All Pain, No Gain? The Haphazardness of Life

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[0:00] This morning we continue this sermon series that we started two weeks ago. And as you know, it's from the book of Ecclesiastes, all 12 chapters.

The title of this series is Real Life with the Real God. And this is the third sermon in that series. And the first sermon was on chapter 1, the second one was on chapter 2, and this one actually spans chapters 3, 4, 5, and 6.
So that means that this one gets to be as four times long as the first and the second one. Now I promise you, I won't make it that long. But anyway, this section begins with a really important theme, don't you think?
And the subject is time. It begins with, for everything there is a season. In other words, events in time are appointed. Now this idea is something of a surprise, I think.
The author of Ecclesiastes, or we might call him the preacher, or the teacher, or the sage, or the philosopher, we know that he's something of a cynic, actually has a really high view of time, I think.
[1:18] He doesn't have a low one, or a cynical one, or a pessimistic one. But rather, you might actually think that coming out of the first two chapters, even though the last paragraph of the second chapter was quite a corrective, maybe even a bit of a conversion, then he might say something about time, like, you know, with respect to its tyranny, or its brevity, or maybe even its longevity.

The author holds a very high theory of time, I think, that's represented here. And his view of time and events is not under the sun, as it says, but under heaven. For every matter is under heaven, is what he says in the first verse.
Well, our world and life isn't ruled, then, by chance, and neither is it ruled by fate. Verses 1 and 8 might think you to lead that it's ruled by fate, but when you get to verses 9 through 11, it leads us to draw a very different conclusion.
And that is that time is ruled by God. After the initial question, inquiry and quandary, I'll come to that in a second, we read a bold statement about God's givenness.
He gives business. He gives beauty. He puts eternity in man's heart, woman's heart. And the first two chapters of Ecclesiastes are, by and large, absent of God, except for that last paragraph in the second chapter that I mentioned.
[2:36] All right? The beginning of this section builds on this corrective and this kind of conversion of that last paragraph. And now we see that God is really active. He gives.

He beautifies. He puts. He preserves. He inspires. He seeks. And the signature of God is all over our world and life from the author's perspective.
God is at work. And that impacts the way we see our own work in time. The author raises the question then, what gain has the worker from his toil?
See that in verse 9? He raises a great question. And I wonder, do you ever ask that question of yourself? What gain has the worker? What gain have I in my toil?
What gain have my friends and family and neighbors have in this world? Now, you may not describe it in the same way that he has a toil, but, you know, it's about work and labor and tasks.
[3:34] You know, that toil. Sometimes the daily grind, the treadmill, the matter of course. Sometimes the humdrum. That would be the negative ways to put it. But everything that we do, right? Is this how we see our work?

Do you ever wonder what is the gain or the profit or the benefit or the point or the difference of it? I just want to say kind of three things then this morning. Because, as you know, if you look in your bulletin, the title very well put and given to us is All Pain, Question, No Gain, The Haphazardness of Life, or as some of our adolescents like to say, The Randomness, it seems, of Life.

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I think there are things that we need to kind of come to grasp when we think about the toil of our life and some of the observations that we make or the author here helps us to make. This question about the toil of our life expresses what is in our minds, I think, when we go about our hard work, this grind, this labor, these tasks.
And all of them, not just the ones that are for pay, no, but the ones that require our affection, our mind, our personality, our will, all of who we are.
And let's be honest, this life is labor. It is toil, isn't it? It's complicated. It's complex. It's sometimes aggravating, sometimes agitating.
[4:54] And it seems like it, that there's no way around it. I mean, we sometimes search for ways to do this, at least since the Industrial Revolution, to somehow make it simpler.

And in the name of progress, we work against this toil sometimes, trying to make it easier, but sometimes actually making it worse. Have we made things even better over the past 200 years? Well, the preacher gives expression to it. But Moses, I think, gives some explanation to it. Just kind of go back again a little bit.
In Genesis chapter 3, verses 16 to 17, we're told about the woman that she will, in pain, give birth. Man is told that in pain, he shall work the land.
Genesis chapter 5, verses 28 through 9, with respect to this labor and this seemingly inherent pain. Lamech then gives birth to Noah, and there's great hope with his coming into the world.
[5:54] The thought was that he would bring relief to our work and painful toil. Well, this is reality and an explanation for the pain of our toil.

And we'd like to change that. We think we can make a difference in the toil. We take life in our hands, making attempts to reduce that toil. In making those attempts, we only get sometimes unforeseen consequences.
We think we're making improvements, and it doesn't seem to actually make those improvements that we hope. A number of years ago, Adam Smith anticipated the positive effects, he thought, in politics.
And he called them positive consequences. He thought that there was somehow an invisible hand that was guiding things. And because of what would be instituted, the positive consequences would come by virtue of that invisible hand.
John Locke came afterwards and anticipated, though, the negative effects in economics. He didn't have to name it. He didn't recognize an invisible hand, but he thought that with our changes, there would be these negative consequences.
[6:59] And then, more recently, Robert K. Merton coined something as, the unanticipated consequences of purposive social action. That's a mouthful, isn't it?

But the effects are sometimes unintended. Well, often unintended, what happens. We think something great will happen as a result of what we're doing, and in fact, something worse happens. But all in the midst of this, the preacher acknowledges that God is at work in this world. Life in this world is in his hands.
And so God is working. He's giving. He's putting. He's making things beautiful. He's actually seeking us all along, whether or not we're seeking him. However, there is pain.
The question is, is there gain, benefit? What's the profit to us, is what Kohelet asks. That's his question. That's our question. And it's a really good one, don't you think?
[7:56] But I think we have to first acknowledge that there is a shape of life that we actually don't see. We make our observations. But somewhere in that, more than we can ever imagine it sometimes, God is at work.

At some point, though, we have to come to accept that pain, just not acknowledge that there is a shape, there is a structure, there is a way that the world works, and that God is the one who's guiding and directing that.
But in the midst of this, there is pain. And the preacher here doesn't ignore the complication and the complexity of this life, or even the worst, the pain of it.
And he names the complexity and pain of life in chapter 4, which wasn't read, so it would be helpful if you do have your Bibles open to chapter 4 of Ecclesiastes. And there are three pains that I just want to note.
There are lots of other pains and haphatterness and things that are quite seemingly random. But the first one is this. That is the pain of oppression. After slipping back into kind of a cynicism after

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this great kind of observation of God's work in our life, in chapter 3, he says there is this oppression. [9:03] He says, He doesn't cite specific oppressions, but it's hard to deny the fact.

He doesn't try to explain it. He just names it. And he is overwhelmed that he draws a conclusion then that the dead are actually more fortunate than the living because of this oppression.
He sees all the pain of the oppression. He isn't even the one who experiences it himself, but the pain of oppression is there. He knows and emphasizes, sorry, emphasizes enough to see, again, I repeat, that the dead are better off.
Some of you may have watched what was acclaimed the best film of 2014, 12 Years a Slave, which is a true story. A true story happened, you know, less than, or just over 100 years ago.
At one point, the female by the name of Patsy begs another male slave, this is based on a true story, whose name happens to be Solomon, to kill her. The experience, the toil, the slavery, the oppression of her life begs him to do that.
[10:18] He refuses to do that. It's interesting, isn't it? 3,000 years before that event, another one in the name of Solomon is expressing that oppression, giving expression to the fact that he thinks that the dead are better off than those that are living because of oppression.

That's the first pain of life that he observes. The second one is competition, right? Toil and skill is inspired by competition. He says, I saw that all toil and all skill and work come from man's envy of his neighbor.
Verses 4 to 6, the preacher universalizes a destructive kind of competition. Now certainly there's a healthy kind of competition as well, right?
But we cannot seem to be protected from this kind of competition that arises out of envy. I learned recently a story of Raphael and Michelangelo.
You might know about this. They were both working in the Vatican Palace. These two men were so embroiled in their competition of their work, unfortunately, that when they passed one another in the Vatican Palace, they couldn't even acknowledge one another.
[11:28] They couldn't stop and talk and encourage and compliment one another for what they were doing. Their work somehow came between them.

The competition was evident. That's the second observation that the preacher makes here. And the third one then is isolation. The preacher recognizes recognizes the problem of isolation and that there's this loneliness which is increasingly evident in the world in which we live in then and of course now in our culture as well.
Studies have shown the effect of social media on loneliness and depression. Social analysis has noted decreased membership in organizations including things like political parties, not just churches and other organizations.
There are a book called Bullying Alone. A Harvard sociologist kind of noted how increasingly isolated our culture is and the effect that that has on people's emotional and social and mental health.
Well, the preacher noticed aside from organizations and at a more basic level that two are better than one. And does this in answering his question, what gain does the worker have for his toil?
[12:36] And the answer is one cannot accomplish what two can do together. That makes sense. And even better, three are than two. Right? In fact, add one to two and while it does make three units, it seems like the effect is actually more than that when three are together.

Well, the preacher sees the benefit of two or three practically in this life. And God knew that right from creation. Of course, after stating for each of his act of creation that it was good, God knew that it was not good that man was alone.
And so the preacher is implicitly lamenting isolation and individuality, those things which we idolize in our culture. And his final example is that an isolated king who refused advice was in very bad shape there in verse 13.
So our toil doesn't turn out the way we might like. We think we know what is best for ourselves and try as we might to improve and take matters into our own hands. Even our best intentions are riddled with pain.
Remember, the key isn't to shrink back from our pain, I think. Athletes and physical therapists know that where there is no pain, there is no gain. And it is a very humbling attitude that is required to accept that there is pain in this life.

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[13:56] It is just a part of our life. And we don't know the wise way of this life on our own by our individual kind of observations of what's going on in this world.

The answer to that then I think might be to aspire to this wisdom life, this life of wisdom. And Ecclesiastes shows us, I think, that there's limitations to this life under the sun.
That we can try to live life on a horizontal plane or maybe just by reason and observation alone. But better than that is to live a life right above the sun, as it were.
A life that's not on just a horizontal plane, but a vertical one. A life ultimately that's lived best not just by reason, but by revelation. The key, however, I think, is in worship.
After making the concluding comment in chapters 4 through 16, surely, the author says, also is vanity and a striving after wind. The preacher corrects himself and it's a bit of a conversion again.
[15:02] He picks up the subject of worship. Picks it up in chapter 5. Look with me there then.
There are two things that he points out about worship, which I think is the way forward in this world where there's so much pain and we ask, is there any gain?

And the first thing that he says about worship, because he says, guard your steps when you go into the house of God, and the house of God would have been the temple, was that we are to, to listen.
Worship isn't what we think. Worship in the ancient world was all about sacrifice. Remember, there's something unique about it for the God-worshippers of the Bible.
It can turn into something that we do. And interestingly, one word for worship in the Greek, which we find in the New Testament, is a compound word where we get our word liturgy.
It's two things. It's a compound word. First is laos, the second word is ergos, which means people, work. It's a combination of our work.
[16:02] We tend to kind of then turn our attention onto ourselves, which is what we do in worship. And it is important. We do do something in worship, but what is important about what it is that we do?

And it's actually a response to what God actually does first. And so the preacher actually here is showing us what true worship is. He actually issues a command.
The command is to guard your steps. And it's a warning against evil. He finishes the verse, they do not know that they are doing evil. What can be evil about going into the house of God?
The problem is prioritizing sacrifice. Of course, the Lord commanded sacrifice in a system of sacrifice. The problem is the potential to miss the point of worship, which is initially important.
It's about listening to God. listening to the one who calls us into worship. And the expectation was clear that the God of Israel spoke to his people.
[17:05] That was worship. God taking the initiative. Worship directed by this God, not by us. And we're here this morning because God calls us.

He commands us into his presence. Before we do anything, we listen to him. Just think about how much listening you do when you come in here. Well, there's also a warning against becoming quick to speak that follows in chapter 5.
And this follows that, this follows that in the case of the preacher, he is very aware of the vanity of life. when it comes to speech, he's right in step with the third commandment.
Do not take the Lord's name in vain. It doesn't mean only swearing, things like that, or cursing. It means not kind of failing to follow through on the vows that we make to God.
And failure to follow through, show yourself reliable, making excuses for what you'll say you're going to do is the warning that he issues. And we know that from the New Testament that's out of the heart comes sin, but out of the mouth, Kohelet says, we can be led into sin.
[18:15] Well, that's the first thing he says about worship, which I think is the antidote to just being overwhelmed by the pain of this life and thinking that there is no gain. But the second thing is, is the fear of the Lord.

We come to the end of that paragraph and you see those words, it is the way of wisdom, the avoidance of foolishness, is to worship the Lord and to fear Him. The one who vows with His mouth draws attention to what he or she does, but more important, again, is what God does.
And so look back in chapter 3, verse 14 with me. The author says, I perceive that whatever God does endures forever. Nothing can be added to it or nothing can be taken from it.
God has done it so that people fear before Him. It seems to be a good thing. Chapter 5, verse 7 ends with, after talking about the increase of words and dreams, the preacher says, God is the one you must fear.

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Now, when is the last time that the Lord shocked you? When is the last time that He surprised you? Well, the fear of the Lord doesn't receive, I think, enough good attention.
[19:21] And it's just the reverence of our God. It is the hold that, it's the hold that we have on God or maybe the hold that He has on that helps us to see just how supreme He is.

That's what the fear of the Lord is. It's seeing Him like no other, so much above us in all respects. It's the awesomeness of God. That's the fear of the Lord.
It doesn't scare the life out of us. In many respects, He scares life into us in some respects with a fear. We revere Him just that much. And we live in a culture that seems like it's fear averse.
I know that there are some exceptions to that. But we let things like the film industry shock us or awestruck us. Fear becomes recreation or entertainment.
It kind of peddles a fear with no substance to it. But the fear of the Lord is the most substantive and safe place to live. And listening and fearing the Lord lead us to, I think, a more sustained worship.
[20:25] And when we do that, we can rejoice in the work of the Lord and our work in response to Him as an act of worship. Look at chapter 3, verse 22 with me.

So, 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?
There's a theme here. Repetition chapter 5, verse 18. Reads like this, behold, what I have seen to be good and fitting is to eat and drink and find enjoyment in all the toil with which one toils under the sun the few days of his life that God has given to him.
So the question is this toil, is there any gain to it? Kohelet's saying, yes, there is, of course. The gain that is in that is what comes from God, which induces this rejoicing as we know that he's the one who gives, he's the one who makes things beautiful, he's the one who's sustained, he's the one who provides, and time isn't just completely random.
God is the one who directs it, he's the one who appoints the life in which we live and the fullness in which he promises because of who he is as we live not just under the sun, but know that he's the one who is above the sun as it were in heaven, guiding and directing our steps as we even pray those words, may your kingdom come here on earth as it is in heaven.
[22:01] And this king, Kohelet, this king who is the author of that, gets these great glimpses of it and leads us into that as he goes back and forth from observing things apart from God, but also then seeing what it is that God does as he directs our life in a way of wisdom.

May we learn and live that way of wisdom from him as we live day in and day out. Amen.

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