

Breaking The Monotony Of Life

Ecclesiastes 3

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Everyday we're bombarded with advertisements telling us how to be successful and happy: join this dating site, buy this car, get this insurance, go on this diet, brush your teeth with this toothpaste to get white teeth. On and on and on the list goes of things you need to do to be happy. All it does is depress us, because we can't meet the standards and requirements of the world.

How do we find purpose and meaning in life? How do we break the monotony of life? Those questions we will find answered in Ecclesiastes 3. Solomon is looking at life "under the sun," and he concludes that "all is vanity." Chapter 1, verses 1-3 say, "The words of the Preacher, the son of David, king in Jerusalem. 'Vanity of vanities,' says, the Preacher; 'Vanity of vanities, all is vanity.' What profit has a man from all his labor in which he toils under the sun?"

"The Preacher" is King Solomon. He is "the son of David" and "king in Jerusalem." Solomon is in kind of a backslidden state as he looks at the world "under the sun," verse 3. That's one of the key phrases to understanding Ecclesiastes. Solomon comes to the conclusion, in verses 1-2, that "all is vanity," all is emptiness. He goes on later to say it is vexation of spirit. If you're looking at life without God, life becomes vain, meaningless and empty.

The monotony of life, the vanity of man's wisdom, the emptiness of worldly pleasure and the certainty of death, in chapters 1-2, caused Solomon to conclude that life was not worth living. Now in chapter 3, Solomon takes a closer look at the monotony of life. He discovers three factors that God uses to keep our lives from becoming monotonous and meaningless. These are three factors that will break you from the monotony of life and give you purpose and meaning to your life.

The first is that God is in control of the times and seasons of our lives. As you look at the world around you, you may not feel that God is in control, or you might conclude that if God is in control, you're not happy with God right now. You don't know what God is doing and why He's doing it. You question if God knows what He's doing. Have you ever thought these things? "God, do you know what You're doing? God, do You see what's going on? God, what's happening here?" You need to be careful not to judge God by circumstances. But rather judge your circumstances by who God is; that God loves you, and He has a purpose and a plan for your life.

Ecclesiastes 3:1 says, "To everything there is a season, a time for every purpose under heaven." Notice the words "season" and "time." He uses the word "time" 28 times in chapter 3. God has your times, and God is controlling your seasons. We all know that life has seasons to it. There is the winter season, the spring season, the summer season and the fall season. All of these seasons come through our lives. Solomon saw that there is an appropriate time and season, verse 1, for all of life's experiences.

You want to add spice to your life? See God in everything. See beyond the mundane, the temporal, the material. See the hand of God. See how He led you, how He is directing you, how He protects you, how He is providing for you, how He is guiding you.

As I went over this sermon this week, I did a lot of reflecting on my own life; how God has led me and guided me and protected me and watched over me and provided for me. It's been a blessing to see God's hand in my life. I believe the same is true of every one of us.

It's sad that many people live by the philosophy of fatalism. There are a lot of fatalists today. Remember that old song,

"Que sera, sera.

Whatever will be, will be.

The future's not ours to see.

Que sera, sera.

What will be, will be."

We don't know what the future holds, and whatever it holds, it's going to be, and we can't change it. So some live with this kind of fatalistic mentality.

There are also those who live by the philosophy of pessimism. It's not that they are pessimists; it's just that they have a philosophy of life that is pessimistic. Everything "under the sun" is vain and vexation of spirit.

The great British preacher, J. Campbell Morgan, said, "Only when the soul looks out upon the circumstances, from the standpoint of fellowship with God and knowledge of Him, can it be optimistic." I love that. Only as you look at the circumstances of your life and you think about God, can you see God working and meditate on Him. Then you can be optimistic, knowing that it's not up to blind chance or fate but that God is actually in control.

Don't try to understand God by your circumstances. Rather understand your circumstances by God. When there are earthquakes, tornadoes, hurricanes, floods, wars and famines, don't try to interpret God by those things or blame God for them. Sometimes we call them "acts of God" when God had nothing to do with them. You need to understand who God is. God is love and has a plan and purpose for your life.

Here are the well-known verses that Solomon said, in verses 2-8: The whole focus in these verses is that there is a time and a season for every phase of our lives. He said there is, "A time to be born, and a time to die; a time to plant, and a time to pluck what is planted; a time to kill, and a time to heal; a time to break down, and a time to build up; a time to weep..."—we know that all so well—"...and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance; a time to

cast away stones, and a time to gather stones; a time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing; a time to gain, and a time to lose; a time to keep, and a time to throw away; a time to tear, and a time to sew; a time to keep silence, and a time to speak..."—I wish I knew when that was—"...a time to love, and a time to hate; a time of war, and a time of peace."

I studied all these in preparation for this sermon, and I want to admit that you can't really know for sure, in all these 14 contrasts, what Solomon meant. We know what he meant in a few of them. We know what he means by "a time to be born, and a time to die." You don't control those two times in your life; you don't control the day of your birthday, and you don't know the day of your death. The Bible says, "It is appointed for men to die once." Everyone has an appointment with death. We do not know when that will be. No one knows the day of their death. Only God knows. We didn't know when we would be born either; we had no control over the date.

Kids sometimes get upset with their parents and say, "Why did you have me?! Why was I ever born?!" I've even heard adults say, "Why was I ever born?!" They are frustrated with being born. They don't want to celebrate their birthday, because it bums them out that they're even here.

So you have no control over your birthday or the day of your death. The focus is that you must rely on God; God is the one who is in control.

Also, there is "a time to plant, and a time to pluck what is planted." That's an agricultural concept, no doubt. Again, there is a time and a season to plant; you must plant at the right time. There's a time to plant, and there's a time to harvest. There's a time of sowing, and there's a time of reaping.

Solomon said there is, "a time to kill, and a time to heal." We don't know what kind of killing he is talking about, but the Bible teaches that it's okay to have capital punishment—"eye for eye, tooth for tooth." If someone kills someone, capital punishment can be instituted by the government. The Bible also says there is a cause for a just war. But then Solomon says there's "a time to heal."

There is "a time to break down, and a time to build up." We're not certain what Solomon meant by that.

We understand what he meant by "a time to weep, and a time to laugh." Even Jesus was "a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief." Did you know that God keeps your tears in a bottle? He knows every tear that drops from your eyes. But there is also "a time to laugh." God balances out our lives.

There is "a time to mourn" the loss of a loved one, and there is "a time to dance." Not only have I experienced my own sorrow, grief and joy, but as a pastor, I live it through the congregation. Sometimes I will perform a funeral in the morning and then a wedding in the afternoon. I remember one day I went early to a hospital and met with a young couple who had to take a

two-year-old off of life support. I wept and prayed with them. Then I went over to the church and did a wedding and celebrated with them. Then a couple knocked on my door that afternoon who had marital problems, needed prayer and needed my help. All that in one day. And sometimes I'll have even more packed into one day. So life is full of seasons and circumstances. We "weep" and we "laugh." We "mourn" and we "dance." Even Jesus wept at the grave of Lazarus. He was a man "acquainted with grief."

Verse 5 says, "a time to cast away stones, and a time to gather stones." Israel is a very rocky place. The Jews had a saying that when God was distributing the rocks, He gave them all to one angel. He told the angel to go throughout the earth and distribute the rocks evenly. But the angel tripped and fell in Israel, and all the rocks fell there. So when the land was farmed, they first had to clear away the rocks. They used the rocks to build walls and homes.

"A time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing." Some Hebrew scholars feel this is a reference to intimacy within a marriage relationship.

"A time to gain, and a time to lose," verse 6; and "a time to keep, and a time to throw away." This is a clean-your-closet-out type of thing. Wives, this is a good verse to use when you want your husband to clean out the garage. There's a "time to throw away"; it's in the Bible. There's a time to clean, a time to keep that which you have and a time to give away.

There's also "a time to tear..."—which is probably a reference to tearing their garments in mourning—"...and a time to sew," a time to sew up their clothes.

"A time to keep silence, and a time to speak." We need to learn that lesson. "Lord, put a guard around my mouth." We usually speak when we should keep silent, and we are silent when we should speak.

There's "a time to love, and a time to hate; a time of war, and a time of peace." So we should love the things that God loves and hate the things that God hates.

There are some lessons to learn from these verses. Number one, the Bible teaches that God providentially watches over us. The word "providence" is not in the Bible, but the concept is. This is not fate, but it's faith in God's love and God's care. Jesus talked about it in Matthew 6:26, 28-30 where He said, "Look at the birds of the air, for they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns; yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they?" "Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin; and yet I say to you that even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these....O you of little faith." You have a Father in heaven—if you are a Christian—who has promised to provide, protect, guide and take care of you.

In Psalm 139:16, David is talking to God. He said, "Your eyes saw my substance, being yet unformed. And in Your book they all were written, the days fashioned for me, when as yet there were none of them." A question that the world debates today is whether or not that unformed child in the womb is a human being. The answer is "Yes," from the moment of conception.

Even if it's not fully developed, is an amputee a human? Yes. Someone without arms or legs is still a human. How many arms or legs you have has nothing to do with your humanity.

David said that even before he was formed in the womb, all of his days had been ordained by God. All of his days: the bad days, the good days, the tearful days, the laughing days, the mourning days. God knows how to balance our lives. If our lives were all full of sunshine, we would all be deserts. God has to send the rain so that our lives would grow. Difficulties are good for us; they teach us to depend on God, to be humble and sympathetic toward others. So God ordained all our days; He's written them in His book.

The key is seeing God at every turn and at every season of life. Maybe you're empty-nesters. Maybe you have grandchildren. Maybe you're in your sunset years, and you're wondering what your life has been all about, what's the purpose of your life. Then maybe you can look back and see God's plan throughout your life.

Maybe you're young and wondering what the future holds. I don't have any better advice for a young person than to "seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness," and God will take care of the rest. "Remember now your Creator in the days of your youth." God is supposed to be a part of your plans, your goals and your ambition.

Job had a bad day. One day he lost all his children, all his possessions and ultimately he lost his health and all his wealth. The only thing he had left was his wife. He turned to his wife for encouragement and she said, "Curse God and die!"

"Thank you, sweetheart. I needed that encouragement." It's always awesome to have your wife encourage you right when you need it. She was interpreting God by the circumstances.

But Job responded, in Job 1:21, "Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked shall I return there. The Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord."

You want to live a life that's not boring? In everything that comes into your life, say, "Bless the Lord. Praise the Lord." I remember when my mother died, for three days we watched her breathing slow down, and we knew she was going to die. Then finally she stopped breathing. The moment she died, my Dad started giving thanks to God. He praised the Lord and thanked the Lord. Through his tears, he had this thankful and grateful heart.

He taught me the lesson that when these kinds of things happen in our lives, we should turn immediately to God. When I don't understand, when I don't comprehend, when I don't know why I'm weeping right now, I go to God. Rather than turning from God, I turn to God. If you want to become better rather than bitter, you turn to God. There is a saying that "The same sun that melts wax hardens clay." It's not your circumstances, it's how you respond to your circumstances that's important. One person turns to God and is soft, pliable and blesses the Lord, the other person can harden their heart and turn away from God.

At the end of Job's life, he said, "He knows the way that I take; when He has tested me, I shall

come forth as gold.” I love that. Years ago I found a poem I have never forgotten. It’s called The Divine Weaver. It summarizes what we just read. The author is unknown.

“My life is but a weaving

Between my Lord and me.

I cannot choose the colors

He weaveth steadily.

Oftentimes He weaveth sorrow, (
And I in foolish pride, (
Forgetteth He seeth the upper (
And I the underside. (
(
Not till the loom is silent (
And the shuttles cease to fly (
Shall God unroll the canvas (
And explain the reason why. (
(
The dark threads are as needful (
In the weaver's skillful hand (
As the threads of gold and silver (
In the pattern He has planned.”

How true that is. Not until we get to heaven and we look back, will we understand what God’s purpose and plan really were in our lives. So God knows the way that we take, and He has a perfect plan. Our seasons and times are in His hands.

The second thing you need to do to break the monotony of life is to understand that God has put eternity in every human heart. There is a beyond waiting for everyone. Notice it in verses 9-14. “What profit has the worker from that in which he labors?” He is asking the same question that he asked in chapter 1, verse 3: “What profit has a man from all his labor in which he toils under the sun?” Here in verse 9, he is asking, “What good is it?”

In verse 9, he notices the problem. He says, “I have seen the God-given task with which the sons of men are to be occupied. He has made everything beautiful in its time.” That’s a great statement. It’s all about His time. “Also He has put eternity in their hearts, except that no one can find out the work that God does from beginning to end. I know that nothing is better for them than to rejoice, and to do good in their lives, and also that every man should eat and drink and enjoy the good of all his labor—it is the gift of God. I know that whatever God does, it shall be forever. Nothing can be added to it, and nothing taken from it. God does it, that men should fear before Him.” So Solomon saw the problem; life was hard and full of travail, yet he still saw that life was a gift from God.

Have you thanked God for even the bitter things in life? God uses them for your good and for His glory.

There are some lessons we can draw from this. Number one, life is a gift from God. Notice the statement in verse 10: "God-given." So even the hardships, the trials, the problems are from God. In 2 Corinthians 12, Paul said, "A thorn in the flesh was given to me." It was given to him by God. You might strictly say that God didn't actually give it to him, but He allowed it to come into his life. It may not be directly from God, but sovereignly, God was watching over Paul's circumstances, and He allowed it, "a messenger of Satan to buffet me." God has a purpose for it; He didn't want Paul to be proud, but He wanted him to be humble. "Lest I should be exalted above measure by the abundance of the revelations," this "messenger of Satan" was sent to "buffet me." The plan was that he was to stay humble, so he could stay dependent on God and rely upon God.

That's how in my own life I've been able—and it's not always easy—to thank God for the bitter things, for the problems. They drive me to my knees. They show me how weak I am and how much I need God. They make me long for heaven. That's a good thing. So God brings these things into our lives.

Life is a gift from God. If we accept life as a gift and thank God for it, we will better handle the burdens that come our way. But if we grudgingly turn from God, we will miss the gracious gifts of God that He has given to us to enjoy. Life is a gift from God.

Secondly, God has put eternity in our hearts. I love the statement in verse 11, "He has put eternity in their hearts." That means that God has made us for Himself. "He has made everything beautiful in its time." Put that alongside Romans 8:28, which says, "And we know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are the called according to His purpose."

We are greater than the mundane and the temporal. Man is not an animal. The worst thing that society could ever do is to teach that we are the product of evolution. That is such a lie. You are not an accident. You are not here by a mistake. We are made in the image and likeness of God. That means that we have the capacity to know God. It means we are moral beings; we have the capacity to know right from wrong. It means that we will live for eternity, either in heaven or in hell. It means we have the ability to reason and to think.

Man is the only creature that blushes. You don't see a squirrel blush. We are the only creatures who think in the abstract and enjoy the arts and beauty. We are made in God's image and in God's likeness. We were given the gift of speech, the gift of music, the gift of reason. We are moral beings. All of this is in the image of God. So if you only live for the mundane and the temporal, life will not be worth living.

Jesus said in Matthew 4:4, resisting Satan's temptation to turn the stones into bread, "Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God," quoting from

Deuteronomy. But that's what people are trying to do without God. So the more we look to God and walk in fellowship with God, the more we will enjoy life. God brings joy to us now. Verse 12 has the words "rejoice" and "do good." Verse 13 has the phrase "enjoy the good." Verse 14 says, "fear" God. So we rejoice, do good, enjoy life now and fear God. What a blessing that is. Christianity isn't just "pie in the sky in the sweet by and by." Christianity is joy now. It's peace now. It's fulfillment now, knowing God and walking with Him.

There is a third element or facet that breaks the monotony of life. This may not be as easy to understand. It's in verses 15-22. It's the idea that one day, God will judge everyone. You say, "That's supposed to help me break the monotony of life?" Yes, because the idea here is that God will right all wrongs. Have you ever looked at the world and say, "It's not fair"? Have you seen injustice in the law system and in the courtroom? Have you ever been ripped off and said, "This isn't right! This isn't fair"? You know they're not going to be punished, and they aren't going to jail, but one day God will right all wrongs. He will sit in judgment of all the earth.

Notice verse 16. He said, "Moreover I saw under the sun: In the place of judgment..."—that is, "the courtroom"—"...wickedness was there; and in the place of righteousness, iniquity was there." Solomon is saying that he looked into the courts, where there should have been righteousness, but he saw that it was wrong. He saw wickedness, and there wasn't any righteousness. Everything seemed so unjust. He saw the injustices in verse 16, and then in verse 17, he saw that God will right all wrongs. Here's the key verse: "I said in my heart, 'God shall judge the righteous and the wicked, for there is a time there for every purpose and for every work.'" So God has a time to judge. He's still thinking in terms of the times and seasons of life. If everything has a time and a season and it's all under God's providential care, life has purpose.

But he's saying that God will judge the righteous and the wicked. The Bible clearly teaches that every human being one day will stand before God. If you are a Christian, you won't stand before God and be judged for your sin; that's already been dealt with when you trusted Christ, your sins were forgiven and Jesus paid your penalty on the Cross. But you will stand before God or Christ and be judged for your service—how you spent your time, your talent and what you did with your treasure, and how you lived your life. You're going to give an account to God for the words you spoke and the things that you did.

If you're not a Christian, you're going to stand before God in judgment. It will be in condemnation. The books will be opened, your name does not appear in the Book of Life and you will be cast into the "lake of fire." It burns with brimstone forever. It's what we call "hell." It's eternal. So there are only two destinations. Every one of us will stand in judgment before God.

One of the reasons we have so much wickedness in the world today is because we have no fear of God before our eyes. I believe it would help if we had a fear of God, if we realized that we will have to give an account to God of our lives—if I murder, if I commit adultery, if I lie, if I steal. I'm going to give an account to God someday. If you live your life with this understanding that you will have to reckon with and give an account to God, it brings purpose and meaning

into life.

Solomon also saw that men die, verses 18-21, just as beasts do. “I said in my heart, ‘Concerning the condition of the sons of men, God tests them, that they may see that they themselves are like animals.’ For what happens to the sons of men...”—he’s referring to death —“...also happens to animals; one thing befalls them: as one dies, so dies the other. Surely, they all have one breath; man has no advantage over animals, for all is vanity. All go to one place: all are from the dust, and all return to dust. Who knows the spirit of the sons of men, which goes upward, and the spirit of the animal, which goes down to the earth?”

Now don’t misinterpret these verses, as some cult groups do, that death is the cessation of existence. The word “death” basically means “separation.” It doesn’t mean “cessation.” When you die, you’re still around. You just leave your body. Actually, physical death is the immaterial part of you—your soul and your spirit—leaving your body. Spiritual death or eternal death, on the other hand, is separation from God.

Just like an animal dies, so does a human being. Now this is just my theory, but I don’t believe that animals have an eternal soul like human beings. We have an immaterial part of us that animals don’t have. I get asked if our pets will be in heaven. Don’t ask me that; okay? I know you love your dog and you want to pet him through all eternity, but when you get to heaven you’re not going to ask, “Where’s Spot?!” No; you’re going to be looking at Jesus! Who’s going to be looking for their dog when you’ll be looking at Jesus! “Who knows the spirit of the sons of men, which goes upward, and the spirit of the animal, which goes down to the earth?” We don’t know.

But there are two things we do know: number one, both man and animals die; and number two, both of our bodies go back to the dirt. That’s what Solomon is saying in this passage. The Bible has what’s called “progressive revelation.” So certainly, Solomon writing here in Ecclesiastes “under the sun,” he doesn’t understand the full revelation of the fact that Jesus came, Jesus died, Jesus rose and that He is “the resurrection and the life” beyond the grave. 1 Corinthians 15 talks about hope beyond the grave, so we know what the Bible teaches about that doctrine. But as Solomon looked around the world, he saw that the animals die just as man dies. Just as they go back to the dust, we go back to the dust. But you need to look beyond that and understand that there is hope beyond the grave.

Right now, God is working His providence in our lives. I was reading the story of Ruth Graham, the wife of Billy Graham. It said that she was driving through the mountains one day and came upon a detour sign. She was steered off the main highway, and she followed all the detour signs for several minutes. Finally she saw the last sign in the detour. It read, “End of construction. Thank you for your patience.” When she went home she said to her husband, “Billy, I know what I want put on my tombstone when I die.” Sure enough, when you visit the grave of Ruth Graham, on the tombstone it says, “End of construction. Thank you for your patience.” How cool is that!

So there will come a day when our construction will end, and God will take us to heaven. The Bible says, "To be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord." Paul says, "I have a desire to depart and be with Christ, which is far better."

That adds purpose and meaning to life. Someone said, "You're not ready to live until you're ready to die." When you know where you're going to go when you die, you're ready to enjoy life.

In summary, let me say three things. First, God has a purpose and plan for your life. Believe it. The joy and the sorrows were all written in His book before we were ever born. Secondly, God has made you for eternity. You were made for more than just the temporal. "That which is seen is temporal; that which is unseen is eternal." Set your mind and affections on things of God and on eternity. Thirdly, God will bring you to judgment. We will one day give an account to God.

Amen.