

LIFE IS A GIFT
Ecclesiastes 2:16-3:15

I've found that it is incredibly helpful to think of life as a series of moments – ordinary moments, special moments, and sometimes even wonderful or magical moments. We long for those special and magical moments in life, especially during Christmas time. But there's a danger: we can get so caught up in the monotony of life that we end up missing those moments we long for. It's not the trials or difficulties that keep us from wasting our lives – those seem to have the opposite effect. It's the monotony of life that Solomon is going to warn us about in the book of Ecclesiastes. We'll look at 6 steps to really enjoying the moments in life.

Last week, we came to a summary statement in the book of Acts where Luke wrapped up the Jerusalem era and I thought that seemed like a good place to pause in Acts as we enter into the Christmas season. And I'm one of those guys who thinks in a secular, post-Christian culture, we're crazy not to take advantage of Christmas to talk about the incarnation. I plan to go to spent a few weeks in Hebrews talking about how God has spoken to us in Christ through the incarnation. But today, a special message in Ecclesiastes. I will say that I do have to give credit for much of this sermon to a fellow Berean pastor, Bryan Clark. This is a subject of passion for him because with the longstanding heart condition he has, he has disciplined himself to make the most of every moment. His passion on this subject in past sermons have greatly influenced my day-to-day life.

Ecclesiastes 2:16 is where we'll begin if you want to turn there. But just to introduce us to the book and really amplify the application of it, I want to give us some **literary and historical context**: the book is **written by King Solomon**. You see that in chapter 1, verse 1. He calls himself "*The Preacher, the son of David, king in Jerusalem.*" That's where the title of the book comes from. The Hebrew word for "*Preacher*" is *qoheleth* which means someone who convenes an assembly of people to address them. That's how we get the functional Greek title *ecclesiastes*. An *ecclesia* is a gathered assembly of people. The church is the *ecclesia*. The study of the Church is *ecclesiology*. So the book has the idea of a preacher speaking **wisdom** (that's the **genre**; with some **poetry** mixed in) to a gathered assembly.

You might pick up on that in the book in chapter 5:1, "*Guard your steps as you go to the house of God and draw near to listen rather than to offer the sacrifice of fools; for they do not know they are doing evil.*" Solomon is warning us about the false worship syndrome where we give lip service to God and maybe even do some religious works, but our hearts are far from Him. We live as if He doesn't exist. That's doing evil without realizing it – it's lacking wisdom. But that's a taste of the setting. Solomon has been there, and he's done that, and he's saying, "*Listen up, so you don't waste your life chasing wind. Listen to wisdom before you act.*" At this point, He's an old man who doesn't want us to repeat his failed experiments in life. He wants to spare us the insanity of man's pursuing the same things over and over again expecting different results. So reading this book is **like sitting on grandpa's lap, listening to his wisdom**.

If you've read much about Solomon's life, you know he's worth listening too. It's actually very exciting to read about his life in the Old Testament and try to imagine how magnificent it was. He was the son of King David who inherited an incredible kingdom and under him, the kingdom reached its zenith. He had it all – **power, possessions, pleasures, prestige**. As a young man God appeared to him in a dream and God basically said, ask me for whatever you want and I'll give it to you. And because Solomon didn't ask God for a long life or wealth, but for wisdom to lead Israel well, God granted him all 3 (1 Kings 3:5-15) – wisdom, wealth, and a long life.

Other than Jesus Christ, he became the **wisest** man to ever live. People, even other rulers like the Queen of Sheba, came from all over to hear the amazing insight God had given him. He was the most **powerful** and the **richest** man in the world. In his day, gold was so plentiful that silver was considered as nothing (**1 Kings 10:21**). We could say he had the world at his fingertips.

Yet, even with all of this, he was **miserable!** What most men spend their lives chasing, he actually had, and knew the inability of it to truly satisfy. That's the experience he wants to share so that we will learn from it: **Verse 2** says, "*Vanity of vanities! All is vanity!*" He uses the word **vanity** 38 times and it means "**empty**" or "**worthless**". He appears very **cynical** about life in the book intentionally because he's wrestling with that experience, like a man debating with himself openly, in order to teach us the solution – to grant us wisdom.

He touches on various subjects like riches and power, but as we pick it up in **2:16** he is on the **subject of wisdom**, commenting on how both the foolish man and the wise man have the same fate. "*For there is no lasting remembrance of the wise man as with the fool, inasmuch as in the coming days all will be forgotten. And how the wise man and the fool alike die! So I hated life, for the work which had been done under the sun was grievous to me; because everything is futility and striving after wind.*"

I wanted to pick it up in this section because there are **two key phrases**. One is "*under the sun*" and the other is "*striving after wind.*" **Under the sun** is used 29 times and is reference to a **purely human perspective** of life on this earth – a perspective without God. **Striving after wind**, or chasing after wind, is a reference to **futile activity**. It's helpful to think of a child maybe chasing leaves or what we might call a dust-devil. If you grew up here, you likely chased dust devils as kids and ran at it in order to catch it or get in it. I have a yellow lab that when she was a puppy chased anything that moved – even a single leaf! It's cute for kids and puppies, but not adults.

Chasing the wind is futile activity because you can't catch it. So it's a great depiction of the way that most people spend their lives – chasing money and possessions and power and you don't realize until you catch it, it is empty and fleeting. You can spend your whole life in this monotonous, busy rat race with the goals of landing that dream job, buying that dream house, dream car, dream vacation, only to realize it's not all it's cracked up to be. But **this is the normal experience**, isn't it? We just crank out one day after another after another, **never really enjoying each day, always living for another day**. We're just going through the weekly grind, waiting for 5 o'clock on Friday or that 3-day weekend. And if we don't stop that vain insanity and listen to

wisdom, we'll look back at the end of our life and say, "*What was the point of all that? What did I just spend my life doing? What a waste!*"

He continues on in **verse 18**, "*Thus I hated all the fruit of my labor for which I had labored under the sun, for I must leave it to the man who will come after me. And who knows whether he will be a wise man or a fool? Yet he will have control over all the fruit of my labor for which I have labored by acting wisely under the sun. This too is vanity. Therefore I completely despaired of all the fruit of my labor for which I had labored under the sun. When there is a man who has labored with wisdom, knowledge and skill, then he gives his legacy to one who has not labored with them. This too is vanity and a great evil. For what does a man get in all his labor and in his striving with which he labors under the sun? Because all his days his task is painful and grievous; even at night his mind does not rest. This too is vanity.*"

Look at the result of chasing the wind: "*I hated all the fruit of my labor.*" He has deep anger & frustration & resentment associated with the objects he's been living for because there's so much uncertainty connected to them. Chapter 5 describes the rich man who has it all one day and loses it all the next. He is a man who, listen to this: "*eats darkness with great vexation, sickness and anger.*" Chasing the wind does that because you encounter blocked goals all along the way in your chasing, you get it and realize it's not what it's cracked up to be, and then you can't take it with you when you die. I wonder how many people today are missing what God has for them because they're chasing what will only cause them vexation. Talk about the worst exchange ever. The wise man, in contrast, is occupied with enjoying his life with gladness of heart (5:20).

Look at the **1 summary statement** in **2:24-25**. Solomon has a thought, and then a conclusion to the thought several times. "*There is nothing better for a man than to eat and drink and tell himself that his labor is good. This also I have seen that it is from the hand of God. For who can eat and who can have enjoyment without Him?*" So Solomon's solution to the paradoxes and frustrations of life is set forth **6 times** in Ecclesiastes like this (2:24; 3:12-15, 22; 5:18-20; 8:15; 9:7-10; 11:9-10; 12:13-14). And to summarize all the statements together we could say that **the secret to life under the sun is not to figure out every frustration, but to see life as a gift from God and to rejoice in it**. Better than all the gifts *under the tree*, is the gift of life *under the sun*.

1st Step: See life as a gift from God.

Solomon's saying, "*Life is a gift! Enjoy it!*" It's vastly different from the Epicurean fatalist who says, "*Que sera sera! That which will be, will be!*" It's vastly different from the hedonistic sensualist who says, "*Let's party, for tomorrow we die!*" That's not what Solomon is saying. He is saying life is to be viewed as a gift from God and is to be enjoyed. The apostle Paul, one whom we would consider anything but a hedonist, said, "*God gives to us richly all things to enjoy.*" Jesus said He came to give us **abundant life** (John 10:10). Sadly, us Christians don't show the world that enough. More often than not, churches are known for being dirge-y and lives that make Christianity look like work in a salt mine! Man, the church is where we ought to find joy and hope and life!

Anyway, this approach to life assumes you can't truly enjoy life or have a fulfilling life without God – no matter how you look at it. James 1:17 says every good gift is from God. Solomon says, *"Who can have enjoyment without Him?"*

2nd Step: Invite God into your life.

If you want to be saved from the despair of chasing wind, and instead have meaning and purpose and satisfaction *under the sun*, you have to look **above the sun**. **You need God in your life**. If you have Him, you have more than the world can offer and you will find this life making sense and having meaning. But the only way to invite God into your life is through prayer, accepting Christ as your Savior who died for your sins and rose again. At Christmas, that's what we're celebrating – we could never be good enough to get to God, so God came down to us. He was incarnated – He took on flesh to die in our place taking the punishment we deserve so that whoever believes in Him will not perish but have everlasting life. **The gift of eternal life** is the greatest gift you will ever receive (Jn. 3:16).

Picking it up in chapter **3:1**, you'll see the same mental process is repeated.

"There is an appointed time for everything. And there is a time for every event under heaven—

A time to give birth and a time to die;

A time to plant and a time to uproot what is planted.

A time to kill and a time to heal;

A time to tear down and a time to build up.

A time to weep and a time to laugh;

A time to mourn and a time to dance.

A time to throw stones and a time to gather stones;

A time to embrace and a time to shun embracing.

A time to search and a time to give up as lost;

A time to keep and a time to throw away.

A time to tear apart and a time to sew together;

A time to be silent and a time to speak.

A time to love and a time to hate;

A time for war and a time for peace.

What profit [advantage] is there to the worker from that in which he toils? I have seen the task which God has given the sons of men with which to occupy themselves."

This passage is often quoted in a sentimental way but in the context, it's really dripping with sarcasm. It's very monotonous on purpose, almost like it's intended to bore you to death - *"A time for this and that and this and that..."* By the end, you're saying, *"OK! We get the point!"* Solomon is asking, *"Is this all there is? What advantage does anyone have? We're born, we die, and there's a bunch of stuff in between.* It reflects a monotonous life. We get up, we go to work, we go home, do a couple things, go to bed. We get, go to work, go home, go to bed. Over and over... and if we're not careful, we miss out on the gift that that day was.

The **summary statement** in for this portion is in **verses 11-15**: *“He has made everything appropriate [many translations read, beautiful] in its time. He has also set eternity in their heart, yet so that man will not find out the work which God has done from the beginning even to the end. I know that there is nothing better for them than to rejoice and to do good in one’s lifetime; moreover, that every man who eats and drinks sees good in all his labor—it is the gift of God. I know that everything God does will remain forever; there is nothing to add to it and there is nothing to take from it, for God has so worked that men should fear Him. That which is has been already and that which will be has already been, for God seeks what has passed by.”*

There’s a lot here that we could pick apart here but basically Solomon is saying that all the moments in life – from birth to death – are orchestrated by God. He grants us the gifts and we are to make the most of them. *“He seeks what has passed by”* reminds us that **once a moment is gone, there is no getting it back and we will have to answer for them** (12:13-14). Don’t get from that that because we have gifts, like spiritual gifts, we need to have some sort of high intensity of ministry every day. *Burn out or rust out!* they say. That’s not what the text is saying. **The point is we should be making the most of the moments we’re given, soaking them up, enjoying them.**

3rd Step: Take the time to really enjoy your moments.

Slow down. Soak it up. Don’t hurry. Enjoy the conversation. Feel the sunshine on your face. I had a lengthy to-do list last Monday (my day off) but my in-laws stopped by and my mom stopped by and we ended up enjoying the 72 degree day on the porch. I didn’t get my list done, but I didn’t miss what mattered most. Enjoy the food on your plate – don’t just wolf it down. We eat most meals without really enjoying it because we’re so busy scrolling through social media or planning what we’re going to do when we get done eating. Taste the food. Smell it. Wrap it in bacon or put ranch on it – do whatever you need to do to enjoy it. I sip Dr. Pepper like it’s a drink for kings & monarchs. It’s a reward!

4th Step: Live in light of eternity.

That phrase, *“He has set eternity in our hearts”* is saying that there’s something about us that understands **this life can’t be all there is. There has to be something more.** There has to be more beyond this life, some higher principle, some sort of universal truths that go beyond the particulars of this life that can give this life meaning and purpose – even in the ordinary, everyday moments. And Solomon’s good word is that there is! **Even the ordinary moments can have eternal significance.** He says we don’t always know what that looks like, but God will make everything beautiful in its time. If we want to see it more, I think we have to **discipline ourselves to see the eternal good in each day.** I put a devotional in your bulletins and on our blog to help us grasp that concept more.

5th Step: Discipline yourself to see the eternal good in each day.

Try to imagine the fleeting brevity of your life: Pretend there is a never-ending line that stretches from one side of this room to the other side but it continues on forever in both directions. It

represents **eternity**. Picture God's **program for this world** from creation to its consummation in just a few inches (beginning and end of time as we know it). Within the world's timeline, imagine your timeline. It's just a teeny, tiny, little scratch on that line. In this short little life, you can chase the wind by living for the temporal things that don't satisfy. You can waste it by living in fear and anger that you'll lose this life. Or you can embrace it as a gift to be lived in light of that which matters forever – 100,000 years from now on new heaven and new earth (Rev. 21) it still matters.

There's a phrase I think will help us make the most of each moment. It's a little tacky, but it helps me: "*It's not just another...*" It's not just another fill in the blank."

6th Step: Remember, "It's not _____..."

Tell yourself, **it's not just another day**. This day is a gift. It can have eternal significance.

It's not just another drive to work. It's an opportunity to talk to God, thank God, and praise God.

It's not just another workday. It's an opportunity to serve the Lord in whatever my vocation is (Col. 3:22). It's an opportunity to encourage a coworker or customer. It's an opportunity to bless someone with the skills and gifts God has given me. To make someone's life better.

It's not just another sunny afternoon. It's a day to spend on the porch with your family. To go on a walk with a friend. To wet a line. To go on a hike. To enjoy God's good gifts.

I've been telling myself on vacation, **it's not just another deer season**. For me, the outdoors and wildlife makes my heart soar in worship to Creator God. Nature is God's cathedral and it does something in me nothing else does. It is my equivalent of walking with God in the garden in the cool of the day (Gen. 3:8). I soaked up every moment of deer season this year. I didn't waste it.

Some of you lead Bible studies. **It's not just another Bible study**. It may be that one Bible study someone really needed. A time where God gave guidance and direction, changing their life forever. Maybe someone learned something new or was sent home in a better frame of mind – allowing them to better face a difficult situation the next day. Maybe then someone else sees their response and wonders what's different about them. You won't see it or know it, but God does use it.

It's not just another Christmas dinner. You may have 20 more years Christmas dinners together with your whole family (PTL!). But because I've been doing funerals around here, I know that for some of you it is your last Christmas dinner with everyone present at that table. Some of you have kids who in a few years will be out of the house. That full nest is a short season in life. Take the time for family dinners. Don't everybody gab a hot pocket on the run to their separate lives. Slow the roll. Sit down. Thank God together. Eat together. Talk together.

It's not just another bedtime story. I can't tell how often I'm tempted to tuck the kids in bed as fast as possible so I can just lay down and shut down. But you only get so many nights where they

want you to tuck them in and read to them. And you never know when just the right Bible story might draw them to faith in Jesus. One bedtime story might change their eternal destiny. One bedtime conversation might be a conversation they remember for the rest of their life.

There's a highly respected biographer named James Boswell who is known for his biography on Samuel Johnson and other books. Well, he frequently told people about a special childhood memory he had – a day fishing with his dad. He bragged about how much he learned that day from his dad in the things they talked about. That one day was etched into his memory as a special day. Apparently, years later, someone close to Boswell who had heard Boswell brag about that day, found his dad's journal and opened it to that date. On that date read one line: "*Gone fishing today with my son; a day wasted.*" It's been said his dad "didn't sell a product or sign a deal or bring in a penny, but failed to realize it was one of the most productive days of his life."

Each day is a gift.