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Ecclesiastes 3:1-15
Ecclesiastes: Wisdom for Today
A Time For Everything

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In the late 1950's folk-song writer and performer Pete Seeger wrote a song that was first recorded in 1959 (though not released until 1962) by a band called "the Limelitters". Then a few months later, Seeger recorded and released his own version of the song. While the Limelitters were very popular in the early and mid 1960's, and Seeger and been very popular since the 1940's, it was a recording of the song in 1965 that really caught fire. It debuted on the Billboard *Hot 100* chart in the U.S. at #80 and eventually climbed all the way to #1 a few weeks later on December 4, 1965. It peaked at #3 in Canada, and at #26 in the UK, which proves that Americans have better taste in music. Any guesses what song this is? [Watch this video](#) and see if you've got it right...("Turn, Turn, Turn" by The Byrds.)

I don't know if any song ever recorded has ever been as popular as that song, that was based entirely on a Scripture passage. The words come straight out of Ecclesiastes 3, from the King James English translation – which, considering when the song was written, that's what you would expect. Given that the lyrics were written more than 2,000 years before, they qualify as the oldest lyrics of any number one hit on the Billboard Hot 100. Maybe the oldest of any song to even make it onto the Hot 100. The only words Pete Seeger added are the repeated word in the chorus "Turn, turn, turn," and one other phrase that follows the line, "A time for war, a time for peace," where he adds, as an encouragement for people to work toward peace: "I swear it's not too late."

So the song puts an emphasis on working for peace, which given the era in which it was written and all that was going on in the world, this is no surprise. But the passage itself as it comes to us in the Bible, is really about much more than that. In fact, this passage, in many ways, encapsulates everything that Ecclesiastes is about, particularly verses 1-8. So let's take a look at Ecclesiastes 3:1-15, arguably the most recognized passage of Scripture: **Ecclesiastes 3:1-15.**

This is a really poetic section of Scripture. There's a rhythm to the words and the themes that are balanced and contrasted in a beautiful way. It's no wonder that Seeger was able to take this passage and turn it into a song. It has been a passage for all seasons of life and all the emotions that we go through: new love to broken relationships; from the birth of a child to the death of a nearly life-long spouse; from landing a job to getting fired; the thrill of victory to the agony of defeat. It is all covered here. Life, which is ever-changing, often taking twists and turns that we cannot foresee...while other things which come about because of our own initiative – such as whether to speak or keep silent – all of it is covered in these verses.

Although these first 8 verses do not mention God by name anywhere, we cannot forget that the overarching context of Ecclesiastes is the context of faith. True, as we said last week, Ecclesiastes asks more questions – either explicitly or implied – than it gives answers; but it is all in the context faith nonetheless. The existence of God and the work of God in the world is a “given” in Ecclesiastes, and ultimately, in spite of all the questions, Ecclesiastes points us to God - as we see in the latter half of today's passage. So this is written in the context of belief in, and relationship with, God – who is the author of life and all of its complexities. And so these 8 verses remind us that God is over and above as well as with us in all of these experiences; that all of life is in the purview of God. It speaks to the presence of God in the midst of all facets of life.

Verses 9 and 10 remind us of the “hevel” opening we looked at last week where we read that everything is meaningless, or a mystery or a puzzle. **Here, it's that all the work that a person does really ends up being for naught; this is part of the “hevel” (puzzle/mystery) of life.** We see this theme in several places in Ecclesiastes, though we also read of taking pleasure in our work, or as in today's passage: to find satisfaction in our work and to recognize the gift from God that that is. Then in verse 11 we get a reflection on these previous 10 verses – particularly it's a reflection on the verses that the Byrds turned into a number one hit, though also verses 9 and 10. And so verse 11 says that God has made everything beautiful in its time – birth, death, planting, harvesting, gathering, etc. Now, if we want to get down in the details of each thing he wrote about in those 8 verses, we might

wonder about the beauty of some of the things he mentioned in here – such as war and hate.

But even those: there is a time for them, and there’s a beauty in them.

For instance, God hates sin, including yours and mine. We are called to hate it as well. There’s always a time for that, and the hating of sin is certainly more beautiful than the sin itself. A lack of hating our sin is a big reason people will persist in sin. If we hate something we won’t participate in it. That hatred of sin results in a war waged on sin. There’s a battle. It’s a spiritual one, and we’re in the middle of it.

The last 16 months or so I have had a major musical revolution in my life, as I have come to have a deep and genuine appreciation for a particular musical genre that I had previously not cared for and used to even mock and make fun of. In fact been listening to this musical style almost exclusively for 16 straight months: Rap and Hip-hop. Oh, you thought it might be country music? Maybe some day – miracles do happen! Now, you need to know that in particular I’ve been attracted to *Christian* rap and hip-hop.¹ I’m not listening to secular stuff that’s filled with all kinds of language and themes I don’t need in my head. But still, this music is unmistakably rap and hip-hop, and I used to detest it. Now, I’m captivated by it. My kids have been pretty mystified at dad’s music selections, though I think they are now finally used to it and think it’s kind of cool. Gwen, however: not so much. Pray for our marriage. ☺

Anyway, one of the 380 rap/hip-hop songs I’ve downloaded onto my phone – thank you Amazon Prime – opens with audio from a preacher’s sermon where he expresses frustration with Christians who “murmur” about their “imperfections and failures and addictions and shortcomings...murmur, murmur, murmur...”and he laments the lack of making war on these things. It’s like we’re showing up to an old west shoot-out but we’ve brought our squirt guns instead of our colt 45’s. He implores his listeners to make war on the sin in their lives. And He’s right. **We need to engage in a war, putting on the spiritual armor of Ephesians 6, and battle against the sin and the addictions and the ungodly things in our lives that have a grip on us, and stomp them out.** There’s a beauty in hating our sin and making war on it.

So all of these things have a kind of beauty in them as they happen in their time. There's a time for everything, as verse 1 says. And he can say this with confidence because of his faith in God, because of the eternity that he writes of in the second part of this verse.

And in that second part of verse 11, he recognizes that God has placed in us a sense that there is more than meets the eye – eternity is set in us.

This world and all we can see in the night sky does not seem to be all that there is. We have this idea planted in us that there is more to life than just the space-time continuum. And what this verse tells us is that a longing for eternity and an accompanying eternal realm are planted in us by our Creator.

Ironically, this innate sense that there is more than meets the eye is what drives people to explore the universe – from molecular biology to the mountains to the cosmos. But it's what drives our desire to create something that lasts beyond ourselves – a painting, a financial inheritance to pass on, some kind of accomplishment we might be remembered for...even the photos we take where we preserve a moment in time beyond that moment in time. You see, this idea of eternity is buried deep in us, and it drives us individually and collectively as humanity, to do some amazing things: Pyramids, ½ mile high buildings, symphonies, Sports championships, paintings, inventions that change the world, impacting the next generation or two by inspiring them to be all they can be...these kinds of things are connected to what God has set in us about eternity. And we humans have accomplished some amazing stuff, to the point that we might be tempted to think we are all that and a bag of chips.

And yet, this verse puts us in our place: we cannot actually comprehend eternity. We have all our great accomplishments: “Look how great this company is I started that can ship any product anywhere in the world for free in 2 days;” “Look how beautiful my family is that I’ll share on social media;” “Look at this fast car I bought that goes from 0-60 in 3.2 seconds.” God says: “Hey, I started the whole Universe; I created that which you call beautiful and snap a picture of; I created light – can you build something that goes that fast? I don’t think so!” We cannot fathom what God has done from the

beginning to the end. The place in us where God has planted this longing for eternity and given us the sense that “eternity is a reality” is a limited, finite glimpse of it, even if it drives us to incredible accomplishments. But those accomplishments still pale in comparison to God’s accomplishments. It’s analogous to a preschooler who draws a stick-figure self-portrait (I’d probably still draw one like that if I needed to) and thinks it should go in the Louvre. We cannot really fathom the difference between our creations and God’s. We cannot fathom the difference between our knowledge and God’s knowledge. We cannot really fathom eternity. But God has planted the seeds of it in us.

And I think this is one place where Ecclesiastes can connect with today’s world. We have access to all the knowledge of humanity on an electronic device not much bigger than a deck of cards. But we cannot fathom what God has done from beginning to end. **Without God, we can’t even answer the question of: Why does *anything even exist*?** Why are there stars? Why is there an earth? Why are there living things on the earth? We cannot answer these questions of “why” on our own, because we can’t fathom God, who is the author of everything from the beginning to the end.

And this all leads to verse 14 where we read that: **The purpose of everything happening in its time is so that people will fear God.** This is one of these verses in Ecclesiastes that sheds light on the rest of what we read. This verse is like a lens through which we view and understand the rest of what we read. We often like to reduce the meaning of this word, fear, to mean “respect” and “have reverence for”. And it’s true, the Hebrew word, “yaray” does mean respect and reverence. But first and foremost it means “fear.” As in “scare the living daylights out of you” kind of fear. **Why would you have that kind of fear of God? For one reason and one reason only: Because God is real.** If you don’t believe God is real – with real power to create life and end it, to grant eternal life or not – if you don’t believe that this God is real, then there’s no reason to fear God. It’s like the parent who tells their kid not to be afraid of the monsters under the bed, because they aren’t real. Ecclesiastes is telling us that God is real and He is worthy of being feared. So the conclusion here is that everything we experience in life...everything for which there is a time for them to happen – and that

everything God has done from beginning to end...the conclusion about these things is that they are done so that people will fear God: so that we would acknowledge the reality of God, and stand in awe of His power and His knowledge, and His eternal nature...and fear Him. And it's not a fear that drives us *away* from Him, but that draws us *to* Him...that fills us with a desire to live for him, to live in His will, to live in a way that pleases him.

This is something that some of us may need a wake-up call about. We need God to thump us upside the head and to help us see the beauty that everything in its time has – from birth to death, from war to peace – and have our eyes opened up to what this all points us to: God our heavenly Father, whom we ought to fear greatly because of His reality. Then we can live in relationship with Him, and help others open their eyes up to the reality of who God is as well.

So, if you don't fear God right now, then follow the advice of the Pete Seeger's song: Turn, turn, turn. There really is a time for everything, and there's no time like the present to turn to God. **Turn away from assuming that we can figure it all out, and turn to the God who comprehends it all because He is the author of it all.** Fear Him, the one whose power we cannot fully comprehend, but we know has the power to extend to us eternal life. The invitation to turn to God may most directly apply to anyone here who has lived like *we* are the kings and queens of the universe and of eternity and has never turned to God before; but it also applies to those of us who believe God exists, believe that He loves us, and who want to love Him in return, but stuff keeps getting in the way of our relationship with God. Turn from that stuff...and then turn to God, who has made peace possible through the cross of Christ. As that song says: "I swear, it's not too late." It's not too late for any of us to find the eternal peace we're looking for: it's found in the arms of your heavenly Father, who's got all eternity in His hands, and who has given everything its own beauty in its time...including the beauty of turning to our Heavenly Father and living in relationship with Him. There's no time like the present, to do exactly that. Let's pray...Amen.

ⁱ Two songs in particular set me off on this adventure in Christian Rap/Hip-Hop. If you dare to give them a shot, they are: *Church Clap* by KB (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ACJt5wwrDdl>), and *Dum Dum* by Tedashi (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RwS_GN-YYMw). Both feature Lecrae, who is arguably the biggest name in Christian rap, so you might check out his stuff as well. ☺