

An Empty Life (5): A Time For God

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If you have your Bibles, I'd invite you to turn with me to Ecclesiastes 3. We've been working these last few weeks for about a month now, in fact, through the first two chapters of this great book of Ecclesiastes, and we've found it to be a very modern book in the sense of speaking to dilemmas that have a very contemporary ring about them, both the questions it asks and the answers that the Preacher gives in this book strike us as very contemporary. In giving certain answers to dilemmas that have existed and are part of our current thought, far ahead of time, the book of Ecclesiastes forecasts our questions and answers about 3000 years ahead of time. And that's even more remarkable.

Let's review what we've seen so far. The thesis of the book is stated in the very first three verses, "Life is empty." It's stated that boldly, that's how the Preacher puts it. Not because that's his final verdict on all of life, but because he wants to shock us into the reality of what we face if we attempt to live this life under the sun, and you'll remember that under the sun is his code language for life lived apart from God. Life under the sun is looking at life and not factoring in the eternal, heavenly, divine perspective on things--looking at life simply by the limitations of our human horizons, the natural order, our lives, and the things that we experience in this world.

To restate the thesis, however, he is saying that life under the sun, that is, life apart from God is empty. He's not arguing that life with God is empty, but that those who attempt to live this life apart from God know only meaninglessness, futility; in fact, life he says, is a bad joke lived under the sun. Now, having made that basic starting point in chapter 1 verses 1-3, that is, saying let's start off by looking at life under the sun apart from God, he attempts in the rest of the first two chapters to give you three ways that people who are living life apart from God, that they attempt to supply meaning to life: wisdom, pleasure and work, and he explores each of those three ways as ways that people attempt to find or supply meaning to a basically meaningless life in a universe that is random and purposed. And he explores each of those three ways and he finds that each way failed.

He says, "Look, if you take the way of wisdom and become contemplative and reflective about this life, and think hard about this life, it won't lead to meaning but

to despair, if you attempt to think apart from God. Because you'll look at world with many, many heartbreaking things, and you'll have no ultimate answers and it'll lead you to grief and despair, not to meaning and satisfaction and fulfillment.

So, he says, "OK, let's shelve that idea. Wisdom won't work. Let's try fun." So he does fun, he does pleasure, and he says, "If I can't think my way through to meaning, at least I'll feel my way through to satisfaction and pleasure and enjoyment." And he says, "I did that, and I did it better than any of you have ever done it, and at the end I sat down and I thought about what I had done, and it was empty. It was utterly meaningless, it hadn't filled me up, it hadn't given me the satisfaction that I thought that I would gain from it, and so pleasure is not capable of supplying life with meaning."

And so, finally he says, "Well, wisdom didn't work, and pleasure didn't work, so I'll try throwing myself into activity. I'll work, I'll go after a meaningful vocation, I'll build things, I'll plant things, I'll leave a legacy for myself in the things I create, I'll throw myself into a human quest." And he tried that, and at the end of that, he said, "I decided again, that apart from God, all of that was empty." Now, having explored those three avenues of wisdom, and pleasure, and work, to try and find meaning, and having found that there was no meaning in those things apart from God, He then, in chapter 3, finally provides us with a full-scale solution to this dilemma. Where do you go, if wisdom won't supply meaning; if pleasure won't supply satisfaction; and work or vocation or some human quest; political, or social, or moral, won't supply meaning; where do you go? He tells you here, in Ecclesiastes chapter 3. Let's turn, then to God's word, and hear it:

There is an appointed time for everything. And there is a time for every event under heaven--

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.

What profit is there to the worker from that in which he toils? I have seen the task which God has given the sons of men with which to occupy themselves. He has made everything appropriate 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. I know that there is nothing better for them than to rejoice and to 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. Furthermore, I have seen under the sun that in the place of justice there is wickedness and in the place of righteousness there is wickedness. I said to myself, "God will judge both the righteous man and the wicked man," for a time for every matter and for every deed is there. I said to myself concerning the sons of men, "God has surely tested them in order for them to see that they are but beasts." For the fate of the sons of men and the fate of beasts is the same. As one dies so dies the other; indeed, they all have the same breath and there is no advantage for man over beast, for all is vanity. All go to the same place. All came from the dust and all return to the dust. Who knows that the breath of man ascends upward and the breath of the beast descends downward to the earth? I have seen that nothing is better than that man should be happy in his activities, for that is his lot. For who will bring him to see what will occur after him?

Amen. Thus ends this reading of God's holy, inspired, and inerrant word, may He write its eternal truth upon our hearts. Let's pray.

Our Lord and our God, we ask that You would show us marvelous things from Your word; that we would see, hear, understand, believe, and act upon the truth which You teach here in Ecclesiastes through the words of the Preacher, we ask these things in Jesus' name, Amen.

The Preacher has gone from the contemplative life, searching for meaning in wisdom under the sun, apart from God; to the sensuous life, searching for meaning and satisfaction in pleasure, under the sun, apart from God; to the active life, searching for meaning and fulfillment and satisfaction in life through vocation and work and effort and building and creation, under the sun, apart from God. And he cannot find meaning or happiness or real blessedness or satisfaction in any of these things. And if he can't find it there, anywhere, apart from God, where does he turn? Where does he go?

For the first time in the book, he gives us now a full-scale solution to that and it may surprise you. His solution is the providence of God. His solution is the sovereign, providence of God. We often think of those things as a topic for theological debate, for disagreement and differences between fine Bible-believing Christians, but the Preacher sees the providence of God as the solution to all the problems of this world. He sees it as the solution to the meaningless of

life, apart from God.

The world, you see, is divided into two camps: those who believe in God's providence, and those who reject it, and everything else in between is simply a variation on one of those two themes. And the Preacher is saying here that the only solution to meaninglessness in life is to accept that there is a sovereign, divine, providential ordering of things in this world that supplies it and suffuses it with meaning, and that apart from that ordered, divine plan, there is no hope in this life.

We're going to explore his thinking as we outline this passage. In the first eight verses, the Preacher is going to recount for you the reality that the events of our lives are beyond our personal control. We do not control the time that we weep and the time that we laugh. Who, in his right mind, would choose a time to weep and mourn and die, and so he is pointing to the fact that the great events that characterize the stages of our lives, are out of our control. Now, interestingly, verses 1-8 parallel precisely what he said in chapter 1 verses 3-11. He begins by pointing out that the great events of our lives are outside of our control. However, he does it with a very different angle than he took in 1:3. There, he asked us to look at life, how? Under the sun. Here, in 3:1, how does he ask us to look at life? Under the sun? No! Under heaven. There is a big difference in the perspective that he introduces in chapter 3. Then, in verses 9-15, he draws the implications of the providence of God controlling the events of our lives. Finally, in verses 16-20, he raises a problem for those who do not believe in a purposeful plan of God at work in this ordered universe, and he points out that apart from that belief, life is hopeless, futile, and meaningless.

I. The very realities that weary and vex the unbeliever comfort the believer as a manifestation of providence.

In verses 1-8, the Preacher tells us that the only answer to meaningless existence is the providence of God. The very realities that weary and vex the unbeliever become realities that comfort the believer as they realize those things are a manifestation of providence. Look at Ecclesiastes 1 for a moment, and look at verses 3 -11. "What advantage does man have in all his work which he does under the sun? A generation goes and a generation comes, but the earth remains forever. Also the sun rises and the sun sets; and hastening to its place it rises there *again*. Blowing toward the south, then turning toward the north, the wind continues swirling along; and on its circular courses, the wind returns. All the rivers flow into the sea, and yet the sea is not full. To the place where the rivers flow, there they flow again."

Here's his verdict: All things are wearisome. He looks at the cycles of nature outside of his control. He looks at the movement of the seasons and the waters and the cycles of the winds all out of his control, and what does it get him? It is

wearisome, it's vexing; it doesn't make sense to me.

Now, you turn over to Ecclesiastes chapter 3, and suddenly, there's a different feel to the repetition to the same truth. "There's a time to give birth and a time to die; a time to plant and a time to uproot. A time to kill and a time to heal..." Again, rehearsing things which are entirely out of our control in this life. But what's the difference? Well, the difference you'll see in verse 3 of chapter 1. "What advantage does man have in all his work which he does *under the sun*?" Three words, *under the sun*. Now, turn over to Ecclesiastes 3:1. "There is an appointed time for everything. And there is a time for every event *under heaven*." Notice the differences.

First of all, this is life under heaven. This is life considered in its widest possible perspective—taking in the perspective of God. This is looking at life, not just through the narrow circumscription of our earthly horizons, not simply under the sun, apart from God, but factoring in God's sovereign rule over everything.

Secondly, notice there is an appointed time. This didn't just happen; this isn't just a result of a random sequence of impersonal natural operations, this is the result of the purposeful, personal direction of a sovereign Almighty God. The perspective changes; the events are the same. Some of those events are deeply disturbing and wounding and grieving. Who would choose a time to weep? Who would choose a time to mourn, to experience pain, to suffer? The same events which vexed the unbeliever in chapter 1, however, are seen as the manifestation of a purposeful, personal, sovereign, providential God in chapter 3. The author is pointing out to us here, in verses 1-8, that the believer sees these things as the manifestation of God's providence in life. The very regularity that frustrates the unbeliever in chapter 1, verses 3-11, leads to optimism and comfort and confidence and hope here in Ecclesiastes 3, verses 1-15. If we are trying to live life without God, those kinds of frustrating events—marital breakups, the loss of children, the loss of jobs, friendships fractured, betrayals by family members and by close friends, and on and on and on. All of those things, as painful as they are, are meaningless and fruitless. They mean nothing. They may hurt you, but they mean nothing in a cosmic universe which is simply according to a random, naturalistic, impersonal, operation; *but* in a universe which is ruled by the providence of God, for the one who is in relationship with that living God, there are no meaningless events and there are no events when we are simply the victims of the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune. *Every* event is ruled by our heavenly Father. And our response to things that we cannot comprehend in this life, to things which grieve us in this life; our response is an index as to whether we are trusting in a God who has a purposeful, personal, good, providential plan at work in this world and in our lives. No one chooses a time to weep and whatever may be our skill and initiative, our real masters seem to be the inexorable seasons and motions of life around us far beyond our control.

You have two choices. You can either believe that this is the result of chance and

the random operation of nature. If you do, there *is* no meaning in life. Or you can believe that it is the result of the plan of a good and loving and merciful and gracious and purposeful sovereign God. And that is where the Preacher is pointing us, and you see this in verses 9-15.

II. God's providence is the ultimate comfort to the believer.

Here the Preacher works out the implications of God's providence. God's providence, he says, is the ultimate comfort to the believer. Look at verse 11. He tells us here that God has ordered everything according to its proper time. "He has made everything appropriate in His 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. I know that there is nothing better for them than to rejoice and to do good in one's lifetime." Verse 14: "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."

In this passage he acknowledges that God has given every human being an innate sense of Him and that there is meaning and order in this life. And so, even those who claimed to believe there is no God and to believe there is no providence, and to believe there is no meaning, cannot live as if there is no meaning in this life. God will not allow them to ultimately live consistently with the idea that there is no meaning and there is no God and there is no purpose. And from time to time, even in the lives of those who are most opposed to God's truth and to God's existence, and to God's providential control, they will act as if there is meaning in life. Find a hard-core atheist when his mother has died or his child has died, or there is some calamity that is encroached upon him and laugh and mock at him; his feelings will be hurt. Well, that makes no sense unless there is some morality to what has happened. You have to have a moral universe to have justifiably hurt feelings. And so, he acts as if there is meaning and the reason that he acts as if there is meaning, is because there *is* meaning even though he denies it!

And so, the author, the Preacher is saying, "Look, when you look at this world, you have to live one of two ways: As if this world is meaningless and hopeless, the result of a random operation of chance in a naturalistic structure or as if it is the result of the personal direction of a sovereign, Almighty God." In fact, here in verses 9-14, he asserts that God is ordering everything according to its own design. God's permanent and effective and complete and secure providence orders those who know Him to enjoy life and moves them to be in awe of Him. Isn't that what our *Catechism* celebrates? Turn in your hymnal and turn all the way back to page 870. Look at Shorter Catechism question 11.

Q. What are God's works of providence?

A. God's works of providence are, His most holy, wise, and powerful preserving and governing all His creatures, and all their actions.

And you could have taken it right out of Ecclesiastes 3:9-14. It's just a paraphrase of what the Preacher has just said. It is that truth, it is that reality that turns the content of Ecclesiastes 3:1-8 from something that is frustrating and meaningless to something which is comforting and meaningful. You see, it's not that the events of Ecclesiastes 3:1-8 are less heart-rending than the events of Ecclesiastes 3:1-11. It is that the perspective has changed. Instead of looking at those events under the sun from a human perspective, apart from God; in Ecclesiastes 3 he looks at those *events from a divine perspective under heaven from the perspective of a God* who is alive and in control and it makes all the difference in the world.

III. An unsolvable problem, apart from God's sovereign providence: injustice in the world.

And then in verses 16-22, he says I'm going to lay down one more challenge to my friends who are attempting to live this life under the sun. And he shows an insurmountable problem in non-providence for the non-Christian. In other words, he points, in verses 16-22, to an unsolvable problem; a problem which cannot be fixed or answered apart from God's sovereign providence. And the problem is injustice in this world. In verses 16 and 17, he points out this problem and the answer that only the believer can give. The problem is instead of justice and righteousness, there is wickedness in its place. We've seen examples of that in recent weeks where evil has been called good by our highest court.

And he says, if you believe in a random order without meaning, you have no answer to that. In fact, you can't even articulate a problem with it because you have no point of reference whereby to determine what is good and evil. Only with a transcendent, creator God can you have good and evil. And only within a transcendent, creator God, who has a moral order and a plan, can you have hope when you see a world filled with injustice.

He tells you his hope in verse 17. "God will judge." He will settle accounts with both the righteous and with the wicked. So the believer, the one who lives before the face of God under heaven in relationship with God, has a solution to injustice in this life—final judgment.

But meanwhile, verses 18-21, the one who denies God or who tries to live apart from Him, who tries to live under the sun—for him—there is no hope. There is no way even to distinguish *his* existence from the existence of a beast.

So when the problems of life come, how do *you* look at them? What's the index, the measure of your hope in your response to the problems of life? Do you

remember the scene in the first volume of J.R.R. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*? It's in the chapter "The Shadow of the Past" when Gandalf is speaking to Frodo about the ring of power that has been discovered. If you saw the movie, it's been moved to the Mines of Moria, that's where it happens. And Frodo says, "I wish that this hadn't happened in my time." And you know, a lot of you feel like that today, about things that have entered in to your lives. You've seen a child's heart broken; you've lost a child; you've lost a spouse; you've had your career hopes dashed; you've been betrayed by a friend; and you have thought to yourself, "I wish it hadn't happened." And do you remember how Tolkien has Gandalf respond to Frodo? Here's how it goes from the movie script, roughly. "So do all who live to see such times, but that is not for them to decide. All we have to decide is what to do with the time that is given to us. There are other forces at work in this world, Frodo, besides the world of evil. Bilbo was meant to find the ring in which case, you were also meant to have it, and that is an encouraging thought."

You see, behind that literary fiction is a stable, moral universe with a God who is in control making sense of it all. And so, in the face of the most difficult problem; in the face of the slings and arrows of the most outrageous fortune, we can trust that everything is coming to us from the hand of heavenly Father who loves us. And so, through all the changing scenes of life—in trouble, and in joy—we can sing the praises of our God whose providence is ruling this world. Let's pray.

Our Lord and our God, we thank You for the truth that You are in control. And so, even when we don't understand what is going on in our lives, and even when we are out of control of what is going on in our lives, You understand; because You control and You are not out of control because all things flow from the merciful hands of your providence. Help us in Jesus Christ, to trust in You, Your word, Your providence, Your promise; and, by the gospel, to stand and praise you in the midst of the greatest hardships of life. We ask this in Jesus' name, Amen.

A Guide to the Morning Service

The Reading of Scripture

At virtually every morning service, a minister reads a substantial section of Scripture. The public reading of the Bible has been at the heart of the worship of God since Old Testament times. In the reading of God's word, He speaks most directly to His people. We are reading our way, consecutively, through the Book of Acts. Today we are in the 13th chapter where the work of the Holy Spirit in the call of Paul and Barnabas, and in the ministry of Paul, is evident.

The Gideons Report

Each year we have a "Gideons Sunday" at First Presbyterian Church. We love

the ministry of the Gideons and support it faithfully. The Gideons International was founded in 1899 and is the oldest Christian business and professional men's association in the United States of America. The primary function of the Gideons is placing and distributing Bibles and New Testaments in the human traffic lanes and streams of national life. Every dollar contributed by members of this church today will be used to make it possible for others to have their very own copy of God's Word. An offering will be taken at the end of the service'

The Psalms and Hymns

Our God, Our Help in Ages Past (Psalm 90)

We begin our sung congregational praise this morning using Isaac Watts' famous paraphrase of Moses' Psalm 90. It reminds us of God's eternity and providence. Despite our finitude and the seemingly ephemeral nature of human existence, believers face the future with a godly and certain confidence because our God reigns and rules and protects His people. No wonder Watts entitled this song "Man Frail, and God Eternal." William Croft's majestic tune "St. Anne" is named after the church (St. Anne, Soho, London) he served as organist. Bailey says: "By universal consent this hymn is one of the grandest in the whole realm of English Hymnody. It is found in practically every hymnal. No other embraces in such moving language the whole scope of history, faith in a God who realizes His purposes through history, and the solidarity of a nation which in times of crisis places its hope in the Eternal."

Holy Bible, Book Divine

It's Gideon Sunday, and in response to the Gideon Report, we are going to sing parts of three hymns about the Bible, the word of God written. This one was written by a Baptist layman and originally intended for Sunday School children. In the very first stanza we learn that the Bible is holy, divine, precious, and God's gift to the church – to teach us (among other things) who made us and what we are.

O Word of God Incarnate

Another of How's fine hymns. How served as curate at Kidderminster (Richard Baxter's old stomping grounds), then at Shrewsbury. He later served as rector at Whittington, Shropshire, near the Welsh border (Matthew Henry country!); suffragen Bishop of London and bishop of Wakefield, West Yorkshire. He was known for his work with the poor and with industrial workers. He also found time to write over 50 hymns, most of them during his stay in Whittington.

God, in the Gospel of His Son

The author (1717-1795) was the son of Baptist minister John Beddome. He was

apprenticed to a surgeon in Bristol, but moved to London in 1739 and joined the Baptist church on Prescott Street. At the call of his church, he devoted himself to the work of Christian ministry, and in 1740 began to preach at Bourton-on-the-Water, Gloucestershire. For many years he was one of the most respected Baptist ministers in western England. This hymn thanks God for the glorious qualities of the Bible.

Through All the Changing Scenes of Life (Psalm 34:1-4, 7-9)

From Tate and Brady's famous *Psalter*. Tate graduated from Trinity College in Dublin, Ireland. He was a distinguished playwright and in 1692, became Britain's poet laureate. Brady attended Westminster School, Christ Church, Oxford, and Trinity College. After being ordained, he served for a while in County Cork before moving to London. There he was vicar of St. Catherine Cree church, 1691-1696. He was also chaplain to King William II and Queen Anne.

This guide to worship is written by the minister and provided to the congregation and our visitors in order (1) to assist them in their worship by explaining why we do what we do in worship and (2) to provide them background on the various elements of the service.

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