bands like Nirvana and Smashing Pumpkins and a bunch of punk rockers, and others, say the same thing and people listen to it, sing along with it and end up believing it. It is kind of the spirit of the times. How many TV shows and stories and movies have the small group of survivors after the nuclear war and the pandemic, sheltering in burned out basements counting their

cans of beans and bullets as the walking dead shuffle by? Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* is a hit right now. It might be tough to hear, even tougher to live, but this is the way life seems, for many, taken to an extreme, when God is put out on the periphery of life, beyond our view. Not involved. Doesn't care.

Newsflash from *this* preacher: **Life is hard without God.** Period. If you actively, intentionally, leave God out, *it will be even harder.* Why would you *want* that? Fortunately, we don't have to stay in this downer of a place, where things are confusing and where everything counts for nothing "under the sun." In this very desolate place, everything ends up being a gigantic waste of time, a "chasing after the wind." That's what the preacher is saying when she says, "a chasing after the wind." No one can catch the wind, of course. Almost all of us spend some time in our lives in that hopeless place, our day-planners filled to overflowing, personal schedules overbooked and we're still not getting ahead. But we don't need to stay in that place. Just knowing *we are there*, and *need to move on* is good enough. But where? Where do we go from there?

Fortunately I know where. So please join me.

We have to look somewhere else, somewhere beyond our "under the sun" perspective. Look at verse 10: "I have seen the burden God has laid on the human race." Ok, not so hopeful. We know we're burdened. But then God takes a machete and slashes open our big sack of hopelessness and we hear this: "Yet he has made everything beautiful in its time. He has also set eternity into the human heart."

God has gifted us a way out and a perspective on our pilgrimage through life that lifts us. God has put *eternity into our hearts*. Man, that is good news. This is a viewpoint not just "under the sun." It is *another dimension* we had not considered. It is a view "*above the sun.*" This is a view from heaven, in eternity, *where God is*. We yearn and long for something above the sun, for *someone* beyond what we can see and sense. That ultimate longing, my friends, is *for God alone*. Nothing and nobody satisfies our longing like God does.

To continue in the path toward hope and meaning, we need now to switch to the other side of this book, to the New Testament to find out what and who we're talking about. In your concordance you can simply look up the word "above."

John talks a lot about the one who travels from above the sun to below the sun, to earth, and back above the sun again. John 3:31 says twice "The One who comes from above is above all..." In verse 36, we are promised that whoever looks to this "One from above" "has eternal life, but whoever rejects Him will not see life." John 8:23 is even more clear. Jesus says, "You are from below; I am from above. You are of this world; I am not of this world." If we don't get the perspective of God from *above the sun*, life merely *under the sun* stinks and is stuck in meaningless cycles until time marches us right into the grave. But let us remember

this from John 3:16: “For God (who is above the sun) so loved the world (that is below the sun) that he gave his only Son, that whosoever believes in him (who is above the sun, but has come to us who live below the sun) may not perish but have eternal life.” Hope you caught that. Jesus (who is above the sun) entered time on earth (below the sun) and broke the meaninglessness of the cycles of time by doing a new thing on the cross and in the resurrection. If you are on board with that, if you believe that, then time, for you, is transformed and made beautiful in its own time.

Let me close with Colossians 3:1: “Set your hearts on things above, where Christ is.” Do that and everything down here, what you do, and how you do it, will change. Amen.