June 22/23, 2024

Made for Eternity

Chasing the Wind: Searching for Meaning Series

Ecclesiastes 3:1-15

Pastor Bryan Clark

Some of you are going to struggle to believe what I'm about to tell you, more than you would struggle to believe a Bigfoot Sighting. In 1981, when Patti and I were married, I was on the cutting edge of technology. One of the things that was coming on were these dissolving units, where you could take two slide projectors, and you could dissolve them, so one faded into the other, making kind of this continuous story. Pretty great! So, I thought this would be great in our wedding. So, when we lit the unity candle, we showed this one slide that held pictures of Patti, from when she was a baby, all the way up to the present moment. The other held slides of me, from when I was a baby, up to the present moment, each of them fading into the other, all the way to where we came together as a couple. It was beautiful! All of it was put to music. Choosing a song from *Fiddler on the Roof*: "*Sunrise, Sunset, Sunrise, Sunset, swiftly flow the days*." It was great! *(laughter)* And that's what we want to talk about this morning.

So, if you have a Bible, turn with us to the book of Ecclesiastes, Chapter 3. If you're new with us this morning, we're working our way through the Old Testament book of Ecclesiastes, and the Preacher is not in a good place. The Preacher is struggling to try and figure out what gives life meaning. He just keeps saying, "It's vanity…it's empty…it's chasing the wind." In chapter two, He tried pleasure. He tried possessions. He tried wine. He tried productivity. None of them satisfied. Ryan told us, toward the end of chapter two, that we got a little bit of a glimpse as the sun broke through the clouds, just a little bit, that, maybe, somehow, it's found in the ordinary, everyday stuff of life. But the chapter ends with the familiar refrain. "It's vanity…it's empty… we're just chasing the wind."

In 1965, the Byrds released the song, "Turn! Turn! Turn!" The lyrics were taken right out of our text this morning. The tune is kind of a pop, folksy tune, one of those tunes that kind of sticks in your head. You'll probably be humming it the rest of the day, and the team did a beautiful job. But I can assure you that if the Preacher was writing the music to go with his poem, it would not have been a pop, folksy tune. It would have been something much more like the blues. He's not in a good place. This poem is not just kind of a nice reflection of life. It's full of cynicism. It's full of despair. It's full of struggle, trying to sort out the monotony of life. Chapter 3, verse 1:

> **There is an appointed time for everything. And there is a time for every event** *(could be translated, every activity)* **under heaven.** (*NASB, Ecclesiastes 3:1)

The Hebrew word used here for **time**, is not like, "What time is it?" It's a word that carries more the idea of a season…a season of life. "There's a time to be born." "There's a time to die," and there's a bunch of stuff in between. And what difference does it make? That's what he's wrestling with.

This whole issue of time is interesting to think about. I personally don't like time, because I think time is a thief. If tomorrow I experienced the most wonderful moment of my life, I can't keep it. Time steals it away. Even in the middle of the moment, I know it won't last. I can feel the clock ticking. It's almost like a teaser. And what I long for is moments that last. Why can't they last? I loved being a dad. But time took that away from me. Some of you in the past year have lost loved ones, and that is a painful thing. Time took them away. Time takes away our relationships. Time takes away our health. Time takes away our energy. Time just keeps marching on. It's the thief that keeps taking the things that we love. I think this creates the monotony of life. That's what the Preacher is struggling with, for at the end of the day, the seasons come and go, and they come and go, and they come and go, and time keeps taking all this away. So, what difference does it make? You get up; you go to bed. You get up; you go to bed. You get up; you go to bed. It's just monotonous.

I think this is where we're at as a culture. People can't find meaning. They can't find purpose. They can't find a reason to live. So, they're just cranking it out…and it all becomes a monotony —one day after another, week to week, month to month. How many people just live for five o'clock and the weekends? And they're just trying to find something to get them through another week. I think this is the fuel that drives our busyness. Have you ever asked yourself, "Why are we so crazy busy? What's driving this?" And I think the answer is our emptiness, our despair. Nobody wants to stop and look in the mirror. Nobody wants to ask the hard questions. So, we just are busier and busier and busier, because as long as we stay busy, we don't have to ask the hard questions about why my life is so empty and filled with despair. So, we go and we go and we go. And that's a really good way to waste your life.

The poem that follows, and you can tell it's a poem again, just by looking at it, the way it's structured in the text. It uses a Hebrew technique known as *merisms*. Basically, it's a whole series of couplets, where one mirrors the other. It's like a contrast. "There's a time to be born…there's a time to die." So let me read it to you.

A time to give birth and a time to die;
A time to plant and a time to uproot what is planted.
A time to kill and a time to heal;
A time to tear down and a time to build up.
A time to weep and a time to laugh;
A time to mourn and a time to dance.
A time to throw stones and a time to gather stones;
A time to embrace and a time to shun embracing.
A time to search and a time to give up as lost;
A time to keep and a time to throw away.
A time to tear apart and a time to sew together;
A time to be silent and a time to speak.
A time to love and a time to hate;
A time for war and a time for peace. (Vs. 2-8)

So the technique actually helps us with the interpretation. The technique itself is to create kind of this monotonous feel to the poem. As a matter of fact, I'm fairly confident that if you started with

me at the beginning of the poem, a fairly high percentage of people halfway through, checked out. And by the end of the poem, probably most people checked out, because there's something within us that says, "Okay, okay, I get it, I get it! You don't need to keep saying it." And that's the point of the technique. It has this monotonous…There's seasons and days and weeks and months. And at the end of the day, what's the point? What's it all for? As a matter of fact, that's what he says in verse 9:

> **What profit is there to the worker from that in which he toils? I have seen the task** *(could be translated, the burden)* **which God has given the sons of men with which to occupy themselves.** (Vs. 9-10)

There's really no need to go back through the poem and try to analyze all these different contrasts. That's not the point. The point is simply illustrating the monotony of life. And that's what he asked, "What's the point? What's the **profit**? What's the advantage of all this?" It's the same question he asked in chapter 1, verse 3, and the same question he asked in chapter 2, at the end of verse 11. "What's the point? What difference does it make?" He's struggling. He's trying to figure this out.

It's interesting that verse 10 ends with the idea **with which to occupy themselves**. In the ancient world, most of life was about trying to live…trying to get enough food…trying to live for one more day. That's most of what occupied their time. In addition to that, what did they do? I mean they didn't have television. They didn't have phones. They didn't have cars, They didn't have recreation. So every day, once you figured out how I'm going to survive one more day, "What do you come up with to occupy yourself?" And that's kind of the idea there. It's just like, "Day after day after day, what's the point?"

So here we are 3000 years later, and things are quite a bit different. I didn't say better; I just said they're different. So now, we have no shortage of amusement. We have no shortage of entertainment. We occupy ourselves with what one researcher called "junk food for the brain". We don't like boredom. We don't like downtime. That's why we're addicted to our phones and our games and our devices. That's what we do. We feed on this junk food in order to occupy ourselves, to get through one more day. But we're not happier. We're not more satisfied. As a matter of fact, the research is showing that all this junk food for our brain is doing a lot of damage to our mental health.

Verse 11 is a very important verse. I want to read it to you and then I want to break down the parts.

> **He has made everything appropriate** *(could be translated, beautiful*) **in its time. He has also set eternity in their heart, yet so that man will not find out the work which God has done from the beginning even to the end.** (Vs. 10-11)

So the opening phrase, **He has made everything appropriate, (**everything beautiful), and then we would expect it to be translated, in **His** time. But that's not what the text says. It's **in its time.** What he's saying is, "Somehow God takes what seems so ordinary and random and unimportant and makes it into something that's beautiful…in **its** time."

A lot of commentators use the imagery of a tapestry for this part of Ecclesiastes. It's the idea that in a tapestry, the underside is ugly. It's chaotic. It makes no sense. It's just a random collection of threads and yarn that make no sense and have no beauty. But on the other side—the side that the weaver sees—it's actually becoming something beautiful. We don't see the weaver's side. All we see is the underside, and the underside doesn't make sense. The underside is ugly. The underside is just full of random chaos. And we find ourselves wondering, "What's the point of all this? Why does it have to be this way?"

The idea of **in its tim**e is very similar to what Paul says in the New Testament in Romans 8:28. "***All things work together for good to those who love Him and are called according to His purpose***." The text never says all things are good. They're not. Some things are bad. Some things are ugly. Some things are painful. Some things are just a reflection of the fact that this is a fallen, broken world. But God is writing a story. He's been writing this story from the beginning. He's been weaving this tapestry. And these things that seem so ugly, they seem so painful, they seem so confusing to us, are like threads that He can take and weave them into the tapestry. And even though they look ugly to us, they contribute to the beauty of the masterpiece He is weaving. That's what that phrase is talking about.

He says, **He has also set eternity in their heart**. This is certainly a reflection of the idea that we, as people, are made in the image of God. It goes all the way back to Genesis, chapters one and two, where God created the world that was good. God created people in His image, and He said, "This is very good". This is the world we were created for in Genesis one and two. And this is what my soul longs for. **Eternity in my heart** basically means, "I long for something different. I long for something better. I long for something more." There's something deep within my soul that cries out and wants to believe there's got to be something more than this ugly, broken, chaotic world. Please tell me this is not all there is. So we look at the underside of the tapestry and it's like, "That can't be it. That can't be all there is."

C.S. Lewis said, "*If you find that there are deep longings and desires that nothing in this world can satisfy, one could logically conclude that we were created for a different world*." And that's exactly right. That's what my soul longs for. It longs for the world as God intended it to be. That's the eternity in my heart that separates us from the animals. Animals are not made in the image of God. Animals aren't dissatisfied with the boredom of life. My horses, as far as I can tell, have never seen or admired a sunrise or a sunset. Their favorite thing to do is to stand in the pasture and eat grass. They thrive on boredom. They love the monotony. As a matter of fact, when I interrupt their monotony, they're not happy with me. "Leave me alone. You're bothering me. I'd like to stand here and eat some more grass." So, imagine I take this beautiful tapestry to show my horses. It doesn't matter if I show them the front or the back. They're not impressed. They're like, "I don't know what that is. Get that away from me. You're interrupting me. I'm trying to eat some grass here." They're not made in the image of God. But we are…and we feel that deeply in our souls!

Every week, I am with people in deep pain, and I wish this world was different…I wish it was different! I wish it didn't have to be like this. There's something deep within me that cries out, "Why can't it be different?" I look at the underside of the tapestry. It's just a mess. It's ugly. It's chaotic. It's random. It doesn't seem to make any sense. There's something within me that longs for that. That's what he's saying at the end of verse 11…**so that man will not find out the work**

of God. In other words, I can't see the beautiful side. Only God can see that right now, that which God has done from the beginning to the end. God is writing a story, and it's beautiful. He's weaving a tapestry, but right now I can't see that. I'm not God. In this little sliver of life I get, from my vantage point, it just looks pretty ugly. So, what do we know? Well, verse 12:

> **I know that there is nothing better for them than to rejoice and do good in one's lifetime; moreover, that every man who eats and drinks sees good in all his labor—it is the gift of God. I know that everything God does will remain forever; there is nothing to add to it and there is nothing to take from it, for God has so worked that men should fear Him. That which is has been already and that which will be has already been, for God seeks what has passed by.** (Vs. 12-15)

So, let's start in verse 15, and work our way back up. Verse 15 is really clumsy, and it's hard to figure out what's being said. The NIV ends verse 15 with, **He will call all things to account**. That's actually a very good translation. What verse 15 is saying is, for God, the past, the present, the future…it's all equally clear to Him! He sees the whole thing. And at the end of the story, God is going to call all things to account. Even though we may view our days as empty and monotonous, God doesn't see them that way. He sees every day as a gift, and we're going to be held accountable for, "What did you do with that gift?" At the end of the story, there will be judgment. At the end of the story, there will be justice. At the end of the day, things will be made right. At the end of the day, God will sort it out. And the Preacher is reminding us, "These days are gifts." That's how God sees them. So what did we do with the gift we've been given?

Going up then to verse 14 . . . **everything God does will remain forever. Nobody can add to it. Nobody can take away from it**. That's why everyone **should fear Him**. By **fear Him**, it doesn't mean be afraid of Him. It means to reverence Him, to worship Him, to surrender to Him, to bow to Him, to understand from the beginning, God, the Creator, has been writing a story. He's been weaving a tapestry. And even though it doesn't make sense and it's just random and confusing to us, God is actually in the business of weaving something beautiful. And only God's tapestry remains.

We often talk about this great temptation, this great risk we have as people made in the image of God, to be our own god. "Don't tell me what to do. I'm going to decide all this for myself." So, in essence, to keep with our imagery, what I'm saying is, "I want to make my own tapestry. I want to create my own beauty. I want to weave my own story." So, people can spend their entire lives weaving their own tapestry. But when you run out of days, God takes your tapestry and throws it in the garbage. No, there will not be multiple tapestries. There's one weaver; there's one tapestry that remains. All the rest go in the garbage can…a life totally wasted.

As a result of what we know, then, he says, "Then fear Him; worship Him; follow Him; align with Him." Because the remarkable truth is, in this little slash of a life that I get, it's possible that I can give my life to God as a thread that He chooses to take and weave into the tapestry. Where, at the end of the story, I am included in part of the beauty of the story He's been writing. A story that will last forever.

Which gets us back up to verse 12, and 13, **then there's nothing better than to rejoice** *(to find joy)* **in doing good in one's lifetime…to eat and drink, see good in all his labor**. Labor isn't your job. Labor is everything that defines life. Why? It is a gift of God. There's no question the **good** in Ecclesiastes is tapping back into Genesis, chapters one and two, when God looked at the world that He has made, and He said, "This is good. This is the world as I intended it to be." He looked at people made in His image and said, "This is very good." And He wants people made in His image to find joy and pleasure with Him in the garden beauty He has created. This is captured in Genesis, chapter three, when we're told that God would come into the garden in the cool of the day and would walk through the garden with Adam and Eve, just enjoying being together and enjoying the world that God created.

We often talk about a concept called *shalom*. It's the idea of flourishing, of flourishing together. While we cannot change the whole world, we often talk about at least creating glimpses of the world as God intended it to be, to at least give people the slightest peek at the world as God wanted it to be, and, as the world, one day, will be again—glimpses of flourishing. So every day is a gift. Every day is an opportunity. Today, I'll never get back. It's a day to walk in alignment with God, to stroll through the garden with Him. To be with Him and admire the sunrise and the sunset as a work of His hand. It's a day to create little pockets of flourishing wherever God has placed me. That may just simply be a word of encouragement. It may be an act of kindness. It may be just a listening ear. Always looking for opportunities to at least give people a little glimpse—that this is not the way it's supposed to be. And every day be aware that people around me, their souls are empty and they're searching. And just like us, they have this deep longing to believe, "There's got to be something more than this. There's got to be something deeper and richer that will satisfy my soul."

And we've been given the assignment to help them understand that you feel this way because God has made you in His image, to experience a world very different from this. But now it's broken, and it's fallen, and it's confusing, and it's random, and it's painful. We see the ugly side of this tapestry, and it's like, "This can't be all there is!" And we share with them that God has made it possible through the giving of His Son who died for your sins, to experience the forgiveness of sin and a relationship with God. You can walk with God through the garden and your life can align with God and His purposes. Your life can actually be a thread that becomes part of the tapestry, that ends up being part of the beauty of the story. And God has made that possible as a gift. There is grace if you're just willing to receive it. So, every day is a gift full of possibility, where we find our joy.

Let me see if I can illustrate what I think the Preacher is trying to say. I have three girls, and with each girl, during the spring of their senior year in high school, I took each one of them on a father-daughter trip to Chicago where we would stay for several days and do all kinds of things. I actually lived in downtown Chicago for three years, and I fell in love with the city. There was so much about the city I wanted them to experience and enjoy. With each one, I would tell them all these different things that the city offers, and then let them choose, "What is it you want to do?" Each one of them is very different, and what each chose was very different. Jayme is my youngest and one of the things that Jayme chose, was shopping…not necessarily buying, but shopping. Michigan Avenue is magnificent! We also found some neighborhood stores and shops. She just wanted a shopping experience that seems quite a bit different than what we experience in the town of Firth.

So, when we got back, somebody asked me, "Well how did it go? What did you do?" I said, "Well, we did a lot of shopping," to which this person responded, "Oh that must have been terrible for you!" And it actually kind of caught me off guard. I thought about it a moment, and I responded by saying, "I think you're missing the whole point. I was there to be with my daughter, and my joy came from creating an experience that would cause her deep joy and create a memory we could share together. That's what we were doing."

I think that's what the Preacher is saying. This is a relationship. This is walking with God in the cool of the day through the garden and enjoying each day as a gift. To see the beauty and the opportunity in each day, to create glimpses of shalom, to share the Good News of Jesus, to offer my life in submission, as a thread that God can use and weave into His tapestry. So that, at the end of the story, my thread is part of the beauty of the masterpiece God is weaving. That is mine, if I so choose. This week, you get 168 hours. There's not one single hour you'll ever get back again. You get one shot at it. Don't waste them! "Sunrise, Sunset. Swiftly go the days."

Our Father, we're thankful for this remarkable reality that, from the beginning, You have been writing this story. You've been weaving this tapestry, and You have offered for each of us to submit and align with Your story, and to offer our lives as a thread that You can take and weave into Your tapestry. So that, at the end of the story, our lives are part of the beauty of what You've created. Lord, help us see each day as a gift, and to find joy in the opportunities You give us, to be part of Your story. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Scripture taken from the NEW AMERICAN STANDARD BIBLE
Copyright 1960, 1962, 1963, 1971, 1972, 1973, 1975, 1977, 1987, 1988, 1995
The Lockman Foundation. Used by permission.
Lincoln Berean Church, 6400 S. 70th, Lincoln, NE 68516 (402) 483-6512
Copyright 2024 – Bryan Clark. All rights reserved.