Life is Pain

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[0:00] Well, here we are in Ecclesiastes. We have been on a profound journey with a guy who is looking for the meaning of life.

He is probably King Solomon because he has the same commitment to wisdom that Solomon had, and he also has the wherewithal. He has the ability to pursue meaning to the extent that he is through pleasure.
Remember last week. See if he can find meaning through that. Or trying through human wisdom. But everything he is finding is falling short. Now, we don't know for sure if this is Solomon.
He is called Koheleth, which means gatherer of people. So it can be translated as preacher, or it can be a philosopher who is gathering students. And we may translate that word in a different way as well, especially as you've been going through this book of Ecclesiastes. You may think that the Hebrew translation should actually be Eeyore, which is English for a gray, tired donkey that's very depressed and gloomy all of the time.
He's a real pessimist. And surely this is what we see in this guy, Solomon. Is he depressed? Well, maybe or maybe not. But in his search for meaning, he is finding that all of our work, from the world's perspective, in the end is vanity. It's emptiness. It's striving after the void.
[1:39] But, you know, that realism is a gift for us as well. Because his search is asking the tough and humbling questions. They actually confront us with reality. And this is a gift because it brings us to the reality of life. It both humbles us and drives us to Jesus Christ, where true hope is to be found.

And that's what wisdom is all about. It is about humility before God. It is about hoping in him. Now, you may know that our beloved Jim Packer was a big Ecclesiastes fan. And this comes out in his classic book, Knowing God. Now, this is a wonderful book. And I know some of you have read it. But I invite you, as a New Year's resolution, to read or reread that book. It will bless you. And I want to just mention something that he says in it about Ecclesiastes. He says this, To live wisely, you have to be clear-sighted and realistic. Ruthlessly so, in looking at life as it is.
Most of us live in a dream world with our head in the clouds and our feet off the ground. We never see the world and ourselves in it as they really are. And this deep-seated, sin-bred unrealism is one reason why there is so little wisdom among us. Ecclesiastes is the one book that is designed expressly to make us realists. Now, what is that realism?
My mom, yesterday, asked me to pray for a Christian who I met several years ago and who doesn't go to our church. Her doctor has given her only about two to four weeks to live. She is at the end of her life.
[3:46] She is with her family. She is experiencing some pain. It's a tough time. And she has asked for prayer for her frustration because she wants to be with Jesus now. She cannot understand why God is making her weight. But she wants his help to be able to trust him through this season in her life. Even though she's asking that question, why is he making me weight? What is the purpose of his timing?

She is asking for help to trust him. And that desire is full of wisdom. She is a realist, a Christian realist. And that is real life. To be a realist is to know that there is a lot about life that does not make sense to us. Why does God do what he does? Well, Ecclesiastes says that even though he speaks through his word, there is a lot we simply do not know about God and his ways in the world. But we can trust God and rejoice in him even when we don't have understanding, even though we don't know the meaning of all that he is doing in the world.
And so Packer goes on to put it so clearly, wisdom is not sharing in all God's knowledge, but it is a disposition to confess that he is wise and to cleave to him and live for him in the light of his word

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through thick and thin. That in the end sums up the point of Ecclesiastes.
Will we trust God through thick and thin, even though we don't have all his knowledge? And this brings us to our passage. Verses 1 through 8 are very familiar. And it is partly because of a song that was written in 19, that was actually written in the 50s, but made very popular by the birds in 1965.
If that song is going through your mind, that tells you how old you are right now. And if you don't know anything about what I'm talking about, that tells you how young you are as well. But this song is one, and this poem is one that tells us not how we are to live. It's not a prescription on how to live life appropriately. It is Solomon simply observing the cycles of time and life in a beautiful poem with 14 couplets. And he tells us that it is all according to God's plan and order. That's what life is.
[6:45] God is clearly in charge of all that happens in life, and it fits together in his plan and good purposes for a creation that is fallen, that has been subjected to futility by God because of rebellion against him. So there is this beautiful picture of everything fitting together under God's sovereign goodwill. But if you really listen to this poem, Solomon is also expressing a deep frustration.

Notice how many times in life that the good and wonderful things are undone by the destructive. So death undoes birth. The plant that is planted is plucked up. Love is countered by hate. Peace is shattered by war. There is losing along with all you're seeking. You know, and then the COVID couplet that says the embracing is replaced by a time of refraining from embracing. Laughter turns into weeping. So you see, for all the wonderful gain, there is this painful loss that he is expressing. There's a lot that doesn't make sense to him about life. Wouldn't it be good instead if rebirth kept going on and on? If healing lasted forever? If love never ended? If peace was forever? And that there was always a reason to laugh and to dance? And that we would always find what we are seeking?
That we would always be doing and creating the things that would last. But instead, he says there's endless cycle in life without a point to it. We saw a bit of this in the recent inauguration of the U.S. president. Because in that, already this week, Biden has signed a flurry of executive orders that undoes the things that Trump, the previous president put into his executive orders. Who in turn, turned around all of the things that Obama was doing in his executive order. And so on and so on. There is this cycle that Solomon is seeing. What is the point? And this is the endless starting over again in life and building up what is taken down that Solomon expresses. And so he says in verse 9, what gain is there in work? Solomon is frustrated. In all his wisdom and his wealth, and he was a powerful wealthy king. His experience is not able to figure out the meaning of life. He is sure that God is in charge of all that happens in life, both the joyful and the deeply painful. But he can't understand what God is doing. So Solomon's pride with all his glory is broken down in this book of Ecclesiastes. He is humbled.
Yet this opens the way to hope, to sure hope, and with it joy as well. It is well worth us looking at these frustrations of his. So in the second half of our passage in verses 11 through 22, and I do invite you to be turning to this in your Bible, Ecclesiastes 3, 11 through 22, he expresses his frustrations.
[10:26] And there are three profound limitations that he spells out. In verses 11 through 15, he cannot see what God sees. And then in verses 16 through 17, he cannot see justice, only injustice. And finally, he says, I can't see what happens after death in verses 18 through 22. So you see, he longs to see what he cannot see now. And this humbles him. These frustrations are a gift to us as well, because if we pay attention to them, they humble us. They actually lead us to Christ, where sure life and changing hope is to be found. And this is a gift to us. So let's look at them each briefly. First of all, he can't see what God sees. Look at verses 11 and 22. They're amazing verses. He says, God has made everything beautiful in its time. And we see this as we look around in this creation. We see that beauty. You can see it right close up in nature shows like the planet earth series that shows creation and all its breathtaking beauty. And also he says, God has put eternity into mankind's heart yet so that he cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end.

Uh-oh, here's where the frustration creeps in. Because deep down in every human heart, whether you have faith in God or you don't yet, God puts eternity. He puts this desire to know as God knows, how everything fits together with everything else to produce things that are lasting, things that are glorious, things that are satisfying. But Solomon and us are frustrated by that desire because of sin, because we live in a fallen world. We can't stand back and see the whole painting of creation

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because God has placed you within his masterpiece. There's a deep humility in this so that you see at the end of verse 14 that we fear or reverence God who alone can know that massive work of art that we are a little part of. There is a God,
Solomon is alerting, and you are not him. That is the message here. There is a God. You are not him. He is the creator. We are the creatures. We only know a small part of that whole picture.
And to illustrate that, I want to show you an extreme close-up of a very famous painting by the miracle of our technology here. This is like our life as we experience it. There is some beauty in these colors, but there doesn't seem to be a rhyme or a reason to it. And really, this is like Solomon's frustration with life. We often don't see the purpose or how this all fits together. And that's because life as we see it is a very small part of the much bigger masterpieces. Like this huge painting of Van Gogh that that little picture was a part of. This is the starry night, which many of you are familiar with. And God's view of creation and time is like this complete painting because he created it and he is outside it. He sees how it all fits together. He has this beautiful picture of creation and time in mind as he sets the times and the seasons. He knows what our little part of it is that doesn't make much sense sometimes is to that beautiful masterpiece. And so what we need to do is to stop pretending that we can see that whole picture. God has not shown it to us yet.
His eternity surrounds our time and our little piece of that picture. That's humbling to us, but it also frees us to trust that that picture of your life is in his everlasting arms and is part of his grand masterpiece. Even when the particular time or season that you are in is ugly or is really hard for you. Nothing is outside his eternal and good purposes for this world and for each of us.
[15:32] The guarantee is Jesus. And that is what this leads us to. That humility leads to hope. Because not only has God put eternity into our hearts, but in Jesus, the word, the creator, became flesh and dwelt among us. The second person of the Trinity, God himself, God's son, becomes this baby born in Bethlehem. Heaven comes to earth in him. The painter becomes part of the painting.

And in Jesus, we know that eternity, the life of heaven surrounds us and our time. The eternal purposes of God is that we know him as our heavenly father by the forgiveness of our sins. That is eternal life.
That we know God and his son who he has sent. This is our certain hope. This is the eternity that is fulfilled for us in Jesus Christ. And our response in verses 12 and 13 is very simple. It is to humbly receive from our creator everything as his gift. Everything is his gift. Joy comes in this. Look at verse 12. I perceive there is nothing better for them than to be joyful and to do good as long as they live. Also that everyone should eat and drink and take pleasure in all his toil. That is God's gift to man. You see, humility means that you can take joy in what he gives you. The simple pleasures are a gift from him. We cannot be so prideful that we take joy and pleasure in those small things. Revel in what he gives. Be content in him in all situations because all things you have come from his hand. Celebrate joy as
God's kindly gift. Take joy in eating and drinking because that is about fellowship of friends and family and God's people. Our everyday activities and relationships are a gift from God. In them, he is working all things together for your good, for your salvation, to be part of that beautiful painting.
And that brings us to the second frustration. Because in that, in the verses 16 and 17, you see Solomon really frustrated by the fact that he does not see justice. All he is seeing is injustice. As wise and powerful as he is, he still sees deep injustice in his kingdom. And here he is this powerful king that he should be able to do something about it. Verse 16 says, wickedness is in the place of justice and wickedness is in the place of righteousness. He is expressing the frustration of our world. We can't seem to shake loose from racism or inequality or the oppression of those who are vulnerable. We can't break free from abuse or from the lack of compassion for those who are in need. And during COVID, there has been a heightened sensitivity in our society to all this injustice. There is a frustration that can so easily lead to blame and to forcing change, taking things into my own hands. So that I want to see even justice, even if it means bringing injustice to other people.
But you know, verse 17, Solomon knows in his heart, in his humility, that there will be a day of judgment of both the wicked and the righteous.
This is the day that the Lord has placed at the end of time. You see what this means? It means that life and time is not an endless circle. Yes, there are many cycles of life, but they are like rapids kind of boiling in a river that quickly moves towards the ocean. But he is just not sure of when that judgment day will be or what it will be like. He's not sure when we will get to that ocean.

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[20:06] That's why he says there is a time for every matter and for every work. Lord, when is it going to happen? Well, this leads us to hope because in Jesus, there is the certainty that this will happen.

He has been appointed by God the Father to be the judge, to make all things right on the day of judgment. All that is unjust in this world will be held to account. It will be dealt with in perfect justice on that day. It deeply humbles us to know that each one of us will stand before our judge as well. This is a certain hope. This perfect judge takes our judgment upon himself on a cross. If you trust in Jesus, you have no need to take revenge or to make people pay for the pain and wrongs inflicted on us and on the people around us, he alone can change the hearts of people so that they live justly. He alone changes your heart and in the injustice that you commit as well. And we have this hope here that we can work with Jesus for the ultimate things of heaven. This is what he is doing in the seasons of our life where the poor in heaven are perfectly fed, where people are exalted and made glorious in Christ, where there is no more grief or loss, where races are reconciled and there is the healings of the nations. This is the new heaven and the new earth that Jesus is bringing. This is his purposes for creation. And we begin, we can begin to work with him and live for these things now in service to
Jesus, who will bring all things together in him and with him, knowing that Jesus will perfectly bring us to this day. And then finally, there is this deep frustration. I don't know what happens after death. And here's a man who does not have a complete faith. He teaches that we are no better than beasts because we both die. And in that case, that is very true. We are all, we are all with every living thing on earth subject to death. And this humbles us. These are the words we will hear on Ash Wednesday in a few weeks, that we have come from dust and to dust we will return. And you know, he is seeing that all is meaningless if this is all that there is. And he asks these two wonderfully searching questions in verses 21 through 22 that lead us to Christ. He says, who knows whether the spirit of man goes upward and the spirit of the beast goes down into the earth. And the second question a little later on, who can bring him to see what will be after him? Well, these are the questions of our culture. There is great uncertainty. What happens at our death?
And those questions wonderfully lead us to Jesus. Because Jesus knows where the spirit of a person goes. Jesus brings us through death to see what is after. Everybody will see Jesus. Those who don't know him and those who do, they will bow before him. There will be this judgment day we just heard about.
[23:43] For those who trust him, we will be with him and we will be like him forever. This is certain hope. This is where God is taking us through all the seasons of our life. He is the one who brings meaning into our life because he redeems every aspect of it. Everything is under his sovereign care, bringing us to that day of complete salvation. He is making all things work together for good, for those who love him, for those who are called according to his purposes. So what is our part in this? Very quickly, two things. One, we are called to trust him in all the seasons of our life.

And I know that many of you are going through a tough season right now, that there are financial losses that you might be experiencing, that there are relationships and disappointments that are painful to you right now, that there are deep losses in grief, times of real physical hardship that you are going through as well. But in it all, we are called by Solomon, by these words of God, to trust him, that he is the painter of that big masterpiece that we are part of, that he is bringing us to his completion one day. And secondly, we are called not only to hope in God, but to be intentional for it to him and for him. Because what this has been telling us is that Jesus is in charge of every moment of every person, of every relationship in your life. And our response is very simply to commit those relationships, to commit those seconds and those hours in the day to him and to his care.
In this new year, can you commit yourselves to beginning the day, committing yourself to God, and ending the day in the same way? Can you live in the way that Jim testified of honoring God in all of your decisions, knowing that he is using all of those things that you go through for his glory and for your great good? Amen. And I want to close by a prayer and a psalm before Josh leads us in prayer. It is a psalm, a very short one, of humbling yourself before God and hoping in him. Let's pray with him. My heart is not proud, Lord. My eyes are not haughty.
I do not concern myself with great matters or things too wonderful for me, but I have calmed and quieted myself. I am like a weaned child with its mother, like a weaned child. I am content. Israel, St. John's, each of us listening today, put your hope in the Lord, both now and forevermore. Amen.

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