

The World is Not Enough Part IV: Everything Matters – Ecclesiastes 3:1-11

For everything there is a season, a time for every purpose under heaven. A time to be born and a time to die. A time to plant and a time to harvest. A time to kill and a time to heal. A time to tear down and a time to build up. A time to cry and a time to laugh. A time to grieve and a time to dance. A time to scatter stones and a time to gather stones. A time to embrace and a time to turn away. A time to search and a time to throw away. A time to tear and a time to mend. A time to be quiet and a time to speak. A time to love and a time to hate. A time for war and a time for peace. What do people really get for all their hard work? I have seen the burden God has placed on us all. Yet God has made everything beautiful [in] its own time. He has planted eternity in the human heart, but even so, people cannot see the whole scope of God's work from beginning to end. (NLT).

We come to the part of Ecclesiastes made famous by the Byrds in their song, *Turn, Turn, Turn* (written by Pete Seeger). The way the Byrds sang it, it comes off as a song of hope. The last line, 'A time of love, a time of hate, a time for peace, I swear it's not too late,' begs the listener to consider that peace, broadly understood not merely as the absence of war (though that's certainly part of it) but the Shalom of God where people live rightly both with God and one another in all respects, is something worth striving for. Listening to the Teacher's original poem, however, particularly in its context, you might not get the same vibe. The Teacher has been speaking about the meaninglessness of life under the sun; every time you think you've found a purpose to life, a reason for what you are going through, it slips away like smoke between your grasping fingers. And as he speaks the words of this poem, he seems to further this idea. Life is just a series of 'turns,' one moment its good, the next its bad, and there's nothing you can do about any of it. What's the use of working for Shalom, dear Byrds, in a world like that? His continuous drumbeat on this score has led many to consider Ecclesiastes the gloomiest book in the Bible; just the other day I received *this meme* from one of you, which captures well what a lot of people think when they read Ecclesiastes. But as we get into the passage today, I hope to show even more clearly than we may have in previous messages that Ecclesiastes is, despite appearances, a remarkably hopeful book that enables us to

see that our striving for the kind of world we dream of is worth the effort, and that, in the end, everything we do on that score is profoundly meaningful. That in the end, everything matters.

The first thing to point out as we look at the Teacher's poem is that it is *descriptive, not prescriptive*. What do I mean by that? Simply that this is not a prescription for life, it is a description of the way life is. To some degree you could argue with me about that. There are, after all, occasions when we could take some of this as prescriptive, e.g., there is a time to laugh and a time to grieve, a time to embrace and a time to erect healthy boundaries, etc. But sometimes, people have taken this beyond the Teacher's meaning and used it as justification for all sorts of bad behavior, e.g., 'the Bible says there's a time for war, so that means this war [insert the name of whatever war is happening] must be what God wants!' Or 'the Bible says there's a time to hate...' I'll stop there on that one, because goodness, there's never a time to hate. The Teacher isn't telling us that sometimes its okay to hate (nor is he telling us that sometimes war is good), he is simply telling us that when you look at the world, you find all the opposites. One day there is peace. The next there's war. One day you find love. The next someone hates you. One day you're at a baby shower, the next at a funeral. You get the point; I don't need to do them all. The Teacher is simply telling us that this is the way life goes. It comes in waves or cycles, and there's nothing you can do about it. 'Obladi, oblada.' Ride high in April shot down in May.

And so, given this as the way things are, the Teacher asks a reasonable question, '*what do people get for all their hard work?*' What's the use in trying anything? Why try to make life better than it is? Why try to make a better world? Or to get back to The Byrds, what's the use of working for peace, or justice, or any of the other aspects of Shalom that would make things right in the world, when whatever you do, whenever you make progress, the opposite is going to come roaring back anyway? Oh man I get what he's saying. Last weekend I saw an old man sitting along the street holding a sign that read, 'my father fought the fascists, I guess now

its my turn.' Think about that! All the hate and racism and bigotry and authoritarianism that our forefathers and mothers worked so hard to overcome, have been roaring back in recent years, galloping apace with seemingly little to stand in their way. What's the use? Some years ago, the group Matchbox Twenty sang, *Just see how far we've come*, celebrating the progress toward a better world that had been made over the decades. These days, a better song might be Lincoln Park's *In the End*: 'I tried so hard and got so far, but in the end, it doesn't even matter.'

Oh, but it does. For you see, to this point, I've been analyzing the Teacher's words from the perspective of 'life under the sun,' that is, as we have defined it throughout our series, life apart from God. But if we go back to verse 1, you will find that the Teacher has made a subtle shift in this poem: *'to everything there is a season,' he begins, 'and a time for every purpose under heaven.'* Do you see? All the trials and calamities of life, the setbacks that make it seem as if we're always taking 'one step up and two steps back,' as Springsteen sang, would have no purpose under the sun, but under the rule and reign of heaven, well, that's a horse of a different color, isn't it? Under the rule and reign of heaven, everything finds purpose. I don't mean by that that everything that happens, including all the bad stuff, is God's will. Lord no. Please, no one leave today thinking I said that. But that in everything, even the hardest things, as Paul said in Romans 8:28, God is working both for the good of those who love him and his glory. The Teacher puts it this way in verse 11, *'God makes everything beautiful in its own time.'* Yes. God is working folks. Even in the bad stuff. Even in the setbacks. Even in our greatest disappointments. He is working, and will redeem everything, weaving everything together into a tapestry of grace so beautiful we cannot currently imagine what it will look like. No eye has seen, nor tongue can describe, the things God has prepared for those who love him. As the Teacher says, 'we cannot see the whole scope of God's work from beginning to end,' but one day, we will, & when we do, all we will be able to say will be, 'Wow.'

Yes, under the sun life has no meaning. But God's will is that no one should resign themselves to a life 'under the sun,' for as the Teacher says, *'he has planted eternity in the human heart.'* What does this mean? Well, for starters, it means that God has planted within each of us a desire for eternity, a thirst that cannot be slaked apart from the One who is eternal. As Augustine said centuries ago, 'our hearts are restless O God, until we find our rest in thee.' Hence the 'burden' of which the Teacher speaks in verse 11, that sense of futility we get when we try to comprehend the cycles of life 'under the sun.' Yes, even the frustration we feel then is a gift from God, designed to drive us to seek the something more that is the 'life under heaven,' the life that makes sense of things, or, at least, gives us hope to believe that one day, sense will be made of things. But beyond this, the notion of having eternity in our hearts takes on a second meaning once we discover that it is there. Because once we find it, once we find God, once we connect to the ground of our being, the power source for all living, then we know, that there is meaning in everything, or at least one day, there will be. That all the cycles of life that seem to be going nowhere are actually going somewhere. This knowledge gives us strength to believe that all our efforts to make a better world, even when they seem not to be working, are working. It gives us the hope to carry on, to believe that God will take everything we do and use it, not just in the fickle here and now, but in the steadfastness of eternity. As N.T. Wright wrote in *Surprised by Hope*: *'what you do for the Lord is not in vain...You are, strange though it may seem...accomplishing something that will become in due course part of God's new world...every act of love, gratitude, and kindness; every work of art or music inspired by the love of God and delight in the beauty of his creation; every minute spent teaching a severely handicapped child to read or to walk; every act of care and nurture, of comfort and support, for one's fellow beings and for that matter one's fellow nonhuman creatures; and of course every prayer, all Spirit-led teaching, every deed that spreads the Gospel, builds up the church, embraces and embodies holiness rather than corruption, and makes the name of Jesus honored in the world – all of this will find a way, through the resurrecting power of God, into the new creation that God will one day make.'* SBH.

And so, the Byrds (Seeger's) hopeful take on the Teacher's poem turns out to be the correct one. There is use to the good we do. There is hope. There is reason to push on in our efforts for peace, for justice, for the Shalom of God. At least, there can be, if we seek the eternal that lies within our hearts, connect to the ground of our being, and trust the One who will, make everything beautiful in its time. Let us pray.

From Thomas A' Kempis

Grant me, O most loving Lord,

To rest in you above all else –

Above all creatures, above all health and beauty

Above all glory and honor, above all power and dignity

Above all knowledge and cleverness, Above all riches and art

Above all fame and praise, above all sweetness and comfort

Above all hope and promise, above all gifts and favors that you can give

Above all happiness my mind can feel;

Above all that is not you God.

Anything that you bestow on me

Or reveal to me or promise to me

Is too small and unsatisfying

If I do not see or meet you in it.

For surely my heart cannot truly rest,

Or even be contented,

Unless it rest in you.

[And Lord, having found that rest in you, give me strength to carry on, believing that in the light of your grace and glory, everything matters.]

Amen.