

## The Better Blessings of Life Under the Sun Ecclesiastes #3

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*It's a Wonderful Life!*

Quick disclaimer: It's September, and I'm going to be talking about a Christmas movie. No, I'm not a big fan of starting the Christmas season in September. Dan Foster and I had breakfast at Cracker Barrel on Friday, and it's annoying to me that they already have so much Christmas stuff set up. I'm a traditionalist, and I still believe the Advent season begins after Thanksgiving, not right after Labor Day. Still, for the sake of this sermon, I'm now going to reference my favorite Christmas movie. We now return you to your regular programming . . .

My favorite Christmas movie is *It's a Wonderful Life*. My favorite Christmas TV special is *A Charlie Brown Christmas*, but the story of George Bailey and his noble fight against the evil Mr. Potter, is such a great classic. George is discouraged and in despair, and he thinks all of his toil and life's work has amounted to nothing, and that the world would be better off without him. Clarence helps him see how wrong he is, how life is still worth living and he is making a real difference in the lives of so many people. In the end, George is thankful for all the things he was frustrated about at the beginning of the movie, and he comes to have a deeper appreciation for his wife and children, for the Christmas season, and for all the blessings of his wonderful life.

Ecclesiastes has a bit of the flavor of parts of *It's a Wonderful Life* to it. Overall, it can feel pretty dark and depressing, like George felt on that bridge before he threw himself in the water, wishing he had never been born. "Vanity of vanities! All is vanity!" says the Preacher. All of life under the sun is just vanity and vapor, a chasing after the wind, so what's the point?

But not so fast! Once we accept the vaporous vanity of life under the sun, once we stop trying to find ultimate meaning and our soul's satisfaction in the passing things of this life and we accept that things in this life don't last and that we can't grasp them, that they're like our breath or smoke or the wind. Once we stop trying to figure out the plans and purposes of God behind all the often-maddening things we experience under the sun, and instead trust that God is in control and we're not. Once we put things "under the sun" in their rightful place and gain a proper perspective, we can begin to see that this life does have some better blessings. The Preacher does tell us about many things in this life that are "better" – In fact, the Preacher uses the word "better" 23 times in this book, more than any other book of the Bible. We saw the first one last week, in 2:24:

*"There is nothing better for a person than that he should eat and drink and find enjoyment in his toil. This also, I saw, is from the hand of God"* – 2:24, ESV

But the Preacher has many more for us:

- *"I perceived that there is nothing better for them than to be joyful and to do good as long as they live"* – 3:12
- *"So I saw that there is nothing better than that a man should rejoice in his work, for that is his lot. Who can bring him to see what will be after him?"* – 3:22
- *"Better is a handful of quietness than two hands full of toil and a striving after wind."* – 4:6

- *“Two are better than one, because they have a good reward for their toil.” – 4:9*
- *“Better was a poor and wise youth than an old and foolish king who no longer knew how to take advice.” – 4:13*
- *“Guard your steps when you go to the house of God. To draw near to listen is better than to offer the sacrifice of fools, for they do not know that they are doing evil.” – 5:1*

Some are unexpected, like the beginning of Chapter 7:

*“A good name is better than precious ointment,  
and the day of death than the day of birth.  
It is better to go to the house of mourning  
than to go to the house of feasting,  
for this is the end of all mankind,  
and the living will lay it to heart.  
Sorrow is better than laughter,  
for by sadness of face the heart is made glad.” – 7:1-3*

I thought about simply structuring the whole message as a survey of these “better” verses, but as I read and studied, I realized that would not be the most helpful approach, because we would miss some of the best things. So, instead, we’re going to use Chapter 3 as a lens, as a tutorial or primer, to prepare us to see these better blessings of life under the sun more clearly, to better understand the keys to joy in this brief and vain life.

### **A. The Blessing of God’s Good Providence, 3:1-11**

We begin with the most famous passage in all of Ecclesiastes, thanks to the Birds (or Peter Seeger, who wrote “Turn, Turn, Turn”) . . .

*For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven:*

*2 a time to be born, and a time to die;  
a time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is planted;  
3 a time to kill, and a time to heal;  
a time to break down, and a time to build up;  
4 a time to weep, and a time to laugh;  
a time to mourn, and a time to dance;  
5 a time to cast away stones, and a time to gather stones together;  
a time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing;  
6 a time to seek, and a time to lose;  
a time to keep, and a time to cast away;  
7 a time to tear, and a time to sew;  
a time to keep silence, and a time to speak;*

*<sup>8</sup> a time to love, and a time to hate;  
a time for war, and a time for peace.*

*<sup>9</sup> What gain has the worker from his toil? <sup>10</sup> I have seen the business that God has given to the children of man to be busy with. <sup>11</sup> 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. – 3:1-11, ESV*

This beautiful passage has been misunderstood by some Bible scholars, who see it as simply more of the Preacher's complaining about the vanity of life and the endless cycles of earthly living. But I think it's a beautiful celebration of the providence of God, which can be appreciated only by those who have given up trying to grasp at life under the sun, either to control or understand it. "*He has made everything beautiful in its time.*" Everything serves not just *a* purpose but HIS purpose.

And yet, there is a condition here, of course: We cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end. God has given us business to be busy with, and He has put eternity into our hearts, so that we long for so much more than this life "under the sun" can give us – more on that next week – but, if we will accept and do what God has given us to do and believe that He has indeed made everything – even times of death, tearing down, weeping, and war – beautiful in its time, then we might be ready to really enjoy life, as much as it can be enjoyed.

The real key to all of these better blessings is to see life "under the sun" as also being life "under heaven" – that is, as a life given to us by God. The hand of God sometimes gives us heavy and burdensome things to labor under, but He also gives us good blessings to enjoy, and He actually commands us to enjoy them. We cannot master life; it is not a puzzle to be solved, a ladder to be climbed, a mountain to be conquered, or a day to be seized. No, life is a gift to be received, in humble fear of the Lord who gives it. We dare not make more of this gift than it is, not should we be complaining or grumbling that it is not more than it is; rather, we should receive with thanksgiving and enjoy with contentment what God gives us to enjoy and to do in this short life "under the sun." We live under His providence. So, let's explore some of these beautiful things He has made and given us . . .

## **B. The Blessing of Working Hard, Being Joyful & Doing Good, v. 12**

*"I perceived that there is nothing better for them than to be joyful and to do good as long as they live; <sup>13</sup> also that everyone should eat and drink and take pleasure in all his toil—this is God's gift to man. . . So I saw that there is nothing better than that a man should rejoice in his work, for that is his lot. Who can bring him to see what will be after him?" – 3:12-13, 22*

The first cluster of better blessings specifically named here in chapter 3 are being joyful, doing good, eating, drinking, and taking pleasure or rejoicing in our work or our toil. This is very ordinary, everyday

living, but we are given ample opportunities to do good, to rejoice, and to enjoy life – good food and drink and hard work – just about every single ordinary day.

Hard work is a blessing. To be able to work hard and accomplish something, to expend ourselves in labor, is a gift and a blessing. My work is primarily mental and very sedentary, and when I feel tired from working, it is usually my brain and/or my eyes that are tired. I've been enjoying running with Jeremiah over the past few months as a way to work my body and get good and physically tired. I also enjoy cutting my grass, which gives me a good sense of accomplishment, to start and finish a task and see immediate fruit from my labor.

It's good to work hard. We should work hard at the job God has given us, not as just a way to earn money for our families, but as a good gift from God. We should also seek out physical work if our jobs are sedentary desk jobs.

Later, in Ecclesiastes 9:10, the Preacher will say it this way: "*Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with your might, for there is no work or thought or knowledge or wisdom in Sheol, to which you are going.*" Now, that may seem a bit depressing, and in two weeks, we'll see how the resurrection redeems this sad ending, but this much remains true, even in light of the resurrection: God has given you a limited amount of time in this life under the sun to work hard, to think, to exercise wisdom. So, do it!

It's also good to be joyful. We take life entirely too seriously sometimes. Yes, I say "we" and I need to look right in the mirror when I say that. It's good to take opportunities to laugh at ourselves and to just be thankful and relax. You know the old saying, "All work and no play make Jack a dull boy." Well, it can also make us stressed, grumpy, bored, feeling stuck, etc. It's good to have fun, to play, to laugh, to be silly.

It's also good to do good. If we have opportunity to serve others, we should do it. It's satisfying and rewarding.

We should also eat and drink to the glory of God, as 1 Corinthians 10:31 says: "*So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God.*" (ESV) Good food and drink are a blessing. Later, in Ecclesiastes 9:7, the Preacher says, "*Go, eat your bread with joy, and drink your wine with a merry heart, for God has already approved what you do.*"

Do you know that, if you belong to God through faith in Jesus Christ, God has already accepted you? God has already made you holy and acceptable in His sight! This life is not a test we're hoping to pass so that God will accept us. If that's what we're trying to do, we have absolutely no hope of passing the test. We're not good enough! But Jesus already passed the test for us, and if we belong to Jesus, God accepts us in Him as His dearly loved children. My children don't have to work hard to earn my acceptance. I love them! I accept them! Now, they can still be disobedient and be disciplined, but I'm not walking around constantly thinking about how disappointed I am in my children. God has made you acceptable and has accepted you and your works in Jesus Christ!

So, now what? Well, now *eat your bread with joy, and drink your wine with a merry heart!* God has give them to you! Aren't you glad that God made food so tasty? God could have decided to nourish our bodies through chunks of Styrofoam, or he could have indeed made all meat taste just like chicken, with

no variety whatsoever. But He shows His love for us in the beauty, flavor, and variety of the food He gives us to enjoy. So, enjoy it!

### **C. The Blessing of Self-Awareness, v. 18**

In our enjoyment of life, it's a blessing to be self-aware. We may be depressed by what we read in verses 18-19, but there's a blessing in it: *"I said in my heart with regard to the children of man that God is testing them that they may see that they themselves are but beasts. For what happens to the children of man and what happens to the beasts is the same; as one dies, so dies the other. They all have the same breath, and man has no advantage over the beasts, for all is vanity."* (ESV)

One of the things that sours the sweetness of life, that ruins the blessings God gives us, is an over-inflated sense of ourselves that leads to entitlement. Spoiled children are spoiled because they've lost the ability to enjoy anything in life. They think they deserve it all and they have no sense of gratitude or surprised joy.

Obviously, we are not just animals, but we need to remember two things: We will die; we are as mortal as animals. Yes, we could talk about souls that never die, but that's not the point of this passage – the point is, we're not as great and strong as we think we are. We are also no more deserving of God's blessings than the animals are; in fact, we're less deserving and yet more blessed. To appreciate and enjoy that, we need to realize this.

But here's what we do: We not only fail to be thankful and in awe of how good God is to us in this life, we complain when things don't go exactly our way, and then we compound our ridiculous sin by asking things like, "Well, why doesn't God save everybody? If God can save anybody, why doesn't He save everybody?" That is the ultimate question of arrogant entitlement. We should ask instead, "Who are we, that God should give us life and breath, work and play, food and drink, day-after-day, when we ignore Him and rebel against Him and never give Him thanks . . . and then, on top of that, He chooses to adopt and eternally save some of us rebels by His good grace and for His glory and our eternal good?? Wow! Who are we to receive such great blessings? We are no better than the animals and certainly less deserving. God is SO GOOD!"

### **D. The Blessing of Mourning, 7:2-4**

Now, we're going to jump out of Ecclesiastes 3 and see some other "better blessings" from the rest of this book. We already read the beginning of chapter 7, but let's go back and see what the Preacher is saying here:

*A good name is better than precious ointment,  
and the day of death than the day of birth.  
It is better to go to the house of mourning  
than to go to the house of feasting,  
for this is the end of all mankind,  
and the living will lay it to heart.  
Sorrow is better than laughter,*

*for by sadness of face the heart is made glad.  
The heart of the wise is in the house of mourning,  
but the heart of fools is in the house of mirth. (7:1-4, ESV)*

“Never miss a funeral, they’re too important for you.” This may seem like odd advice, but it’s some of the best life advice I’ve ever received. I think it’s good for married couple to go to weddings, to be reminded of their own vows, and it’s good for all mortals to go to funerals, so we can be reminded of where we will all be one day. Everyone dies.

In one of his excellent sermons on Ecclesiastes, Brian Borgman from Grace Community Church in Minden, Nevada, referenced a study that had been published claiming that Vitamin E reduced the risk of death. Without being silly, he stated quite confidently that Vitamin E most definitely does not reduce the risk of death. If you’re sitting here this morning and you’re breathing, I can tell you your risk of death is 100%. Studies have shown that of every 100 humans, 100 die. It’s good to bear this in mind.

Verse 1 helps us grasp the significance of this, too. Having a good name when we die is more important than being a beautiful, healthy baby when we’re born. Ecclesiastes doesn’t have a very well developed theology of the after-life or of the resurrection, but verse 1 of chapter 7 is one of several hints – which we’ll look at more closely in two weeks – that death is not just what makes life under the sun vain and vaporious because it ends this life very suddenly and sometimes unexpectedly, but death also makes life under the sun vaporious because it ushers us into eternity, which God has set in our hearts, into our real and lasting existence, which will not be vaporious or vain. So, take it to heart!

### **The Blessing of Wisdom, 7:5-13**

Then, if we were to read on in chapter 7 we would see the blessing of wisdom. Verses 11-12 say –

*Wisdom is good with an inheritance,  
an advantage to those who see the sun.  
For the protection of wisdom is like the protection of money,  
and the advantage of knowledge is that wisdom preserves the life of him who has it. – 7:11-12, ESV*

The Preacher has warned us against the vanity of living for wisdom. Wisdom cannot save us from the vaporious nature of this life, but it can give us light and understanding, so we can live better in our days “under the sun.” So, wisdom is good, one of God’s better blessings under the sun, and much of Ecclesiastes is filled with Proverbs of wisdom for better living. But more on the wisdom of Ecclesiastes next week . . .

### **E. The Blessing of Youth, 12:1-8**

The final blessing I want us to see – and we could see many more – is the blessing of youth. We see this blessing in a strange word-picture of old age given to us in chapter 12 –

*Remember also your Creator in the days of your youth, before the evil days come and the years draw near of which you will say, “I have no pleasure in them”;<sup>2</sup> before the sun and the light and the moon and the stars are darkened and the clouds return after the rain,<sup>3</sup> in the day when the keepers of the*

*house tremble, and the strong men are bent, and the grinders cease because they are few, and those who look through the windows are dimmed, <sup>4</sup> and the doors on the street are shut—when the sound of the grinding is low, and one rises up at the sound of a bird, and all the daughters of song are brought low— <sup>5</sup> they are afraid also of what is high, and terrors are in the way; the almond tree blossoms, the grasshopper drags itself along, and desire fails, because man is going to his eternal home, and the mourners go about the streets— <sup>6</sup> before the silver cord is snapped, or the golden bowl is broken, or the pitcher is shattered at the fountain, or the wheel broken at the cistern, <sup>7</sup> and the dust returns to the earth as it was, and the spirit returns to God who gave it. <sup>8</sup> Vanity of vanities, says the Preacher; all is vanity.*

The word-picture here is of our lives as a house with all its features and inhabitants, and the aging process coming on us like ill effects coming on this house and its inhabitants. Some of the images are easy enough to grasp –

“*The keepers of the house tremble*” – trembling arms and hands

“*The strong men are bent*” – our backs get bent over with age

“*The grinders cease because they are few*” – losing teeth and then losing the ability to chew solid food

“*Those who look through the windows are dimmed*” – poor eyesight

“*One rises up at the sound of a bird*” – sleeping very lightly and not being able to sleep soundly for long

“*afraid also of what is high, and terrors are in the way*” – fear of falling or tripping over something

“*all the daughters of song are brought low*” – hard of hearing

“*the almond tree blossoms*” – white hair

“*desire fails*” – well, desire fails

The point is this: Not only is death coming for all of us, but so is this fun season of life. So, to the extent that you can still be active, work hard, eat and drink, enjoy your wife and your life, then do so. But remember your Creator in the days of your youth. Don't take His good gifts and ignore the giver. Some people have the idea that youth is the time to have fun, middle age is the time to make money, and then old age is the time to think about God. Don't be so foolish as to do that! Your life will be so much better if you remember your Creator in the days of your youth and walk with Him through all of life.

### **And Yet, All is Vanity!**

Life is full of the better blessings of God, and yet how does 12:8 end? 12:8 ends things with the words that opened Ecclesiastes - *Vanity of vanities, says the Preacher; all is vanity.* Life is too short to take too seriously. Now that may not be the kind of thing you expect to hear from a Preacher, but the Preacher Solomon said it in Ecclesiastes, and I'm saying it to you now. Life is short; we're going to get old, and we're going to die. But in the meantime, we have been given great blessings to enjoy. We can't understand or master life; we can't seize the day. But we can remember our Creator in the days of our

youth, we can do whatever our hands find to do with all our might, we can rejoice in the better blessings of this life, even as we look in faith to the life to come.