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Rick Myatt

WAIT UNTIL THE BATHROOM IS DONE

Ecclesiastes 3:1-14

Toby and Anna went to Disneyland to celebrate Anna’s birthday. We talked with them about favorite rides there. One of our favorites is Space Mountain. That is a bit surprising. Do you remember going to the theater to see a movie? Regal Cinemas had an introduction to the featured movie that depicted you being on a roller coaster. I had to close my eyes when they showed it because it caused me to have a bit of motion sickness. Wait, you couldn’t watch that, but you like going on Space Mountain, which is a roller coaster in the dark? Rick Myatt works in mysterious ways. Actually there’s a part of that ride that I have to close my eyes for. You go through this tunnel where they have long lights that appear to be spinning, which makes you feel like you’re spinning, even though you’re not. It occurred to me that life is sometimes like that ride. It is dark, disorienting, unexpected and tumultuous. How am I supposed to figure it out and navigate through it without getting sick?

That is especially true given my limitations. I recently had to cut some papers in half using scissors. Using scissors in an effective fashion is something of a challenge for me. One this occasion when I did a couple of them they looked terrible. I asked Laurie if she would do it for me. I told her that I’m bad at using scissors. Somehow that simple skill eludes me. As I explained this to Laurie I also told her that things like pasting or gluing are also problems for me, that I end up inevitably making a mess. She said, “Did you flunk kindergarten or something?” I probably should have. They passed me along to first grade because they won’t flunk anyone out of kindergarten. And I did learn to read. I just never was able to master those craft kind of things like cutting and pasting. I can cut and paste documents on the computer just fine though.

How am I going to get through this ride called life when maybe I’m not even equipped to do kindergarten level work? Let’s see if we can get some help from Ecclesiastes 3:1-14.

GOD HAS A BEAUTIFUL PLAN

In the late 1950’s folk musician, Pete Seeger, put the words of Ecclesiastes 3:1-8 to music and added a few words. A group called the Limeliters recorded the song. Seeger himself also made a recording. In 1965 the American folk rock group called The Byrds recorded a version of the song, calling it *Turn, Turn, Turn*, and that version soared to number 1 on the charts. It became a classic rock song that we still hear from time to time.

These verses from Ecclesiastes are a beautiful, memorable poem. Seeger tried to turn it into an anti-war message, which is odd given that the last line of the poem is that there is “a time for war and a time for peace.” Saying there is a time for war is hardly an anti-war message. But what is the meaning of this poem? Some pastors say that this passage teaches us how we should live. They say we need to have a time to weep and a time to laugh, a time to mourn and a time to dance. But that makes no more sense than Seeger’s anti-war song. Is God telling us there is a time to hate, there is a time to kill? That cannot be right.

What then is the point of this poem? I think the Teacher has given us a description of what life is like. The point is not that we should do all these things, but that life includes all of them. We can key our understanding of the passage off the first couplet of contrasts. There is a time to be born and a time to die. He obviously is not telling us what we should do. We don’t choose when we are born, nor do we choose whether or not we should die. Our life will include birth and death. So it is with the rest of these descriptions.

The author was looking at life and this is what he saw. There was birth and death, planting and uprooting, killing and healing, tearing down and building, weeping and laughing, mourning and dancing, tearing and mending, loving and hating, war and peace. No one has a life where there is only birth, planting, healing, building, laughing, dancing, loving and peace. All of the things mentioned here are characteristic of life in this world, and because of that we are all going to get a taste of all of it, the good and the bad. We are going to experience highs and lows, victories and defeats, love and anger, joy and sorrow.

Recently Brad Colbert told me a story I could relate to. It sounds like one of our travel experiences. The Colberts were going to Virginia to have a vacation with family there. The day before the trip they were informed that their flight back east had been canceled, but the airline had booked them on another flight later that same day. However, it was a red eye flight. They felt that starting their vacation by staying up all night was less than desirable, so instead they booked a flight first thing the following morning. That flight took off in good order, but it had an intermediate stop at Dallas. As they were on the tarmac in Dallas they could see thunderstorms in the area. This turned out to be a problem. Just as they were about to push back from the gate a thunderstorm moved right over the airport. The airport halted operations because they didn’t want ground personnel out on the tarmac when there were lightning strikes in the area. Unfortunately, the thunderstorm decided to stay right there. It stayed there for 6 hours. As the hours passed a problem came into play. It was getting so late in the day that the flight was going to run into a curfew problem at the destination airport. They could land, but there was a noise abatement rule that prohibited them from using reverse thrusters after a certain hour. The only way they could land without using the thrusters was if the plane was light enough that it could stop just using brakes. To lighten the plane they needed fewer passengers, so they offered money to people who would give up their seats. The Colberts decided to not take the offer. Eventually they did take off, and they landed around 1:30 in the morning. They went to the car rental agency they had reserved a car from, and found that it was closed. However, there was one employee still there. Oh, great, he could help them. Au contraire. He said they were closed and he could not help them. He was only there to help a platinum customer who was yet to arrive. He couldn’t do anything for them. They found there was one car rental agency still open, and they were able to rent a car from them. This made it possible for them to get to the vacation site,nowhere they went on to have a wonderful time. And that’s life. Here’s a great thing, you get to have a vacation with family members. Here’s another great thing, you get to fly across the country, making a trip in a matter of house that would take days to drive. But there’s a problem. Your flight is canceled. Then the flight you’re able to get is delayed for hours. Then the rental car company is closed. But then another company comes to the rescue. On the trip there was time to laugh and time to cry, time to grind your teeth and time to breathe a sigh of relief. You could sum up this poem saying, “There’s good news and there’s bad news.” That’s going to be true everywhere in life, and it’s going to be true in every life.

The writer is trying to make sense of life and of this world. The problem for us is that life isn’t quite the way we think it should be. The logical way things should work, we think, is that since there is an Almighty God who loves his people, those who love and obey him should see evidence of his love in their lives. There will be a direct correlation between how good and godly people are, and the way their lives go. There should be some apparent reward for doing things God’s way. But the writer says it doesn’t work out that way. Instead, in every life there is a season for everything. There is a season for winning and losing, for joy and sorrow, for highs and lows, for dancing and for mourning. We are all going to get our share of the good and the bad, no matter who we are.

Life is a bewildering array, a confounding mix of good and bad. That’s true for everyone. That’s the point. And that presents us with a dilemma. Bob Dylan said in an interview that there is no permanent happiness in life. He said he had moments of happiness, “But it’s like water. It slips through your hands. As long as there’s suffering you can only be so happy. How can a person be happy if he has misfortune?” That’s the difficulty these verses present. If there is a time for mourning in all our lives then there will never be happiness.

But then the author makes an assertion that, in light of what he has just said, is surprising. In fact it is almost whiplash inducing because it is so unexpected. He says God has made everything beautiful in its time. Wait, this guy just spent 2 chapters discussing the fact that life under the sun is futile, empty and meaningless, then he followed that up by describing it as bewildering and confounding in its array of ups and downs, joys and sorrows. There is no direct correlation between how godly one is and how smoothly one’s life goes. He concluded by saying that God has made everything beautiful in its time. How did he get that conclusion from all that he has just said? Life is futile, meaningless and bewildering. Everybody is going to get some good and some bad no matter what they are like. How is that making everything beautiful?

This is not a statement that is a conclusion from all that he has been saying. It’s kind of corrective of it. There is a stark contrast between what one would conclude by having an “under the sun” perspective and what one would understand by having an outlook based on who God is and what he does. The writer of this book intersperses these statements in this unusual book that reflect his ultimate point. If you try to understand life without God at the center of it, you end up with confusion, futility and despair. The remedy for all of that is to remember the truth about God and making him the center of your life and your understanding. While life is kaleidoscopic and confusing, while when you try to settle accounts purely by what you see in this world, nothing balances, when you put God in the equation, when he is at the center of it all, what you will see is beautiful.

The words “in its time” are crucial. Maybe not today, maybe not tomorrow, but at some point we will see that what the Teacher said is true. What God has done is beautiful. He is weaving together many elements, some of them even being unpleasant, but somehow when he’s all done what he has made is going to be lovely. This makes sense if you give it some thought. If you make a cake you will probably have as part of it a raw egg. Is that an appetizing bit of food? Absolutely not. It would be disgusting. You will need flour. Would you like to eat dry flour right out of the package? No thank you. Yet the baker takes these unappealing elements, puts them together and makes something beautiful out of them.

Take a look at the broad sweep of history. Adam and Eve failed in Eden, but God immediately foretold a time when he would fix what they had done. What followed was one of their sons killing his brother. Then as more of their descendants came along and populated the planet they got so bad God decided he needed to hit the reset button and start over with a guy named Noah.

Then God chose to use the descendants of one man and his wife to restore the mess people had made of themselves and the world. But much of what happened with that group is ugly and sad. There were a few highlights, but constant failure was more typical of God’s people. It culminated in the ultimate rejection when God’s people rejected their own Messiah. What is astounding is that God took all of that and somehow made it into an astounding plan to save people. The whole thing ended up being masterful and beautiful in its wisdom and grace. And that is what God is doing with everything in our lives.

Galatians 4:4 says, “When the set time had fully come, God sent his Son.” God had a plan through many hundreds of years. There was even a set time for Christ to come. When that time arrived, Messiah came right on time. God used all the failure and rebellion to somehow fulfill his plan to rescue us. At most points during the process the project looked like a total dumpster fire. But right on time, as planned, it proved to be miraculous and awesome.

Nothing in our lives is wasted. God has a plan that is at work. Some of what happens will be confusing, hard to understand, even ugly, just as it was with Israel. But when we see the whole thing, we are going to say, “Oh, I see. That is amazing! It is beautiful.”

We had to remodel one of our bathrooms. It wasn’t just that it was out of style and ugly, though that was true. We had some water damage in the walls that wasn’t going to heal itself. So we had to fix it. The process started with demolition. They had to knock out the tile around the bathtub and tear down the walls. At that point there was a bit of a “what have we done” feeling. The bathroom looked terrible. We could see right down to the studs. Some of the studs had damage from a past termite invasion. Some of the insulation looked bad from water damage. What we saw in that bathroom was not pretty. Then they put up waterproof boards for the moisture barrier. They were a slight improvement on the torn up walls, but it was still pretty ugly. Next they started putting up tile, but it took several days and it was a mess. Having the guys working in the house was disruptive and messy.

There was not a single point during the process when I thought, “This looks great. It’s beautiful.” But now they have finished the project. Now we look at it and say, “Hey, this is great. I like how this looks.” Our problem is we are in the middle of the project, and we are saying, “Well this is the farthest thing from beautiful.” The project isn’t done, and we don’t see the whole thing. If we could see the whole thing in its completed form we would say, “That is amazing! What an artist God is. This is a truly beautiful.”

GOD HAS AN ETERNAL PLAN

The next thing the Teacher says is crucial. He says God has put eternity in our hearts. At various points in this book the writer will say some things that can cause us some heartburn. He says everybody dies. Good or bad, wise or foolish, rich or poor, faith or no faith, everybody ends up in the grave. In 3:19 the writer tells us, “Surely the fate of human beings is like that of the animals; the same fate awaits them both: As one dies, so dies the other. All have the same breath; humans have no advantage over animals. Everything is meaningless.” Does that sound like it belongs in the Bible? People are the same as animals. They all die. End of story. Later 9:2 says, “All share a common destiny, the righteous and the wicked, the good and the bad, the clean and the unclean, those who offer sacrifices and those who do not. As it is with the good, so with the sinful.”

If you just look at what happens “under the sun,” only consider what you see in this life, this is where you end up. Animals die and people die. Good people, godly people, have no advantage over terrible people because they all die. Looking at it through that under the sun lens, there’s no difference. They die and are gone forever, no matter what they are like.

But 3:11 totally changes that perspective. Though it is obviously true that everyone dies just like animals die, this verse says God has put in the hearts of humans a desire for and a sense of eternity. We have a sense that there’s more to us than living here for a few decades, then being recycled back into the ecosystem. This is crucial. The plan won’t look beautiful without eternity factored into the equation. Without eternity the chaos of life is just chaos. Only with the eternity that we sense we were made for does it all become beautiful.

Some will say that this idea that there is life after death is nothing more than wishful thinking. But at least part of the point here is that we do think it. Where does that come from? What is there in our experience of life that would suggest that is even a possibility? Nothing. That sense is there because God has put it in our hearts. This is a persistent and pervasive idea.

A recent survey by AARP of people over 50 years old revealed that 86% of them believe in heaven. Furthermore, 66% say that their confidence in life after death has increased with age. Actor and comedian, John Cleese, when asked in an interview what he thought the meaning of life is, responded, “I believe that there’s an afterlife, although I can’t explain it. I think the evidence is too strong that there’s something going on that contemporary science knows nothing about.” Dolly Parton said of life after death, “I don’t think (death) is the end of any of us.” She doesn’t have a good sense of what that life is, but she thinks it is real. Actor George Clooney said he’s skeptical about life after death. Then he said, “But as you get older, you start thinking. It’s very hard for me to say that once you’ve finished with this chassis that we’re in, you’re just done.”

Cathy Haines was a reporter with USA Today who was diagnosed with cancer. Not long before her death she wrote about how at times fear wakes her up at night and she weeps like a 3 year old. But at other times she feels peace. She said what helped her is thinking about a ship sailing away on the blue ocean, an object of beauty and strength. She envisioned watching as it nears the horizon, and then it disappears over the horizon and someone says, “There, she’s gone.” She writes, “Gone where? Gone from my sight. That’s all…Her diminished size is in me, not in her. Just at the moment when someone at my side says, ‘There. She’s gone,’ there are other voices ready to take up the glad shout, ‘There she comes!’ And that is dying.”

None of those people have a biblical world view and understanding of eternal life. But what is important here is that all of them have a sense that death is not the end. They can feel it. There’s more to us than these few years. God has put eternity in their hearts. This is hugely important. It changes life from a bitter tragedy that ends with unrelenting sadness for every person, into a thing of hope and joy. It is, in fact, eternity that gives meaning to our lives.

In my younger years I was something of a paradox. I always hated school. Yet I was also a very good student, always got pretty good grades. In 8th grade we studied the US Constitution. I was really good at that for some reason. In fact, I was the star pupil in that subject. A local TV station had a show that was a quiz type show where they had students from local junior high schools come on and compete, representing their school, with the subject being the Constitution. That tells you a lot about the state of local TV programming in Bakersfield back then. Watching a bunch of 13 year olds answering questions about the Constitution no doubt was riveting television. But guess who was chosen to represent Compton Junior High. Yes, that’s right, the honorable Rick Myatt. My point here is this was a big deal, right? Well, no, not really. It is only from the perspective of many years that I can see that event in its real significance. I can see that being the best in that one small thing didn’t matter, and that the dumb TV show was laughable, but there was value in learning. And so it is with our lives. What gives them both perspective and significance is eternity. If all we have is these few years on this earth, then the whole project really is empty and futile. It is nothing more than chasing after the wind and it is utterly meaningless. But eternity infuses the whole thing with meaning.

Pastor and writer, Mark Buchanan, tells of a conversation he had with a philosophy student in his 20’s. This young man said he rejected Christianity and its lure of eternal life. He said, “Life justifies living. Life its its own reward and explanation. I don’t need some pie in the sky mirage to keep me going.” He said that life has enough mystery and adventure so it doesn’t need anything else to account for it. Buchanan commended him and said, Yes, it’s good to experience the wonder of this life. Bravo, life justifies living.

But then he said, “Only…” If you’re old enough or if you’ve seen reruns of the old TV show Columbia, you will remember he always had a tactic of saying, “But there’s just one more thing…” That’s kind of what Buchanan did. He talked about a man he had met named Richard who is 44 but looks 20 years older. He is an addict. He has AIDS and is dying. The last time he had seen Richard, Buchanan had given him a bus ticket so he could go to his mother’s home. He hadn’t spoken with her in 15 years, but he was hoping he could go home to die. Richard said, “I wish I’d never been born. My whole life has been a mistake. My whole life has been misery.”

Buchanan said, “I have a question about your philosophy. How do I explain to that man that life justifies the living?” The young philosopher had no answer. He’d have to think about it and get back to him. Buchanan gave him his address and asked him to write when he came up with something. He has not heard from him. Buchanan said that’s “because life does not justify living. Eternity does.” In order for our lives to have meaning there has to be some reference point that is much larger than our time on this earth. It is, as Buchanan said, only the eternal that infuses life with real significance, and part of the reason eternity is in our hearts is we sense that.

GOD HAS AN UNFATHOMABLE, BUT CERTAIN PLAN

We see one more important statement in these verses. Yes, God makes all things beautiful in their time, and he has put eternity in our hearts, but it is also true that “no one can fathom what God has done from beginning to end.” Yes, the plan is beautiful, but we don’t see the whole thing and it includes much that we simply don’t comprehend. We don’t fathom the whole thing. This is a problem for us because that means there’s going to be a lot that happens in our lives that we can’t figure out.

We are like Job, grappling with all of the horror that had happened to him and having no sense of what was going on. He trusted God, but he wrestled, he questioned, he struggled because none of it made sense. In the end God essentially said, “That’s because you’re not me.” At that point Job got it and said, “I despise myself and repent in dust and ashes.”

In his book, *When All You’ve Ever Wanted Isn’t Enough*, Rabbi Harold Kushner wrote, “It is a devastating thing to have God fail you. However you conceive of God…to base your life on certain assumptions and then to have them collapse under you is a shattering experience. It leaves you feeling not only that your theology is not right, but that nothing in the world is right.”

Job’s story tells us that our assumptions about God and about life are going to collapse under us at some point. That is because we cannot fathom all that God is. We are finite, limited by time, and have minds and hearts that have been affected by the fall. We cannot totally understand an infinite, eternal, holy God. He operates in ways that are mysteries to us.

We often labor under the misconception that we should be able to understand what happens in our lives. You will often hear people say, “Everything happens for a reason.” I believe that is true. The problem is, I may never know what that reason is. Job never did. It actually might be something that has nothing to do with events here in this world, so there’s no way for us to know the why.

We were on an airplane as we were preparing for a landing. The flight attendants announced that everyone needed to buckle their seat belts, store their tray tables and put their seats in the upright position. I noticed a young child whose parents were helping her heed those instructions. She did not understand why she had to do all of that. They never explain why you have to do all those things. I believe at least part of the reason for that omission is they don’t want to traumatize any kids on board. They probably don’t want to traumatize any adults either. Imagine if they gave the rationale for doing as they instruct. You need to buckle in to your seat because the majority of airline crashes occur on take off and landing. Uh, wait, what now? It gets better. It is important that you be buckled in because in the event of a crash at our 140 knot landing speed, if you’re not buckled in your body will be thrown out of your seat and become a lethal missile. You will certainly be killed and might kill any others you are thrown into. It is important that tray tables and seat backs be stowed out of the way because when the plane has stopped moving after the crash and people are panicking to get out of the remains of the aircraft before it starts to burn, the seats and trays will get in their way. By this time the kids, and probably a few adults will be wailing in fear.

The airline people know that you don’t need to understand all the gory details behind why you should do as they ask, they just need you to trust them and obey their instructions. We don’t need to know all the reasons, we just need to know they are looking out for our best interest. And so it is with God. We don’t need to know all that he is doing, in fact, we can’t know because we are not infinite and eternal. But we do need to trust that though we cannot fathom all that he is doing, he is making everything beautiful in its time.

IMPLICATIONS

EXPECT SEASONS

I have heard people who aren’t fans of San Diego say that part of the reason is that they enjoy the seasons. I conclude what they mean by that is they like some really cold weather that includes snow. We don’t get that here. But San Diego most definitely has seasons. In July and August we often have days where the high is in the 80’s and the low is around 70. We don’t get that in December. We can have days in December where the high is 58 and the low is in the upper 30’s, and it’s raining. The seasons here are very different and quite noticeable. They even have seasons in Hawaii. They are even less extreme than here, but they exist and make a difference. I don’t say this to promote one place or one climate over another. I say it to make the point that wherever we live we had better expect to experience seasons, because we will.

This passage tells us that is true of life also. I’m pretty boring. I’d like to have summer weather all year. We kind of do the same thing with life. We’d like one climate in life, a climate with nothing but joy, victory, building, laughing and dancing. This poem reminds us in this broken world there are seasons, and some of them will entail sadness, losing, tearing down and weeping. The seasons will come and go.

Knowing this helps us in two ways. First, it reminds us when we are in the hard times that it is a season. That means it won’t last forever. Yes, the winter may be harsh, but there is a summer ahead.

Second, and more important, God has not failed or abandoned us. He uses these words to remind us that we are in a broken world and these seasons are a part of it. If we expect God to give us only “summer time, when the living is easy,” then our faith in him will crumble when the winter arrives, as it will in every life. So expect the seasons so it won’t shake your trust in God when they come.

REJOICE IN THE RESURRECTION

The fact is eternity is in our hearts. Humans sense that there is more to us than the few years we have on this planet, and that sense is quite stubborn. Even those who insist it is not so, have trouble getting away from the sense that it is true. However, just because we feel that or believe it does not mean that it is, in fact, true. For instance, it is commonly believed that a penny dropped from the top of the Empire State Building would kill you if it hit you in the head. That doesn’t make it true. The TV show Mythbusters examined this one and discovered that the penny would hit terminal velocity and at that speed would not do serious damage to a human body.

It is commonly believed that the Great Wall of China is the only man made structure that can be seen from space. Many believe it, in fact, textbooks even state this, but it is not true. Even Chinese astronauts have verified they cannot see it from space. It is commonly believed that Vincent Van Gogh cut off his own ear in a fit of madness over a woman. That’s what I’ve always heard. It’s not true. The ear was cut off by friend and fellow artist Paul Gauguin when they got into a fight and Gauguin attacked him with a fencing sword. Van Gogh lied about it to protect Gauguin from prosecution.

The point here is that believing in eternal life does not make it true, no matter how stubborn the belief. Despite all the stories of near death experiences, we don’t have proof that there is life after death. Except for one historical event. Jesus Christ said he would die, then come back to life, and he did it. This proved that he was who he claimed, God in human form, and that there is hope of eternal life. So we should found our belief in that proof and rejoice in it.

HAVE AN ETERNAL FOCUS

Having eternity in our hearts does important things for us. First, it gives us hope. My aunt Dorothy died last week at the age of 93. My mother now is the only one left from her generation in our family. It is so sad that we all face that final act of life. Except that because Jesus conquered death we know that it is not the final act. We have hope that we will continue, and that the continuation will be even better.

Second, it gives meaning. Having eternity in our hearts means that what we do has a point. If there is no eternity, if there is only life under the sun, then as chapters 1-2 said, the whole thing is absurd and pointless. It is a tale full of sound and fury, signifying nothing. But because there is eternal life, it all means something.

In my case, I could easily sum up my life as a big fail. Laurie and I planted a church here and led it for 31 years, at which point that church told me to take a long walk off a short pier. It felt like a big failure. Now I’m leading another church with a whopping 30 people in it. There’s some world changing ministry right there. Not. Many people would say it’s just more fail. But eternity totally changes the equation. It says that what matters is That I do faithfully what God has given me to do. He’s responsible for the results, I am responsible for being faithful. That means that eternity gives huge meaning to even the little I am doing right now. And that is true for all of us. Maybe you don’t see any point to what you are doing. But if you are being faithful to God, obeying him, loving those around you, worshiping him, it matters, and it matters eternally.

As we were talking about this Laurie said having eternity is the only way we can have peace. She’s right. It is how we know that everything happens for a reason. It is how we can know God makes everything beautiful in its time so we can rest during all the seasons of life.

REST IN THE BEAUTIFUL PLAN

Finally, don’t despair in the dry times, the hard times, and don’t forget God in the good times. Remember that in ways we cannot see God is weaving it all together to make something beautiful. We are in the middle of the project right now, so we can’t see what it will be, but we know it is going to be glorious. The bathroom project is not done. But when it is complete you’re going to love it. Never forget that. Assign that truth to everything that happens in your life, and thank God that he will make it all spectacular.