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Nothing Matters: But What If It Did?

Everything and Nothing is Temporary

Ecclesiastes 3

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If you'll entertain me for a moment: If you have a watch, would you take a look at it? Watch the second hand or the digital seconds counting up. Now I want you to think about your future self, about fifteen seconds from now. What will you be doing? When that moment comes, let's see if we can capture it.

3...2...1. Can you comprehend this? That future self you imagined is already past. Were you able to capture that moment? Can you remember what that person was like fifteen seconds ago? Is that memory already fading?

Here's something Ecclesiastes wants us to accept today: Part of being a creature is that everything is constantly becoming the past.

Kids, what would happen if I told you there was ice cream after the sermon? Some of you might make the next hour all about getting to the end of the sermon. Thirty minutes left, twenty minutes left. Asking your mom to check the clock. Pretending to go to the bathroom. Probably not hearing a word of the sermon because you are focused on rearranging your life around the ice cream at the end of the sermon. And then, you get it. And it's wonderful. And then, five minutes later, it's gone. And then you're thinking, "What's next?"

Adults, you do it too. Do you find yourself rearranging your present just to get there? Or how about this: In 2016 the Cubs won the World Series. They had not done that for over a hundred years. For those hundred-plus years, they spent billions of dollars and expended countless hours of people's lives and attention, all for that one glorious moment when Anthony Rizzo caught the final out in a game seven for the ages. And you know what? It was fun. I and every other Cub fan basked in it, but by the next day it was already a fading glory. Since then, five other teams have won. Almost every player from that team is gone. And now the Cubs stink. Pick the high point of your favorite team. We can still go back and relive that moment by watching highlights, but it becomes more obvious every year that that time is past. We can't bottle up that moment. It's what Ecclesiastes calls *Hevel*, or vapor.

Is this frustrating at all? To think of life this way? It is. And that's what Ecclesiastes does: presents real life.

Question: What is the point of doing anything when everything fades? How do we live faithfully in a frustrating world?

Here's the hope we get to cling to: We know the whole story of the Bible. We know where this story ends. And when we view Ecclesiastes 3 in light of the whole Bible, we see that, ***at the same time, everything is temporary, but also, nothing is temporary.*** The clock keeps ticking. Everything ends. But God is in each and every season, working through it for his purposes, which never end.

Let's walk through the chapter, seeing how Solomon tackles each of these ideas. We'll take them in order and divide them in three separate parts.

1. Everything is Temporary (vv. 1-8)

¹ **For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven.** Solomon shows his hand at the beginning. He wants to show us that there is a season for everything. He gives us fourteen pairs of opposite life experiences to illustrate for us not only that every season will end, but also that baked into the cake of life is a rhythm of temporary seasons. Spring, summer, fall, winter, then spring again. The sun rises, then sets, and we don't wonder if it's going to rise again. Kids, you're on summer break. But you know school is coming. And then summer again. And so on through the grades. The clock keeps ticking.

These fourteen pairs are not exhaustive, nor are they all particularly clear about what exactly they point to. But the point is that life has seasons. Some are predictable; some are not. Some are enjoyable; some are frustrating. Sometimes, one season undoes another season. I'll comment on some as we go through them.

² **a time to be born, and a time to die; a time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is planted;** Here's the most basic one: you were born, and you will die. We will all die. But after we're gone, and whether we were here or not, the sun would keep rising and setting, and the seasons would keep advancing. In between our birth and death, we occupy ourselves. We plant, but later we pluck that same plant and move it somewhere else. We move to a new place, dive in, make new friends, get to know the area, and then we move, doing it all again, knowing that what we invested in previously will fade. Our friendships will be strained, someone else will paint the walls of our house a different color. On to the next thing.

³ **a time to kill, and a time to heal; a time to break down, and a time to build up;** Sometimes we set a broken arm. Sometimes we amputate.

⁴ **a time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance;** We all know this. Life is not all joy, and it's not all sorrow. Often, we laugh and cry on the same day. Both are part of the human experience.

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;**

Sometimes it's Christmas; sometimes we're dropping off those same gifts at Goodwill. Sometimes we keep our stuff; sometimes we give it away.

That new car you're worried about the little scratch on will someday be traded in or totaled, and that scratch won't matter too much.

Sometimes we land a great job. Sometimes we get downsized. Different seasons.

⁷ **a time to tear, and a time to sew;** You would be sad if you caught a snag and got a small hole in your favorite shirt. But you would want the paramedics to tear that shirt in two if that's what they needed to do to get to your heart.

a time to keep silence, and a time to speak; Couldn't we all learn from that?

⁸ **a time to love, and a time to hate; a time for war, and a time for peace.** We should pursue love and peace. But there is a place for coming up against evil and injustice.

Why do we need to know this? Doesn't this make life a bit pointless? It's like rearranging the deck chairs on the sinking Titanic. Does it matter what we do when we're all going down?

Here's what is important to realize: Solomon presents this reality, but he doesn't say this is bad. In fact, it's just what *is*, the way God made it.

Solomon wants us to embrace that we are *creatures*. We are subject to forces out of our control. We are at the mercy of the seasons. We can break our clock or remove the battery, but time marches on.

And yet, we don't naturally embrace this message. Most of us spend our entire lives building things that won't last, convincing ourselves that they will. We make all kinds of foolish decisions when chasing immortality.

What's the antidote? Here it is: embrace that everything is temporary. Say to your neighbor: "You have an expiration date!"

This is reality. Everything is temporary. And do you know what? You fit right in. Because we are creatures; we are made to fit into the created order. Ecclesiastes 3 deflates us, but only because we were so puffed up, we were ready to pop.

Embracing that everything is temporary allows us to not put too much stock in what is happening right now. We can see that things have a time and a place and not be surprised by either. We don't have to assume the good times will always roll. But we can appreciate the good times, pleasantly surprised, knowing they will end. We can also endure the bad times, knowing that they, too, will end.

However, this is not all that Ecclesiastes 3 has for us. "Everything is temporary" is not, in itself, an exclusively Christian message.

You could embrace that message, and still go off in a number of different ways. I can think of two we interact with regularly. Maybe you're here today and doing this. Lean in.

One is what we call hedonism. This is pursued by the type of person who knows they will die, and so makes their life about having as much fun as possible.

Paul says in 1 Corinthians 15:32 that if all this Christianity stuff is wrong, he might as well "eat and drink, for tomorrow we die."

I don't know if the pop star Kesha has read Paul, but she seems to agree when she sings: "Let's make the most of the night like we're gonna die young."

The other option we may call humanism. This is embraced by the person who does not believe in a final judgment, yet still believes we should do good. They fight for certain issues or simply try to live a good life because they think it's the best way to live, or because they feel a sense of care and responsibility toward others.

If that's you, are you getting tired? That's my impression right now.

The messages of "have fun" or "do good" don't work very well when life isn't fun and justice doesn't always seem to prevail. I think COVID has made us cynical. A lot of us now embrace that life is temporary. But we've lost any other hope and have fallen into depression and anxiety. Then, we look to self-medicate in some way—immersing ourselves in fun or work or a cause or something mindless just to get by.

The band *Arcade Fire* just released an album that sounds like it was written by someone marinating in the last 2-plus years.

Fight the fever with TV
In the age when nobody sleeps
And the pills do nothing for me
In the age of anxiety

We can't stop crying and we really think we mean it
But the tears just fall on the sheets (anxiety)
Another lost soul just trying to feel something
Trying to feel something
Trying to feel something in the age of (anxiety)

Here, Christian, is where you have hope that no one else has. Neither hedonism nor humanism lasts without us constantly suppressing the eternal ache we have in our hearts. We can't live as if this is all there is if this is not all there is. Our culture wants to think that we can live well even if everything ends. And yet, the people around you—at your school, your job, the person bringing your groceries to the grocery pick-up, all want eternity. That's why we need the next section. Everything is temporary. And yet, at the same time, nothing is temporary.

2. Nothing Is Temporary (vv. 9-15)

These verses act as the lens that we put back on the first section to make it possible to live faithfully in a frustrating world.

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. 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.

Solomon asks: Why go through the motions of the seasons? Why try?

The answer is in verse 11—God makes everything beautiful in its time. The regularity of change is something *God* blesses. *God* made the seasons; he controls the seasons. He is the Creator. He is outside time. And he made us to exist *in time*.

Spring, summer, fall, winter—this is a beautiful repetition. Work and rest alternating in proper proportions—this is good. None of this was made to last forever. We can't make it do what it wasn't meant to do.

But here's the rub, in verse 11. This is why accepting that everything is temporary only works with God in the picture—we are creatures, but we are made for eternity. And everyone, deep down, knows it.

And yet, God does not let us see the whole picture. This is the tension, the frustration, of the human experience. We are finite and infinite. Made for more and yet unable to tell the future or even figure out exactly why things are happening the way they are right now.

And so, verses 12-13 give us the solution to our tension. We lower ourselves from trying to figure God out or to breaking free from the cycle and submitting ourselves to the theme echoed over and over in Ecclesiastes: be joyful and do good for as long as you have. Enjoy each season for however long it lasts and honor God in the midst of it. We can end striving. We can have peace. But first, we have to appreciate that there truly is nothing more to get out of life.

But as we've seen, we can only truly enjoy life's temporary pleasures if we recognize them, first and only, as a gift from God.

Finally, in verses 14-15, Solomon reinforces that it is *God* and his works and his ways that last forever. And even more than that, they always have been. God does not need a watch. It is always always.

Here is the key that makes Ecclesiastes 3 livable and wonderful. This is *not* all there is. *God* is controlling the seasons and rhythms. There is a reason for our toil. And God and his purposes and ways last forever.

Therefore, what we do under the sun may fade, but what we do from him and through him and to him, when we're joining in his purposes, that will ripple forever.

This is where the gospel becomes very apparent in the message of Ecclesiastes. Enjoying life in light of eternity implies that you're going to have a good eternity.

If our takeaway from Ecclesiastes is simply "you die," then it does not follow that we should enjoy life. Life still slips through our fingers. Pleasures fade.

Because when you die, you will face judgment. And no matter how much we enjoyed life and did good, we know that we are rotten to the core. We don't measure up to the holy, infinite, perfect, all-knowing, all-powerful, outside-of-time God.

When we meet him and we hear the verdict, we will want to trade all the pleasures of the world, no matter how great, to avoid being cast into hell forever. And we will know in an instant that our good works were just selfish attempts to justify ourselves.

And yet, there was a creature who lived life under the sun in exactly the way God intended his creatures to live. This creature also took on the wrath due for our sin as he died our death on a cross. But this creature is also the Creator. Jesus bridged the gap between creature and Creator, the gap of sin that has existed ever since Adam and Eve.

But Jesus rose again. He still lives. When we abandon our attempts to do life our way and trust that he did all of that for me, we can know what will happen on judgment day. God will not hold our sins against us. He already put them on Jesus. And he will treat us as if our life was well-lived, because Jesus's was.

It is in light of that, of our confidence on judgment day, that we can enjoy life as it is and make our whole lives about obeying, loving, honoring, and glorifying God.

John Chrysostom, a preacher in the fourth century, drove this home when he said: "it is not possible that a soul anxious about hell should readily sin."¹ This is why we will study Revelation in the fall. How this ends affects how we live.

We do not have to give up and despair because we know that there is a God who is ordering and moving this whole world toward his intended purpose, even if we can't always see it.

But that's why living life under the sun well takes remembering that there is someone over the sun who we will meet someday. We must remember the eternal if we are to live in the temporary.

¹ Steven A. McKinion, *Life and Practice in the Early Church: A Documentary Reader* (New York and London: NYU Press, 2001).

3. Everything and Nothing Is Temporary (vv. 16-22)

So, we hold these truths in tension: Everything is temporary; nothing is temporary. Everything and nothing are temporary. We need both perspectives to live life under the sun.

These last verses, 16-22, show two different examples of frustrations that come from living in this world. Our new lens helps us see how to live faithfully.

a. Justice will be served (vv. 16-17)

First, Solomon asks the question: What if justice is perverted or slow? Answer: Because everything is temporary, injustice will not last forever. Because nothing is temporary, no one will escape judgment. God will deal with all injustice. God may seem slow in bringing justice, but he will.

b. Humans should be humbled (vv. 18-22)

Second, Solomon observes that often life can *seem* meaningless. Solomon is saying: as far as we can tell with our eyes, what makes our end any different than that of the animals? We all die. Some animals even live longer than us. What's his point? Don't think too highly of yourself. You also are a creature. We should be humbled.

Does this mean we are truly no different than the animals? No, from Genesis 1 it's clear that God makes us and us alone in his image. However, Solomon may truly have been in the dark about what happens after we die. When you read the OT, it seems that God waited to flesh out exactly what happens for eternity, though he gave some hints.

But on this side of the cross, we know what Solomon may have only known in part. Yes, we are temporary. But we are not temporary. Like your dog, you can't take it with you. Unlike your dog, if you are a Christian, you have a special relationship with the eternal God. You get to share in his plan for eternity, right here, right now, in all the earthiness and grittiness and fleshiness of life under the sun.

Everything is temporary and nothing is temporary. What would it look like to walk through life with this perspective? To embrace the seasons with an eternal mindset?

Solomon gives us two examples, but what if we apply that lens to our earlier verses?

We can revel in the regularity, predictability, and beauty of spring, summer, fall, winter, and spring again.

We can mourn death because it means the end. But not fear death, because we will live forever.

We can fully invest in the place we are right now as if God will never move us. And then, if he does, we can do it again in a new place, while believing that what God did in the last place was not a waste, even if it was only for a season.

We can treat our stuff as stuff.

We can draw near to God when the present is really, really hard and take comfort that someday it won't be so hard.

We can go on vacation without making ourselves more stressed-out than before.

We can watch highlights of the 2016 Chicago Cubs and enjoy every second without deceiving ourselves into thinking that this is what is supposed to make us happy forever.

In every season, we can appreciate that God gives sinful creatures like us these small tastes of eternity, without feeling like we need to squeeze out of them what they were never meant to provide. Temporary pleasures are just that, temporary. And yet, unlike us, God is not bound by these seasons. Every temporary joy he gives us as a gift will someday be multiplied by infinity forever.

Everything is temporary. Nothing is temporary. Everything and nothing is temporary.

There is a time for everything. Each has a place while it lasts, but all will be better forever.

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