

Suitable in God's Time

Ecclesiastes 3:1-22

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Prayer: *God, your Word guides our every step. Help us listen well, understand your message, that we may follow your will. Amen.*

Last week, we began our study of Ecclesiastes, one of the wisdom books in the Bible, along with Proverbs and Job. If you've ever felt skeptical, this is the book for you. It's filled with a critical and questioning tone. The main character, known as the Teacher or *Qohelet* in Hebrew, is someone who gathers an assembly, in this case, a group of students studying wisdom literature. The Teacher looks at life and observes many contradictions. He challenges traditional wisdom that claims to have all the answers.

For example, Proverbs says: *Live right and things will go well. The wicked will be cut off from the land* (Prov. 2:20–22). Ecclesiastes counters: *Not always. Sometimes the righteous suffer and the wicked thrive. Sometimes there is no justice. Life doesn't add up* (cf. Eccl. 3:16; 4:1).

Today, he might say, there's a glitch in the system. A technical malfunction. Things don't happen as you might expect. In that way, Ecclesiastes is almost an "anti-wisdom" book—unconventional, going against the grain, if you will.

There's a word that the Teacher uses throughout the book, occurring 38 times. It's the main concept in Ecclesiastes. The word is often translated as "vanity" or "meaningless." "But that doesn't quite capture the heart of the idea in Hebrew. The word is *hebel*. *Hebel* literally means "vapor," or "smoke." The basic idea is something that is fleeting. Something that evaporates, lasting for a very short time. Here today, gone tomorrow. Ephemeral. Temporary. That's the first meaning of *hebel*.

A second idea of *hebel* is "enigma." Life is a paradox. Or as Winston Churchill once said, "It is an enigma, wrapped in a puzzle, within a conundrum," or some variation of the saying as he described the Soviet Union.

Life, says the Teacher, is an enigma. Like smoke or vapor, it appears solid, but when you try to grab or hold onto it, there's nothing there. As he observes life, he sees a lot of beauty and goodness in the world, but just when you're starting to enjoy it, tragedy strikes. And death comes to us. And it seems to blow it all away. Or take justice as another example. We pursue justice and expect everyone to be treated fairly. But bad things happen to good people and the innocent all the time.

So life is unpredictable, unstable, or in the words of the Teacher, "a chasing after the wind." *Hebel*.

The Teacher says he tried everything to find meaning and purpose in life. He pursued wisdom. He indulged in pleasure. He built grand projects. He has amassed great wealth. But in the end, he says: "*I considered all that my hands had done... and all was [hebel], a chasing after wind*" (2:11).

So he concludes: Enjoy life. *Eat, drink, and be merry*, because life is fleeting—here today, gone tomorrow. Savor the simple pleasures while you can, for they are gifts from the hand of God (2:24).

Today, as we continue our study of Ecclesiastes, we turn to chapter 3, perhaps its most famous passage, especially the first eight verses. Many Baby Boomers will remember Peter Seeger's 1959 song *Turn, Turn, Turn*, made popular by the *Byrds* in the mid-1960s during the Vietnam War.

*To everything, turn, turn, turn.
There is a season, turn, turn, turn.
And a time to every purpose under heaven*

*A time to be born, a time to die...
A time to plant, a time to reap.
A time to kill, a time to heal
A time to laugh, a time to weep.*

Except for the title and the last two lines, the lyrics are more or less a direct quote from chapter three's first eight verses.

"For everything, there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven" (3:1).

Time was a favorite topic among wisdom writers.¹ The passage describes a series of opposing events—a time to be born and a time to die, a time to weep and a time to laugh—that are all part of a larger, unalterable pattern.

The Teacher believes that everything has its time. A certain *determinism*, if you will. He refers to this phenomenon as "time." And behind this *determinism* is a divine power. God is behind it. Humans cannot alter or control this divine schedule; they must simply submit to it.²

This contrasts sharply with the idea of pure randomness, such as the feather in the movie *Forrest Gump*. Stuff just happens to Forest Gump, which is symbolized by the feather floating in the air and then landing on his feet. No rhyme or reason.

While Ecclesiastes affirms that there is a divinely appointed time for everything, it does not explain *why* these events occur. Life is a mystery. And human wisdom is limited. We cannot fully comprehend it.

And at the end of the book, the author, who is a separate person from the Teacher, softens the blow of the Teacher's harsh and unconventional wisdom by saying, "Fear God, and keep his commandments, for that is the whole duty of everyone. For God will bring every deed into judgment, including every secret thing, whether good or evil" (12:13-14). The idea is to make us humble. We don't know everything. We can never understand the mysteries of life. Human wisdom is limited.

So, there's the answer to the issue of finding purpose and meaning in life. But it's from the author of Ecclesiastes, not from the Teacher, who is the main voice in the book. But that's jumping ahead to next Sunday's sermon, the last in this sermon series.

Meanwhile, in verse 9 in our passage today in chapter three, the writer asks the obvious question: If God determines all moments, what is the point of human effort? The answer is sobering—people will never fully understand the futility of their anxious striving because our understanding is limited:

¹ Sirach 39:16-34; Ecclesiastes 3:14-15.

² ² Diane Bergant, *What Are They Saying About Wisdom Literature?* (Ramsey, NJ: Paulist Press, 1984), 58.

“[God] has made everything suitable for its time; moreover, he has put a sense of past and future into their minds, yet they cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end” (3:11).

Since human history is predetermined (3:2–8) and our knowledge is finite, the Teacher offers this simple advice: enjoy life while you can.

“I know that there is nothing better for them than to be happy and enjoy themselves as long as they live,” (v. 12) says the Teacher.

This theme of enjoying life while we can repeats throughout the book. The Teacher’s central message is that we should appreciate the simple joys of life, for these, too, are from the hand of God—divine gifts.

This doesn’t mean living a reckless or irresponsible life. He’s not advocating hedonism; instead, he wants us to embrace the present and find contentment in everyday blessings.

He also wants us to stop and really consider the march of time. While we develop technology and build nations or empires that rise and fall, the natural world—like a mountain or the ocean—endures. The mountains were there before us and will still be there long after we’re gone. The ocean waves will continue to wash to the shore, and the sun will rise and set daily. No one will remember what you did a hundred years from now, but the cycle of nature will continue. And so, ultimately, time will erase us and all our accomplishments from memory.

And if that’s not disheartening enough, the Teacher also talks about death. Death, he says, is the great equalizer. Death comes to us all, no matter who we are—rich or poor, the young or old, righteous or wicked.

So with these two concepts—the march of time and death—the Teacher warns us against pinning our hopes on our accomplishments. You think you can find meaning and fulfillment in building a career or becoming rich and famous, and working so hard, think about the stress and the toll these take on your life, the anxiety, and the sleepless nights. Or maybe you think pleasure will make life worth it. But that, too, is fleeting. *Hebel*. You may go on vacations, party all weekend, but Monday always comes. *Hebel*.

What a sobering thought! I know. But that’s the reality. God determines time, sets all the moments. And we can never change that. The Teacher

says, “What has been is what will be, and what has been done is what will be done” (1:9).

The Teacher’s point is that we should accept this reality and find solace and meaning in the present moment. He says many of our pursuits for meaning and purpose—such as material wealth, status, and power—ultimately have no lasting meaning or significance.

So again, his advice is: *enjoy life while you can!* For everything is *hebel*. Temporary. Life is a puzzle. And human knowledge is limited. We can never understand life and all its mysteries.

So, eat, drink, and be merry! Go down to the beach. Sip some margarita or tequila. Climb a mountain or hike a trail. Enjoy the beauty around you. Can you say amen to that?

Well, let’s hear some reactions or questions.