

A Time for All Things
Ecclesiastes 2:24-3:15

Thanks to the Byrds' 1965 cover of "Turn, Turn, Turn," the first eight verses of chapter 3 are some of the best known in all of the Bible. Pete Seeger first composed the song in the late 1950's, and, aside from rearranging some of Solomon's ideas to make the words rhyme in English, he really only added one original thought: the last line reads, "A time of peace, I swear it's not too late." At the height of the Cold War, and with the use of nuclear weapons an ever-present threat, it's easy to see why he closed the song in such a hopeful way.

For we all want the world to be a better place, don't we? In fact, in verse 11, Solomon says that we human beings have the world in our hearts, which means we can all catch a glimpse of the eternal. Yes, unlike any other part of God's creation, we have within us a sense of the infinite. Through our history books we can study the grand sweep of human events, getting an idea of how at least some of them interrelate. Through our telescopes and with our knowledge of physics, we can explore the immensity of the universe in a systematic way. That's why we crave meaning in life – we not only want to understand how everything fits together, but also to play at least a small part in making things better.

But unlike Pete Seeger, Solomon doesn't conclude his poem with the wish that wars might one day come to an end. Instead, he simply observes that periods of war and peace inevitably follow one another in a cyclical pattern. And even the most casual study of history, not to mention the most cursory glance at today's headlines, would have to lead us to agree. After all, even though he really has nothing to gain and everything to lose by trying to push the political boundaries of Russia just a few miles farther to the west, Vladimir Putin has once again brought war to the European continent, a conflict that is already causing the prices of food and natural gas to rise around the world. And who knows if China will follow his brutal and stupid example, by trying to conquer Taiwan?

But Solomon's poem isn't just limited to politics, is it? No, we all know that if the good times don't last forever, neither do the bad ones – in fact, most of us have lived long enough to know that life is a mishmash of good and bad put together. For babies are born even in the midst of wars and recessions and pandemics. We know that the same wet weather that makes the corn and hay grow in the summer, also makes it hard to harvest the cotton and soybeans in the fall. And doesn't every relationship involve some laughter as well as weeping, some embracing and some distance? Haven't we all danced at weddings and mourned at funerals – sometimes in the same week? And no matter how much we packrats might like to object, there comes a time when some things just have to be thrown away.

So, if we can't draw Pete Seeger's rather naïve conclusion, that somehow if we could just put the right social structures in place we could get rid of all the wars, not to mention all of the poverty and disease in the world, what can we learn from Solomon's poem? Well, in verse 11, Solomon not only admits that we all have aspirations to understand and therefore improve the world, but also that we'll never be able to figure out how all things fit together. Instead, everything that happens under the sun will continue to seem random, pointless, and thus essentially meaningless to us.

So, how can we deal with such inevitable frustration? Well, we might fall into the sterile and often deadly philosophy of nihilism, the belief that since nothing has any real meaning, nothing is really real at all. Or we might stop short of such utter despair, contenting ourselves instead with the hard virtue of mere stoicism – the notion that we must grit our teeth and do our duty, regardless of the injustice or difficulty of life, all the while remaining sternly indifferent to either pleasure or pain. Or we might take a third approach, embracing the false hope of hedonism, giving ourselves over to the endless

pursuit of pleasure in spite of the knowledge that none of it can be lasting or meaningful in and of itself. Yes, since death eventually comes to all of us, we might indeed come to resign ourselves, in one way or another, that everything in this world is vain, empty, as profitable as trying to catch the wind.

But that's not what Solomon is trying to teach us in this book. Instead, as he has told us over and over again throughout these first three chapters, it's only the things and purposes and events "under heaven" that are vain. It's only when we look at things in a purely worldly context that nihilism, stoicism, or hedonism make any sense at all. But once we raise our eyes to heaven, once God comes into the picture, suddenly our whole perspective is transformed.

And that's because only God can provide the solution to the experiment Solomon set for himself in chapter two. Remember, with all the wealth and power anyone could hope to possess, Solomon tried to determine what experience, what activity or what object could bring true meaning into anyone's life. But because none of these things really last, because every experience or pleasure or accomplishment is ultimately fleeting, because death eventually comes to all of us, Solomon turned away from everything under the sun in despair. In fact, a more accurate translation of chapter 2 verse 24 says not that there is nothing better for a man, but that there is no good in any man that allows him to eat and drink and tell himself that his labor is good.

But then, Solomon suddenly changes his tune, pointing out that God can do what we cannot. For the same verse goes on to say that it is in fact possible for us to enjoy our food and drink and labor – if we understand these things to be gifts from God. In fact, in verse 26, Solomon goes so far as to say that God is able to give wisdom and knowledge and joy to those who are good in his sight. And we find the same idea in chapter 3 verse 13 – our joy in our eating and our drinking, our joy in all the good work we do and all the labor we accomplish – this joy is the gift of God.

And so we can see that it isn't a relationship with another human being that can truly fulfill us, but only a relationship with God. It isn't any of the wondrous things in God's creation that can truly satisfy us, but only the Creator Himself. It's only the great Giver of all good things that can enable us truly to enjoy any of His gifts. Only God can bring meaning and fulfillment to all of the times and seasons of our lives.

Why is that? Solomon explains in 3:14: "Everything God does will remain forever." Now, that's a sharp contrast with so much of what Solomon has described up to this point in the book, isn't it? The tree lovingly planted in memory of a loved one eventually dies, and must be uprooted. The grandest, finest structures that we build, even great houses like Windsor or Oak Square are eventually destroyed, for one reason or another. Even the most carefully crafted alliances can't prevent wars from breaking out. In fact, everything that we human beings strive to accomplish will eventually be swept away – but God's plans and purposes and deeds last forever.

And so if we really want to have meaning in our lives, doesn't it make sense for us to devote ourselves to the things that are most meaningful, the things of God? Shouldn't we spend more time in the Word of God, the only book in the world that will never stop being published and read? Shouldn't we spend more of our resources on the effort to bring more eternal souls into the Kingdom of God, where they can enjoy Him forever? If we want to have true joy, and if we want our lives to have true meaning, wouldn't it make more sense to get in step with God, going where He goes and doing what He wants us to do?

But before we rush off to the mission field, Solomon pulls us up short one last time. For look at what he says in 3:14: Where it comes to what God does, nothing can be put to it, or added to it, and

nothing can be taken from it. So, where does that leave us? Are we right back to the point of despair as we contemplate that everything we do is simply meaningless?

Well, no, not necessarily. Let's say for example that you're sitting in the stands watching the Dallas Cowboys play the Kansas City Chiefs. Would you be frustrated that you can't stand in for Patrick Mahomes or Dak Prescott? Would you go up to Mike McCarthy or Andy Reid and insist, "Put me in, coach! I'm ready to play!"

Or would you be content simply to watch such great athletes at work, praising them for their prowess, and marveling at all the things they can do? No, any realistic assessment of our own abilities combined with an acknowledgment of the NFL players' clear superiority should keep us from any hint of despair or even frustration that we can't get on the field. Instead, we simply enjoy watching them make amazing plays – and talking about them after the game.

And that's the sort of perspective we should have where it comes to the Person and Work of Christ, isn't it? For what did we read responsively this morning from Ephesians chapter 2? We weren't just outclassed in the face of our sin and its deadly consequences – we were spiritually dead, completely unable to do anything to save ourselves. But because God loved us so much, Jesus paid in full the debt we all owe, laying down His life on behalf of all who trust in Him. Remember, as He died on the cross, He said, "It is finished." His work was done, and there was nothing we could do to add to it. All we can do is sit on the sidelines and praise Him for His tremendous sacrifice.

But that wasn't the end of the story, was it? No, because the Father raised Christ from the dead, we too have been given new life, resurrection life, life that is no longer earth-bound, but that can be lived in the context of eternity. It is because we have such new life that we can not only enjoy all the blessings of this world as a gift from our loving Father, but also undergo all the trials and troubles it brings, confident in His love and assured of His sovereign grace.

Moreover, Paul says that we have been given this new life precisely so that we can do good works – not in order to earn our salvation or somehow add to Christ's completed work on the Cross, but to express our thanks and praise for all He has done. Our works thus gain eternal meaning as we perform them for the glory of the One Who has loved us and saved us and made us His own.

So, let's sing the praises of our risen Savior, especially to those who are continuing to live as though the things under heaven, the things under the sun are all that matter. Let's enjoy our Father's blessings and work as hard as we can in this world for His glory. For no matter what season of life we may be in, no matter what events may happen to us in their appointed time, we can rejoice in this sure and certain hope: that as we are one with Christ, we are even now sitting in the heavenly places, enjoying all the riches of God's grace in His kindness toward us through Christ Jesus. And such meaning, such fulness, such joy will be ours for ages to come.