

IV. Ecclesiastes in Biblical Perspective
From Vanity to Vitality
“For Everything There Is a Season—Part 2”
Ecclesiastes 3
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We will be Ecclesiastes 3 for this study. The book of Ecclesiastes starts with the phrase ‘everything under the sun is vanity.’ Vanity means vapor or breath. When it’s translated in the Hebrew it is considered worthlessness or more precisely meaninglessness. I like to use the illustration of cotton candy where when I begin to eat it I realize I had just bought sugar coated air that had the moment of exhilaration but the reality was there was nothing but emptiness. This is what the writer of Ecclesiastes is telling us. I have already gone through this the previous studies on this book but the writer is Solomon. He has written two other books, Proverbs and Song of Solomon. In Proverbs, we see his heart’s desire for wisdom which is the gathering together of Divinely ordained common sense for life and how you live with wisdom that is knowledge and understanding. Secondly we’re fully aware of the dissipation and decline of Solomon’s walk with the Lord and his obedience, even to the point not only in disobedience in terms of marriage but also in sexuality, pagan gods and a foothold for the child sacrifice god, Molech, toward the end of his kingdom.

The book of Ecclesiastes seems to be Solomon coming to his senses and repentance. It’s no accident in the last chapter he tells us to ‘fear God which is the beginning of wisdom’ where he is bringing us back to the book of Proverbs which he had left with his life. In the Song of Solomon it’s the glorious text that speaks of the majesty of the relationship of a man and a woman in marriage and the anticipation and reflection of that toward the glorious bride and Bridegroom, Christ and His church. I think this is important to keep in mind and to remember that vanity is looking at life ‘under the sun,’ not from the perspective of the transcendent but from the perspective under the sun while bearing the curse of sin of all that is under the sun. The writer is the Preacher giving us the wisdom of his analysis that all is uselessness and vanity until he gets to the solution which is to live life from above the sun with the fear of God and the trust in a sovereign God.

As we get into this study we’ll see how he weaves the sovereignty of God and the transcendence of God throughout this book. He doesn’t just wait to till the end of the book. In the last study we looked at the first 8 verses of chapter 3 and in this study we’ll finish the remaining verses in this chapter. We will start by reading from the first part of Ecclesiastes 3. Ecclesiastes 3:1–8 says,

[1] For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven:

[2] a time to be born, and a time to die;

a time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is planted;

[3] a time to kill, and a time to heal;

a time to break down, and a time to build up;

[4] a time to weep, and a time to laugh;

a time to mourn, and a time to dance;

[5] a time to cast away stones, and a time to gather stones together;

a time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing;

*[6] a time to seek, and a time to lose;
a time to keep, and a time to cast away;
[7] a time to tear, and a time to sew;
a time to keep silence, and a time to speak;
[8] a time to love, and a time to hate;
a time for war, and a time for peace.*

We could spend much more time on each one of those. For instance, a time to love and there is our way of life which is to love the Lord with all our heart, soul and mind and our neighbor as ourselves. There is a way of life that is ours. There is also a time to hate but hate needs to be rightly directed. We hate sin and those things that contribute to sin. We hate the consequences of sin and the ramifications of it.

I've recently done several radio programs having to do with this cavalier petulant declaration of the loss of the life of a baby in New York, Rhode Island and now Virginia and the resulting impact of it. I praise the Lord that in our state of Alabama, the Supreme Court approved the rulings that have been established concerning the personhood of the child in the womb. We see this default line throughout our nation. As I was dealing with this matter I was not only emptied in my soul that we would have an elected official blithely speaking of infanticide – this is child sacrifice in this nation that has been visited by the hand of God with multiple revivals and awakenings yet under our watch the salt has lost its saltiness. The light is not shining with clarity, consistency, courage and compassion.

Therefore we find these bold, petulant, off-handed remarks concerning the destruction of life. There is this emptiness I felt in seeing what is happening with the curse of sin of what is under the sun. So there is this time to hate for I hate all that is related to the industry of death – the death in the womb, the death at the end of life and the death of the unwanted and inconvenient between the womb and life. That is where we are headed whenever man suppresses the truth in unrighteousness, in our sin and idolatry of ourselves. This is shaking our fist against God with all that is found in our soul and now we have a church that will gladly speak out on any issue that the culture is speaking out on but is amazingly silent on the issues the culture tells us to be silent on.

First of all, we have to stay on mission. As one of my mentors said 'the heart of the problem is the problem of the heart.' We need to have an evangelism and discipleship ministry of the Great Commission in which men and women are being brought to Christ and then being taught the whole counsel of God. This is teaching them to observe all that Christ has commanded. When men and women are properly evangelized and discipled you will be amazed at the ministries that will burgeon through those people out of the church of Jesus Christ into the society as salt that retards sin and the light that exposes sin. We also have to be an instrument of redeeming grace and common grace. So we feel this emptiness and see the vanity that is happening under the sun of man's rebellion that comes from it.

Pete Seeger is the one who wrote the song Turn, Turn, Turn (To Everything There is a Season) which is right out of Ecclesiastes 3:1–8 and everyone seemed to love the song until they found out it was taken from the Bible. The group the Byrds who did this song later are the ones who actually made it a best seller so now you have a case of God writing a best seller in the pop music field.

There are 14 stanzas in the first eight verses and each one has a positive and a negative. It is a statement of what you do and then a statement of the negative in what you do. What I think the writer is getting at here is what seems to be an unending and uncontrollable cycles that

control humanity. In my family, when we went to the movies we would go out afterwards and ask questions like what did the movie say, what was the world and life view and one of my daughters said one time after, ‘dad, can’t we just enjoy the movie?’ That’s what they want you to do when you go to the movies – just be entertained and watch what they pour into your mind without filtering it.

My wife and I never really had a real honeymoon and so this past year I wanted to do something more ‘honeymoony’ for our anniversary so I promised my wife it would not have anything to do with a battlefield or a cemetery. I told her to pick it and we’ll do it, but to me it is fun to exegete a cemetery. You might start seeing several who died on the same date so you think there must have been a plague here or an infant problem here or this or that but what you will likely see on most tombstones is a birthdate, a dash and then a death date. It’s interesting to note that you don’t have any control over the birthdate or the death date. One might think about the person who commits suicide and I would say the sovereign hand of God is still at work. Part of what the writer of Ecclesiastes is saying is that you really don’t have control of the dash. It is God who determines every season and every time.

We have recently celebrated our 50th wedding anniversary and we have been so blessed because of all the encouragement we have received but my wife said to me after ‘Honey, I’m not superstitious but I’m always aware that when God brings us up and encourages us there is going to be a season of adversity that comes with the seasons of blessings.’ I seemingly have no control of that situation but the writer here is saying that there is not only vanity in what seems to be repeated cycles that control you, you don’t control it. The seasons determine the planting and the harvesting, the gathering and the scattering. The seasons have been ordained by God. Now does that lead to greater vanity or could that lead to vitality?

Let’s look at the next section in Ecclesiastes 3:9–12 which says [9] *What gain has the worker from his toil?* [10] *I have seen the business that God has given to the children of man to be busy with.* [11] *He has made everything beautiful in its time. Also, he has put eternity into man's heart, yet so that he cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end.* [12] *I perceived that there is nothing better for them than to be joyful and to do good as long as they live;* [13] *also that everyone should eat and drink and take pleasure in all his toil—this is God's gift to man.*

He lays out this cyclical dynamic. He makes a presentation that the experience of life seemingly is cyclical and the times seem to control the man and his busyness. You’ve all heard the saying ‘what goes around comes around.’ Then he brings three statements of perspective. The first one is the seasons are in the hands of God and God brings beauty through them. What’s in our hands? When spring comes we plant. When summer comes we cultivate. When fall comes we harvest. When the winter comes let it rest. God brings the seasons and each one of them has a beauty to it.

As I was thinking on this I love Alabama because I get enough winter to have a season of it but not too much because I get tired of it in about 3 and half weeks. When we lived in Miami I loved being there but I did miss the seasons because we didn’t get much of a winter, if any. God brings the seasons into our lives and not just summer, fall, winter and spring but the seasons of life where you have seemingly more energy and when you need rest. God builds these cycles into your life and they have a beauty that God has assigned to it. When you step out of the season, out of the toil, under the sun and you look at it under the sovereign hand of God that has ordained the seasons for your toil, then you begin to see a beauty that God has put into it, not you. When you look at in its time and season then you know it is the hand of God.

The second perspective he gives is you see the sovereign hand of God with the awareness of eternity. See, you know it's not cyclical, for you know there is a beginning and an end here and there is an eternity you were made for. If you study the works of sociology and anthropology as you see the discovery of humanity of the primitive tribes you will be amazed at something. Every tribe they uncover has a 'week.' I wonder where that came from. They have some kind of a month, a season week, some kind of a year. They will have a holy day in the week and holy days throughout the year. Is this just mere luck that every humanity came up with that or is that a degraded existence of what God created initially? They don't have the right holy days or do the right things on the holy days and they don't use the week the way they ought to because of our sin nature, but there is still even under the curse, and under the sun, you still see the reflections of God's seasons in place.

They have also discovered that these tribes have a religion. It is not a Biblical or God of glory honoring religion, but there will be a religion. Where you go there is religion, worship and their believing. Now they're not believing what's right. They are not worshipping right or the One who is to be worshipped, but it's there because that's how they were sovereignly made. You will also find out that everyone you talk to has a sense of eternity that this is not all that there is.

My favorite time to share the Gospel is on an airplane especially after there has been some turbulence. Then I ask them 'do you think there's a heaven?' and when I have asked this I have never been told 'no,' not initially. If they are avowed atheist they will eventually gather their wits and realize that I have kind of drawn them in to something they didn't want to say and they will try to back track. One of my favorite ones was when I was talking with a scientist from Oxford where we tried for six hours to convince her she couldn't be a scientist if there wasn't a God. I remember when she said she thought there was a heaven and I said 'How do you think you get there?' She said 'I don't know but I will tell you unless I drown myself in Vodka I can't sleep at night trying to answer that question, then in my Vodka induced sleep I have nothing but nightmares all night.'

We see in Ecclesiastes 3:11 that *Also, he has put eternity into man's heart, yet so that he cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end.* Here is the sovereign statement that under the sun that's not all there is. Why is it that men and women are not settled? Why is it that they can't get out of their mind eternity? In my youth there were three key moments that I think God used later in my conversion. One was that marvelous part of the night of the gloaming when I was 10 years old. I love the gloaming part of the day where day is becoming night. The breeze is blowing and the lights are starting to shimmer. I looked up in the sky as the bright blue of the sky was getting a darker blue and soon to become a dark night. Then I began to see stars upon stars coming out. I remember being overwhelmed at the infinitude of the heavens and then the sense of eternity. The God who made that made me for eternity. Then I thought there is coming a day I'm going to die and what do I do between now and then? Then what will I do after that day when I die?

Then I had that same thought the next place we moved where I slept with about 14 blankets and the windows open. One night I couldn't sleep. It was quiet but I could hear the wind. I was laying on my side and I felt my heart beating. It struck me that there is a day that it won't beat. There is a beat that will be my last one. What day will that be? What should I do until that day? What will happen after that day?

I had that one more time when I was attending East Carolina University. I will not tell you the condition I was in when I was thinking through it this time. I was at the point of

dissipation in my rebellion against God and my emptiness had almost hit the bottom. I could almost hear that Peggy Lee song 'Is That All There Is?' which I think it was another attempt to put Ecclesiastes into music. I got up out of my bed and walked outside. I looked up and remember thinking just how empty everything was and how eternity was not far away from me. What is it and how is it that I will meet that day?

Do you know why this is true? When you talk with people they all have religion, they all worship and they all try to answer this eternity that is in their heart. The reason why we are restless here and sense the vanity is not only because of the curse of sin here, but we know we weren't made just for this here. We were made not for this world in its present condition for we have been born again for another world and it's called the new heavens and the new earth. It is with unfettered intimacy with the Lord who came to save us at the cross from our vanity and our sins.

The writer says a third thing in the last part of this Ecclesiastes 3:9–12 paragraph in verse 12 and that is there is something better coming for those who fear God. When you fear the One who made the sun and is above the sun then when you're under the sun all that you're experiencing can be beautiful for His glory when you are enjoying Him in it. *[31] So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God* (I Corinthians 10:31). But you can't know everything. God has made you and sovereignly designed you for something more than this and there is beauty in the seasons we toil in. God is with you so that while you are under the sun, the vanity doesn't dissipate but the vitality begins to overtake it as you enjoy not the toil or the seasons, but the Lord of the seasons and the toil in the midst of it. That's why the seasons and the toil are embraced. Now you can do this knowing God has a purpose and a plan.

I remember reading this in a commentary but can't remember which one. We are asking ourselves 'what is my place and purpose in the grand scheme of things?' But under the sun we have this question; 'is there a grand scheme of things?' When you know the God of glory you know it's not a scheme. It is a purpose and a plan to His praise and your joy in Him. So I thank God for the Westminster Shorter Catechism question number one which says, what is the chief end of man? The answer is man's chief end is to glorify God and enjoy Him forever. We are to glorify and trust Him under the sun. I can't know everything even though I want to know everything. In fact, I can't know unless God reveals to me what I need to know. Also I will never know God exhaustively. I can know Him intimately, personally and accurately as He reveals Himself in His creation and His Word. My frustration is not that I can't know everything but I want to know Him. I don't want to make my place under the sun but I want to embrace the place He has made for me under the sun, the One who created the sun.

The writer doesn't stop there. Ecclesiastes 3:14–15 says *[14] I perceived that whatever God does endures forever; nothing can be added to it, nor anything taken from it. God has done it, so that people fear before him. [15] That which is, already has been; that which is to be, already has been; and God seeks what has been driven away.*

You may say 'I can live to the glory of God' but you can only live to the glory of God to the ability that He has given you. You reflect His glory. You don't add to His glory and that becomes your great joy. Be careful of your language. I cringe every time I hear someone say 'we're in trouble in our culture because we've kicked God out of the classroom.' We don't kick God anywhere. You may punish people who speak of God or try to ignore Him or marginalize people who love Him. God can show up wherever He wants to however He wants to and besides that as long as there are math tests in school there will be prayer in the public school. That is terrible theology to say you have kicked God out. You have to get a right picture of God and

that is you are made in His image. He is not made in yours. You don't add to Him or take away from Him. You may sin against Him and bear His judgment but His glory will be supreme now and into eternity.

This God of glory, this God of might, this God who is majestic died before the foundation of the world. The sovereign appointment for God, what was done in time had already been decreed by the wisdom and sovereign hand of God. Let's continue in Ecclesiastes.

Ecclesiastes 3:16–22 says *[16] Moreover, I saw under the sun that in the place of justice, even there was wickedness, and in the place of righteousness, even there was wickedness. [17] I said in my heart, God will judge the righteous and the wicked, for there is a time for every matter and for every work. [18] I said in my heart with regard to the children of man that God is testing them that they may see that they themselves are but beasts. [19] For what happens to the children of man and what happens to the beasts is the same; as one dies, so dies the other. They all have the same breath, and man has no advantage over the beasts, for all is vanity. [20] All go to one place. All are from the dust, and to dust all return. [21] Who knows whether the spirit of man goes upward and the spirit of the beast goes down into the earth? [22] So I saw that there is nothing better than that a man should rejoice in his work, for that is his lot. Who can bring him to see what will be after him?*

There are two things he is saying in this last part of chapter 3. One is that ultimately justice is in the hands of God. Does that mean we should not be concerned about justice? Absolutely. God has set up government to punish evil doers and reward those who do good, but ultimately the answer to oppression, poverty and justice is only, finally and ultimately in the hands of God. While in these days we honor Him with justice everything will be settled on that Day, when all men stand before Him and men will bear the thoughts and intentions of their hearts. I believe we ought to strive for a just society and be about justice like in the sanctity of life matters, the sanctity of humanity – made in the image of God, say 'no' to racism and oppression, where people are properly rewarded when they work. We ask God increasingly to give us a just society. Micah 6:8 says *[8] He has told you, O man, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?* So we do justice but ultimately man will not bring the final verdict of justice, but God will.

Secondly, because of the curse of sin under the sun everybody dies. God made us from the dust and to the dust we return. The writer tells us he doesn't know all the details but he knows we have a spirit. Ecclesiastes 11 and 12 will tell us where the spirit of a man goes and that death is not the end of things but he says when we look out into society, under the curse of sin, everything living dies. How God handles all of that I do not know.

I do know that when you take your last breath there are two things that will happen. One is that you will go be with the Lord spiritually and two He isn't through with that body for He will raise to a new body for a new heavens and a new earth. We just don't know the details of it because we are dependent upon God's Word to reveal those things to us and God hasn't chosen to reveal the details of how it's done. Those things rest in the wisdom of God. Dust to dust is the curse of sin in this world and that will not change until God comes and brings all things to a consummation.

So in the meantime what should we do? Rejoice in that labor that takes place in the seasons of God. Don't try to do away with the vanity by your own remedies to the sin that brings meaninglessness in society. Death is inevitable. God has declared your eternity. God doesn't just solve justice on the last Day but He does it sometimes in these days.

I have a dear friend and his name is Joel. I've known him since I attended Covenant College and I thank the Lord for this fine churchman. I was talking to him about a situation he was involved with at one time. One pastor said he said this and another pastor said he said that. There were no witnesses. These pastors were both passionate and vehement about what they heard Joel say. Joel said this to them, 'My friends we have done all that we can do. I can't come to a verdict. He said 'he did' and he said 'he didn't' and we have no way to determine who said what. We have no other witnesses and so this day I say to you as a minister of the Gospel, God will bring the solution and the justice of this situation to light in the last Day but I want you to know I'm praying He will bring justice in these days before the last Day for the sake of His church.'

Within three years one of those pastors has prospered to see men and women come to Christ and grow in those ministries. The other is out of the ministry and is even questioning his faith. God will bring justice on the last Day but God can bring justice before the last Day. God can make the verdicts clear but ultimately it is God who brings justice which is why our courts have said 'God save this court.' God you bring the wisdom. We're grateful for the judge but don't put the trust in the judge. We're grateful for the jury but we don't put our trust in jury. We put all the systems in place but God alone is righteous and just.

Death is inevitable. Thomas Jefferson, George Washington, Babe Ruth, Abraham Lincoln – what do all these people have in common? They all died. If Jesus doesn't come back you will die. Between now and that day, when dust returns to dust, will you try to make a name for yourself or will you fear God, exalt His Name and enjoy Him in all the toil you do in the seasons He has ordained for you? That's the wisdom the preacher is calling us to.

All of vanity will not disappear on this side of eternity but the vitality of walking in the joy and fear of the Lord can be expressed even in the midst of the emptiness of a world under the curse of sin. Dust to dust but for the believer it's dust to glory. Let's pray.

Prayer:

Father, thank You so much for the time we could be together in Your Word. God we confess as many as gone before us this is not an easy Book but it's one that You have given us and You have given it for a purpose that we might think, live joyfully, passionately for the glory of God even among the dust of death. God bring the testimony of the joy of the Lord for those who fear the Lord and trust the Lord. God You made us. We have a birth date and we have an anticipated death date and You are the One who has given us how we live in-between with You and for You with the knowledge You have provided by what You have revealed in creation and Your Word and You have made us for a purpose. We don't make our own purpose. Father, in the midst of vanity we can know the vitality of walking with You and for You and in the midst of injustice we would seek Your justice but ultimately trust in the justice of God even as we would do justice by the grace of God. Father, we would also ask that in Your grace and mercy You might fill us to overflowing so that we don't just see life repetitively in the seasons and cycles but we see the beauty of the seasons and our toil for You knowing You have made us for something even better. I pray this in Jesus' Name, Amen.