

Ecclesiastes: Everything is Vapour

“Everything Beautiful in its Time”

Ecclesiastes 3:1-15

Delivered at Central Baptist Church on February 2, 2020

INTRODUCTION

- **(SHOW SLIDE 1)** Over Christmas I came across Virginia Woolf’s novel *To the Lighthouse*.
 - In one sense it is a rather mundane story about a family on a holiday, but the story haunts you when it is over.
- In part 1 of the book we meet the Ramsay family who are on a long holiday at their oceanside house. Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay are surrounded by their eight children and numerous friends. The kids have fun on the beach and the adults paint, garden, and read. The family is always together and every night the dinner table is filled with wonderful food and celebration.
 - Part 2 of the book has a very different tone and style. A decade of time passes but this section does not describe any events. Rather, part 2 contains reflections on the ravages of time and the power of death in taking everything from us.
 - It becomes clear that the family is not taking summer vacations anymore. Something has happened and the vacation home is falling into disrepair.
- The final section returns to the vacation home 10 years later. What’s lost is painfully obvious. One of the sons was killed in war, an adult daughter has died in childbirth, and Mrs. Ramsay, who was the joyful centre of the family, has also died.
 - In part 1 the kids desperately want to go on a boat ride to the old lighthouse nearby but the father is too occupied with his work to take them.
 - In the final section it is the father who is desperate to go. He drags the reluctant teenagers along as he tries to recapture what they had but was sometimes too busy to fully enjoy. But time has moved on and that season of life is over.
- Woolf’s book is so haunting because it is so real. There are many wonderful things to enjoy in life. Yet, as we have been learning, all of life is like a vapour or a puff of breath. As we experienced this past week with the death of Kobe Bryant, life is here one day and then it is gone. The seasons of life come and go and you cannot grab onto them or control them.
 - This can lead us to despair and exhaustion: despair because time and death turn sweet seasons of life into mere memories: children grow up, athletic ability crumbles, and loved ones pass away.
 - This can also leave us exhausted. We try to control our lives in an attempt to avoid difficulties, but this only leaves us stressed out and makes us hard to be around. How many families have you seen torn apart because the parents keep trying to control the lives of their adult children? Trying to control everything is like trying to control the wind.
- It is right here that our passage today offers such powerful wisdom. It shows us how to find joy instead of falling into despair. It shows us how to find rest instead of trying to control everything. Do you want joy? Do you want less stress?
 - This this passage says it is time for you to do four things: It’s time to *face reality*, time to *let it go*, time to *seize the day*, and time to *fear the Lord*.

FACE REALITY

- **(SHOW SLIDE 2)** **First, it’s time to face reality.**
 - The author of Ecclesiastes is King Solomon and he refers to himself as the Preacher. He begins chapter 3 with a statement about time. Look at verse 1. ***READ 1 - For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven.*** Then from verses 2-8 he gives a poem about the various times of life.

- If you grew up in the sixties, or you've seen *Forrest Gump* then you've heard these lyrics in the song *Turn, Turn, Turn* by the Byrds. But Solomon wasn't wearing a tie-dyed t-shirt while he wrote this and it isn't meant to be a peace anthem in response to Vietnam.
- In this poem, the Preacher describes every experience in life by describing opposite ends of the spectrum. When he says in verse 2 there is **"a time to be born and a time to die"** these are two ends of the spectrum and so include everything in between.
 - You can also see how he is including all of human experience in the masterful use of the number seven. In the Bible the number seven represents completeness. In this poem there are 28 uses of the word "time" which is 4x7. These 28 uses of "time" are distributed over 14 lines, which is of course 2x7.
 - In this poem the Preacher has artfully and masterfully captured all the changing seasons of life both good and bad, joyful and painful.
- Notice also that we cannot control all the times and seasons in our lives.
 - In verse 4 there is **"a time to weep and a time to laugh."** One evening you're laughing at a great movie and the next evening you get a phone call that leaves you in tears.
 - Verse 4 goes on: **"a time to mourn and a time to dance."** One day you dance with your daughter at her wedding and another day you hold her in your arms as you mourn over the fact that she has miscarried again.
 - Just like life, this poem has a steady rhythm of one time changing into the next. And, just like life, there is no overall structure or order to what season of life comes next. There is joy and there is sorrow, war and peace, hate and love.
- Then, just when you're admiring how this poem captures all of life, Solomon sucker punches you in verse 9. **READ 9 - What gain has the worker from his toil?**
 - This is the exact same question as chapter 1. For all your effort at life, for all the times you experience, what do you have to show for it when your time is done?
 - He gave the answer back in chapter 1. For all of these experiences you end up with nothing. Everything is a breath or a vapour. Despite all the times of joy and love, pain and sorrow, you will die and be forgotten. There is no ultimate gain because everything is like a breath.
- Once again, the Preacher is trying to make us face reality. If you want to learn how to find joy and how to live wisely then you must come to face reality as it is.
 - And what is reality? You must see that you live in a fallen but beautiful world so that life moves from one season to another, that you cannot control it in such a way that you will win in the end because, like a vapour, it will all soon be gone.
 - So, if you want to find joy and rest, then the Preacher says it's time to face reality.

LET IT GO

- **(SHOW SLIDE 3) Second, it's time to let it go.**
 - We cause ourselves endless *frustration* when we try to find answers for why certain things happen in our lives. We also *exhaust* ourselves trying to control everything to avoid the changing seasons of life. The Preacher wants us to rest. How do we do that? Let it go. Let go of the questions that cannot be answered. Let go of the trying to control that which cannot be controlled.
 - How? Look at verses 10-11. **READ 10-11 - I have seen the business that God has given to the children of man to be busy with. 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.**
- Oh, what rest there is for you in these verses. Notice that the times of your life are not the result of blind random chance or the cold hand of fate. You might have thought that during the poem for God does not appear anywhere in the poem. But now the Preacher shows us how to think about the changing seasons of our lives.

- The key is resting in the fact that the eternal God has scheduled every season and will bring them all together. Notice the phrase **“he has made everything beautiful in its time.”** God “made” the universe in Genesis 1 and here we learn that God has also “made” all the seasons of your life. They are not random. They are scheduled.
 - We want to know how it all fits together because God has put a sense of the eternal in our hearts but God has also made it so that we cannot know, just as a character in a novel cannot know how the author will bring all the events together.
- Do you see how this brings rest? You can let go of the questions and need to control and find rest knowing that God is in control of the seasons in your life.
 - As Romans 8:28 says, **“And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose.”**
- One of the best illustrations of this comes from Corrie Ten Boom. During WW2, Corrie and her family hid Jews in their home and helped them escape the Holocaust, but they were caught and sent to a concentration camp where her sister, Bestie, died. After the war she spent the rest of her life travelling the world telling people about Jesus.
 - Here is a woman who knows what it means to face a time of war and a time of peace, a time of mourning and a time of laughter. She is not naïve about reality but has faced the worst of human suffering.
- If you go to the Netherlands there is a museum dedicated to her. There you will also find this object hanging on the wall. **(SHOW SLIDE 4)** As you can see, it is thousands of threads that look like a gigantic mess.
 - Corrie would take this object to her talks and show it to her audience. She would speak about how this is what our lives feel like. They often feel chaotic and we often cannot see any order to them. But then she would go on to speak about how God controls time and is working everything out toward his desired end.
 - She would then turn over the tangled mess of threads to reveal that it was actually a beautiful tapestry. **(SHOW SLIDE 5)** From the back no thread seems to have a place but from the front we can see that every single thread has been woven in with purpose and every thread is part of the whole: **“he has made everything beautiful in its time.”**
- Corrie would then go on to read this poem.
 - **(SHOW SLIDE 6) *My life is but a weaving
Between my God and me
I cannot choose the colors
He weaveth steadily***
 - **(SHOW SLIDE 7) *Oft’ times He weaveth sorrow;
And I in foolish pride
Forget He sees the upper
And I the underside***
 - **(SHOW SLIDE 8) *Not ’til the loom is silent
And the shuttles cease to fly
Will God unroll the canvas
And reveal the reason why***
 - **(SHOW SLIDE 9) *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***
 - **(SHOW SLIDE 10) *He knows, He loves, He cares;
Nothing this truth can dim
He gives the very best to those
Who leave the choice to Him***

- Do you want to know how to live wisely, to know joy and to know rest? Face reality as it is. Life in a fallen world is filled with many different seasons of life. The key is to let go of trying to control it all or figure it all out.
 - On this side of the tapestry of time it often looks as though there is no meaning or purpose. But find rest in the fact that God has woven every thread of your life with purpose and one day he will turn over the tapestry to reveal how it all fits together to form a beautiful tapestry.

SEIZE THE DAY

- So, it's time to face reality and it's time to let it go. Now in the third place the Preacher says **(SHOW SLIDE 11) it's time to seize the day.**
 - Look at verses 12-13. **READ 12-13 - ¹²I perceived that there is nothing better for them than to be joyful and to do good as long as they live; ¹³also that everyone should eat and drink and take pleasure in all his toil—this is God's gift to man.**
- Once again, we see how wrong it is to see Ecclesiastes as a depressing book about how meaningless life is. To the contrary, it is a book about how to live wisely and with joy.
 - Once again, we find the Preacher coming to the same conclusion as at the end of chapter 2. Since we will all die and since we cannot control life so as to gain something at the end, he says that to live wisely means to seize the day.
 - He tells us two ways to do this.
- **(SHOW SLIDE 12) First, seize the day by enjoying your life as a gift from God.** The preacher says ***"everyone should eat and drink and take pleasure in all his toil—this is God's gift to man."***
 - So, he is saying, "Carpe Diem! Seize the day and enjoy it as God's gift." But how is this any different from how the advice that everyone is giving after Kobe died this week? Everyone feels the reality of death and is saying, "Carpe Diem!" This was really popularized in the 1980's film *Dead Poet's Society*. It's old now but it is famous and still resonates.
 - In the movie, Robin Williams plays a new teacher at a traditional boy's private school. In an important scene he gathers his pupils around a cabinet in the school hallway that displays photographs of sporting heroes and trophies from the past. These men are dead now and their moment of glory has passed. Williams asks his students to imagine what these dead heroes would say to them. As they think about it he walks among his students whispering, "Carpe diem."
 - The students embrace this motto for the remainder of the movie. The young men seek to squeeze all the life out of their school days with funny and tragic results.
- The Preachers advice is similar but also very different. Yes, we must seize the day and enjoy our lives because this is the only appropriate response to the fact that we cannot control the times of our lives and that fact that we will all die. But the Preachers advice is very different. Can you see how? The preacher's Carpe Diem centres on God.
 - He is not saying, "Anything goes! Engage in any pleasure you want." Rather, the wise person learns what it means that God is our Creator, that everything comes from his hand, so that we enjoy his good gifts within the boundaries he has given.
 - So, enjoy your lunch. Savour every taste as a gift from God. Enjoy your friendships. Enjoy your work. Enjoy your friends, spouse, and children. Listen to music that lifts your heart to good things. Seize the day by enjoying the many good gifts God has given you.
- **(SHOW SLIDE 13) Second, seize the day by doing good with what God has given you.**
 - Verses 12-13 also make it clear that this carpe diem is not a call to just live for yourself and all your own pleasures. **READ 12 - ¹²I perceived that there is nothing better for them than to be joyful and to do good as long as they live.**

- We are to use our lives to do good in this world. Use your short life to bless others, to work for the cause of Christ, to make a difference. Most of your deeds will go unnoticed but God knows them all and uses them all to keep weaving his great tapestry.

FEAR THE LORD

- So if you want to live wisely and with joy then the Preacher says it's time to face reality, it's time to let it go, and it's time to seize the day. But he has one last thing to say that must be at the core of your life.
- **(SHOW SLIDE 14) Finally, it's time to fear the Lord.**
 - If you want to live wisely then everything must start with standing in awe of God. As proverbs says, "The Fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom." To live rightly your whole worldview must begin with the existence of God.
 - To help us stand in awe of God, the Preacher contrasts our inability to control time and do anything that lasts with God and what he does. Look at verse 14. **READ 14 - ¹⁴ / *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.***
- Fear does not mean be scared of God and run away from him. To fear God means to revere him and to stand in awe of him. And what is it that should make us stand in awe of him?
 - All you do is but a puff of breath that disappears. What God does endures forever. What you do is imperfect but what he does is perfect and nothing can be added to it or taken away from it.
 - Your inability to control time should humble you and show you that you are not a god. Every time you are stuck in traffic, every time you get sick and miss work, every time you can't fix a situation, you are reminded of the fact that life is hebel – that you cannot shepherd the wind. But then let this lift up your heart for there is one who can shepherd the wind. God controls all time. God's actions last. Stand in awe of such a being and humble yourself before him.
- C.S. Lewis captures this so well in his book *The Screwtape Letters*. They are letters that a senior demon writes to a junior demon on how to destroy the man he has been assigned to.
 - In one letter the senior demon points out how upset people get when a portion of time is unexpectedly taken from them like when you planned a quiet evening and it gets interrupted. We feel like this time has been stolen from us.
 - This, the senior demon says, can be used against the man he is assigned to destroy. The senior demon writes,
 - **(SHOW SLIDE 15) "You must therefore zealously guard in his mind the curious assumption, "My time is my own". Let him have the feeling that he starts each day as the lawful possessor of twenty-four hours. Let him feel as a grievous tax that portion of this property which he has to make over to his employers, and as a generous donation that further portion which he allows to religious duties.**
 - **(SHOW SLIDE 16) You have here a delicate task. The assumption which you want him to go on making is so absurd that, if once it is questioned, even we cannot find a shred of argument in its defence. The man can neither make, nor retain, one moment of time; it all comes to him by pure gift; he might as well regard the sun and moon as his possessions.**
 - **(SHOW SLIDE 17) The sense of ownership in general is always to be encouraged. The humans are always putting up claims to ownership which sound equally funny in Heaven and in Hell and we must keep them doing so. . . . And all the time the joke is that the word "Mine" in its fully possessive sense cannot be uttered by a human being about anything. In the long run either Our Father or the Enemy will say "Mine" of each thing that exists, and specially of each**

man. They will find out in the end, never fear, to whom their time, their souls, and their bodies really belong.¹

- Let's put this all together by working backwards through the points. To live wisely and find joy begins with fearing God. Humble yourself before him. Ask his pardon for the fact that you have often lived as if you are a god.
 - With this as your foundation you can now seize the day, enjoying all the good gifts that God has given you and using your life to do good to others.
 - As you enjoy the moment you can let go of trying to control everything because you can now see reality clearly. You can see that God is weaving all of time, including your life, into a beautiful tapestry.

THE FULLNESS OF TIME

- Solomon's view of God and time is so freeing and should lead us to fear God but when we come to the New Testament we discover a whole other level that he did not know. Here we learn that God has been weaving all of time toward one critical point that would change the course of history forever. Paul calls it "the fullness of time." In the fullness of time God sent forth his Son. Jesus, the eternal Son of God, came into this world.
 - He came to put an end to the old times of death, pain, and suffering and to start a new creation. To accomplish this, Jesus' declared that the times of his own life were all moving toward one specific time, which he called the "hour."
 - The hour was the period of time when Jesus, the sinless one, suffered and died on the cross in order to defeat the power of sin, Satan, and death.
- Three days later God raised him from the dead. A new creation had begun. Jesus is the one who is Lord over time. He is the Alpha and the Omega, the First and the Last, the beginning and the End. Because he was slain, he is now the one who is worthy to open the scroll of history and cause all events to come to pass. All of history is moving to the time when he will return, to the time when he will judge the world, and to the time when he will reign over a new heavens and new earth.
 - In this new creation we will utterly forget what it means that there is "a time to die" for there will be no more death. Times of hate, killing, mourning, and war will become meaningless concepts for all times will be times of planting, building up, laughing, dancing, embracing, and peace.
- Until Jesus came the world kept heading into the darkness of night. But with the coming of Jesus, the clock of history has struck midnight. It may still be dark but, with the resurrection of Jesus, the night is passing and dawn approaches. As Paul says, "The night is far gone; the day is at hand." As the old hymn puts it:
 - **(SHOW SLIDE 18) *The sands of time are sinking,
The dawn of Heaven breaks;
The summer morn I've sighed for,
The fair, sweet morn awakes;
Dark, dark hath been the midnight,
But dayspring is at hand,
And glory, glory dwelleth
In Immanuel's land.***

¹ C.S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters*, Chapter XXI.