

## “Is There Purpose to What We Do?”

### *Ecclesiastes 3*

This year our theme has been ‘Understanding the Times’. We took that phrase from 1 Chron. 12:32 where we read that the sons of Issachar ‘understood the times and knew what Israel should do.’ Which was for the 12 tribes to be united together under King David once and for all so that God’s people would be united.

We also saw the need to understand each person is needed for ministry from the wall building in Neh. 3. We looked at our need to speak up for the oppressed in society fro Prov. 31. We learned from Eph. 5 that we live in evil times but we can redeem the evil for good and live for God’s glory. We learned from Jesus in John 4 to understand that it’s always a spiritual harvest season where people can be brought to Christ. And from Moses’ mother Jochabed on Mother’s Day and Noah on Father’s Days we learned that even though the time we live is not much better than theirs, it doesn’t mean we can’t be godly parents and live righteous lives.

As we mark Thanksgiving today we’re going to look at our time on earth from a more general perspective. Maybe as you reflect on what it is your thankful for you’re thinking about the usual things; family, God’s provisions, job, health, etc. But is that all we can come up with? What about thanking God for your life, your existence, your purpose? Do you struggle with understanding your purpose; why you and I are here?

Solomon wrote Ecclesiastes to record his own struggle with understanding our earthly purpose. The book can seem dismal at times and can be easily taken out of context if we’re not careful. You can’t understand Ecclesiastes if you don’t know how Solomon concluded the book. There he concludes that the purpose in life is to

*12:13 Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man. <sup>14</sup> For God will bring every deed into judgment, with every secret thing, whether good or evil.*

Fearing God is the beginning of wisdom, he also wrote in Prov. 1:7. To fear God means to be so in awe and stunned by the immensity of God’s love for you and His power over your life, that you are afraid not to follow Him. There are many passage which shows this but I’ll just show you one for now. Jer. 33:7-9,

*<sup>7</sup> I will restore the fortunes of Judah and the fortunes of Israel, and rebuild them as they were at first. <sup>8</sup> I will cleanse them from all the guilt of their sin against me, and I will forgive all the guilt of their sin and rebellion against me. <sup>9</sup> And this city shall be to me a name of joy, a praise and a glory before all the nations of the earth who shall hear of all the good that I do for them. They shall fear and tremble because of all the good and all the prosperity I provide for it.*

Jeremiah had been predicting the destruction of Jerusalem. Yet also that God in His grace was promising Israel a complete future restoration in their land where God will fulfil all His promises in an amazing way. And they will just shake their heads in wonder because they couldn’t see it for all the bad things that happened to them in life. Yet God brought them these blessings. That’s a great way to introduce Ecclesiastes and seeing God’s purpose for your life.

The book of Ecclesiastes records Solomon's pursuit of meaning in life. He states 38 times in the book about things he has observed "under the sun". From an 'what-I-can-see-with-my-eyes-on-earth-only perspective. So he begins saying

*Meaningless! Meaningless!" says the Teacher. "Utterly meaningless! Everything is meaningless." <sup>3</sup> What do people gain from all their labors at which they toil under the sun?*

He begins Ch. 1 saying nothing ever changes. There's nothing new under the sun. We live, we die, we are not remembered. If this is true, Solomon says in 1:12-14 then it's like chasing after the wind. So he decided to experiment and see if he could find meaning in the things people look for meaning in life. In pleasure and alcohol (2:1-3), in great building projects (2:4-6), in amassing wealth and the physical pleasures wealth gives (2:7-10), none which satisfied (2:10). So he pursued philosophy and wisdom but that almost drove him mad because he didn't see how it changed his lot over the fool. So he says in 2:17 'I hated life' because nothing I do satisfies, and all my accomplishments will be left to others who might destroy what I did. So when he looks at life from an under the sun/without God perspective he concludes in 2:22

*<sup>22</sup> What do people get for all the toil and anxious striving with which they labor under the sun? <sup>23</sup> All their days their work is grief and pain; even at night their minds do not rest. This too is meaningless.*

However, since he does know God, he looks at life from God's perspective and reassures the reader saying,

*<sup>24</sup> A person can do nothing better than to eat and drink and find satisfaction in their own toil. This too, I see, is from the hand of God, <sup>25</sup> for without him, who can eat or find enjoyment? <sup>26</sup> To the person who pleases him, God gives wisdom, knowledge and happiness, but to the sinner he gives the task of gathering and storing up wealth to hand it over to the one who pleases God. This too is meaningless, a chasing after the wind.*

He now distinguishes the purpose of the person who pleases God vs. the sinner. And he continually goes back and forth in the book seeing life from these two perspectives. With this in mind he begins Ch. 3 with an introductory thesis statement about God's control over our lives:

*There is a time for everything, and a season for every activity under heaven:*

And he picks this up again in vv.9-11 but in vv.2-8 he writes a poem about the seasons of life. And he makes this 'under-the-sun'

## **Observation: Life is a Continuous Cycle of Seasons that We Have Little Control Over (3:2-8)**

This poem consists of 7 pairs of contrasting opposite seasons, 7 doubled indicating this is complete statement. He begins with birth and death, then mentions planting and harvesting, hurting and healing, mourning and weeping, building and tearing down, loving and not loving, searching and giving away, etc. Without spending a lot of time on these verses Solomon is essentially saying life is full of ups and downs over repeated seasons. We go through seasons in life. Birth and death and everything in between.

At different times we are building; an education, a family, a career, a home, retirement. At other times we are quitting/downsizing all those things. We rejoice at births of children and

grandchildren while in-between we mourn at the losses of family and friends. At times we're very busy raising a family, maintaining a job and home, later we're emptying our home, using our non-work time for our children's family's. And no matter where we are in life – in school, young and single, married with babies, midlife, retired, repeating the same cycles of joys and sorrows in all these we are looking for purpose an all of it. Or better, as Solomon will conclude, are we finding God's purpose in the everyday cycle of life?

What young person sitting in school hasn't looked around and wondered is this all there is? What's the point of this? What young parent in the chaos of unrest hasn't wondered is there a purpose to changing all these diapers and making meals and helping with homework? What successful person who has supposedly reached the pinnacle of their life asked, is this all there is? I thought I would be more content and happy?

So Solomon frames this seemingly endless cycle of seasons in life with v.1 and vv.9-11,

*There is a time for everything, and a season for every activity under the heavens:*

*<sup>9</sup> What do workers gain from their toil? <sup>10</sup> I have seen the burden God has laid on the human race. <sup>11</sup> He has made everything beautiful in its time. He has also set eternity in the human heart; yet no one can fathom what God has done from beginning to end.*

And the words for time in v.1 and 11 mean "appointed" times. Appointed by who? God. With the premise from 2:24-26 that you only understand your purpose if you know God. Solomon says if you only like look at life from an 'under the sun only' perspective, you will conclude that it seems pointless, a recurring cycle of ups and downs in life about things I can't control much of. But vv.1, 9-11 is a

## **Explanation: However, Understand that in God** **Everything Has Purpose** **(3:1, 9-11)**

Because if there is an appointed time for all the things that happen to us or we experience in life, and God is the sovereign appointer of these things, then God has a purpose in them for me.

***Even though I can't see it now (vv.9-10)***

*<sup>9</sup> What do workers gain from their toil? <sup>10</sup> I have seen the burden God has laid on the human race.*

He repeats the question what do we get out of all our labour on earth (1:3), because we can't always see what God is doing in our life at the time because we're under the sun and He's above the sun. Through time and experience and consistently living by faith, we at times can see God's hand through events and experiences and understand even if unclearly how He has used a good or a bad situation to move us in a direction we weren't going, to save us from potential suffering or to even use suffering to draw us to Himself and to reveal Him to others. But its hard to see what God is doing when you can't see life from His vantage point at that moment or in that season.

But we still ask why, what's God's purpose in this? And even for the unbeliever who asks 'Why am I here?', 'What's my purpose?' even though we may not see it now

***Yet, our desire to find meaning points us Godward (v.11)***

<sup>11</sup> He has made everything beautiful in its time. He has also set eternity in the human heart; yet no one can fathom what God has done from beginning to end.

Why do we even ask that question? Because God has set eternity in our hearts. What does that mean? It means we were made for something more than what's under the sun. We were uniquely created by God. We are not wired to only find satisfaction in that which we only see. That's why nothing ultimately satisfies us, even if you reach the top, even if you accomplish that lifetime goal, you still feel something is missing. God is missing.

So if God has made everything 'beautiful' in its time, that means everything has an overall purpose from God's perspective. Our hard labour. Our stresses. Our sorrows as well as our joys and successes are all pointing us towards God. Are moving us, as we know from the New Testament, into a deeper relationship with Him through faith in His Son, or as a disciple of Jesus becoming more like Him. Why is God conforming us into the image of Jesus? Because Jesus is the perfect human being. Adam and Eve were perfect but they sinned. So do we aspire to be? No one is perfect, they all let us down, except Jesus.

Jesus became one of us, suffered even without sin. Crucified without human reason but in God's above the sun purpose, died for ours sins. What was Jesus' purpose? He tells us in John 17:4,

*I have brought you glory on earth by finishing the work you gave me to do.*

His purpose was to glorify God through the work of the cross God had given Him under the sun. That's what our purpose is; to glorify God in all our toilsome labour under the sun. That's what we were created for.

Solomon uses different words but says the same thing.

<sup>12</sup> I know that there is nothing better for people than to be happy and to do good while they live. <sup>13</sup> That each of them may eat and drink, and find satisfaction in all their toil—this is the gift of God. <sup>14</sup> I know that everything God does will endure forever; nothing can be added to it and nothing taken from it. God does it so that people will fear him. <sup>15</sup> Whatever is has already been, and what will be has been before; and God will call the past to account.

So, now he gives his

## **Application: Open Your Eyes to the Gifts of God** **And Praise Him for Them** **(3:12-15)**

When you know God you recognize all that you have is by grace and you thank Him for it. The simplest basic everyday things of life; eating, drinking, working. And if God does things in our life it endures forever means it has eternal purpose. So our challenge as a believer is to believe that what God allows into our life is to accomplish His Rom. 8:28 good in our life – Christlikeness. Because being more like Christ brings us the most joy. Striving to make God known and exalted is what matters the most. That doesn't mean we smile and laugh off tragedy and hurt and pain, it means having the assurance that God has an eternally directed purpose in it and that its not wasted.

In 1 Thes. 5:16-18 Paul commands us,

*<sup>16</sup> Rejoice always, <sup>17</sup> pray continually, <sup>18</sup> give thanks in all circumstances; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus.*

You can't give thanks in all circumstances if all circumstances don't have some kind of God-directed purpose. And we have to share the gospel with the unsaved so that the emptiness they have that they can't understand is intended to be filled with God. That life in general only makes sense in God and theirs specifically has meaning and purpose in God because God made them and has a plan for their life.

And v.15, which says, <sup>15</sup> *Whatever is has already been, and what will be has been before; and God will call the past to account.*

Says two things: 1) we can't change what happens to us only how we react to whatever happens to us; and 2) it sounds like God will show us one day by calling the past to account. Account for what? How God used His appointed times and seasons to direct our life. And we know how He wants to direct our life; to conform us into Christlikeness.

*Rom. 8:28 And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose. <sup>29</sup> For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers and sisters. <sup>30</sup> And those he predestined, he also called; those he called, he also justified; those he justified, he also glorified*

If we're going to be glorified and be perfectly like Jesus one day, then the appointed times and seasons God places in our lives are all part of that process. Solomon didn't have this aspect to God's plan, but he did come to realize trusting God was the best thing for us. Fear God and obey His commandments.

If you don't think your everyday routines of life have meaning, you are wrong. God wants to be glorified as you raise children, toil in that job, pay your bills, play your games, talk to your neighbours, buy your groceries. God is always with you in real time. The times we live in are God-filled even if we can't see His hand. The things we don't understand have eternal purpose that He's working on to make us more like Jesus.

Thank Him for the good gifts He has given you in life. Trust in His ultimate goodness for the things you don't understand in your life knowing that through our obedience and trust, He is growing us into more Christlike people each day.

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