

Life is Pain

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[0 : 0 0] Good evening, everyone. Well, I watched the new movie Soul this past week, and it's a great film. I really recommend it for you, especially, actually, that you would watch it during this Ecclesiastes sermon series.

This is the perfect time to watch Soul. One film critic called it a catechism in a new religion radiating tranquility. He wrote, there are times when watching this animated masterpiece feels like being gently indoctrinated into a new religion.

One whose creed radiates tranquility, warmth, and joy. Now, we just read Ecclesiastes chapter 3 together, and the preacher's theme in this chapter is time.

Time. Verse 1, Without giving away any more than you'll see in the movie trailer, Soul is also a film about time.

About running out of time. Right when you're about to get your big break in life. Literally running out of time since the main character dies in the first five minutes of the film. Again, it's right in the trailer.

[1 : 0 6] I'm not spoiling it for you. And then he spends the rest of this film fighting for a second chance to live his life again. to seize the day and prove that it's not all vanity.

And the movie rightly identifies how we're all searching for an escape from time's great enemy, which is death. Time is just another name for death.

So chapter 3, verse 19, For what happens to the children of man, what happens to the beasts is the same. As one dies, so dies the other. It was Woody Allen who quipped, I'm not afraid to die.

I just don't want to be there when it happens. So for the preacher of Ecclesiastes, time and death, it would seem, are yet more proof that everything is vanity. What gain has the worker from all his toil under the sun?

Verse 9, Yet, yet, there are these two beams of light that shoot through this chapter and they lighten the darkness of the vanity we've seen so far.

[2 : 1 1] Two hints that there's something beyond what we can see in our time under the sun. And each of these beams, it shines from beyond time, from the Lord God who is outside of time, and introduced the possibility that time and toil and vanity is not all that exists in the universe.

So the first is introduced in verse 11. God has made everything beautiful in its time. Also, he has put eternity into people's hearts, yet so that we cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end.

Somehow each of us has a longing for something beyond this world, an eternity beyond time's vanity. And God has placed this longing in us for a reason.

And the second beam of light is there in verse 17. I said in my heart, God will judge the righteous and the wicked, for there is a time for every matter and for every work. So somehow, time won't have the last word.

There is an eternal justice from God that is beyond the reach of vanity. So you see, while there is a randomness to life under the sun that eludes our understanding or our control, there is also a sovereign God who is in control and has a plan for everything that occurs under heaven.

[3 : 32] So let's trace these two beams of light under these two headings. First, longing for God's eternity. And second, longing for God's justice. First then, longing for God's eternity.

Verses 2 to 8, they give us this beautiful poem that you might even recognize as a number one hit pop single from the 1960s. And the poem emphasizes how time holds all of our human experience under heaven in its grasp.

There's nothing beyond the reach of time. And that's why there's 14 lines in this poem, two pairs per line, so that it comes out as a multiple of seven, representing perfection or completion in Hebrew poetry.

And it's also not just about our individual experience either, because you may never live in a war zone, but you are ruled by the structures of time, which holds together all of human experience.

Now, I've already pointed out how this idea that time is really just a synonym for death, and we see that in this passage. Bookending our chapter is mentions of death.

[4 : 43] First in chapter 3, verse 2, a time to be born and a time to die. And then right at the very end in verse 22, who can bring him to see what will be after him? In other words, who knows what happens after you die?

And consider for a moment all of the tricks that we have discovered in the modern world for avoiding talking about death. We distract ourselves from death with entertainment.

You know, as a young boy, I actually believed that the reward of getting old was that you got to watch a lot of daytime television. We create euphemisms for death to soften the blow.

We pursue life-extending technologies to postpone the inevitable. Just this month, scientists announced a new breakthrough, a discovery of cellular pathways that amplify lifespans by 500% in nematode worms.

It remains to see whether we'll be as lucky as the nematode worms, however. So all of these are simply clever strategies for grabbing control of something that makes us feel powerless.

[5 : 52] Death. Yet the preacher here recognizes that death isn't entirely meaningless. Like birth and everything else, it's also under God's control. So verse 18, 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. There is a purpose for our mortality here. Accepting our mortality opens the way for receiving rather than taking.

For surrendering control. And which is precisely why God has placed this longing for eternity in our hearts. Remember verse 11, God has made everything beautiful in its time and also he has put eternity into people's hearts.

And this longing is intended to remind us that we're created for more than this world. Perhaps there's even an echo here of Genesis chapter 1. You remember when the Lord God creates us male and female in his image.

And also to remind us that it is vanity whenever we try to play God. Whenever we try to discover what kind of meaning or purpose could lie behind everything that God has done from beginning to end.

[7 : 04] that too is vanity. No one describes this longing for eternity better than C.S. Lewis in Mere Christianity. This is what Lewis says.

If I find in myself a desire which no experience in this world can satisfy, the most probable explanation is that I was made for another world. If none of my earthly pleasures satisfy it, that does not prove that the universe is a fraud.

Probably earthly pleasures were never meant to satisfy it but only to arouse it, to suggest the real thing. The sweetest thing in all my life has been the longing to find the place where all the beauty came from.

Now, you might already be saying, wait a second, what about verses 20 and 21, Jeremy? I mean, those verses say that we all go to one place. All are from dust and to dust all return.

Who knows whether the spirit of man goes upwards and the spirit of the beast goes down into the earth. Who knows? So why does the preacher abruptly become so agnostic about the afterlife just a few verses later?

[8 : 07] And to be honest, I actually appreciate the preacher's honesty here. I appreciate that he knows that he can't see more than God has revealed to him at this time. And as those reading Ecclesiastes on this side of God's full revelation in Jesus Christ, we have the full light of the sun where Ecclesiastes only has this narrow beam of light so that we see God's full revelation of eternity in our hearts through Jesus Christ's death and resurrection.

Philosopher Peter Kreeft says, Ecclesiastes is the question to which Christ is the answer. The perfect silhouette of Jesus which the face of Jesus fills.

And the amazing part of the story of Revelation is that God's son Jesus, he didn't avoid time but rather when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his son born of a woman, Galatians 4 verse 4, so that the incarnation is God entering time, participating in all those seasons of life described in verses 2 to 8, redeeming the curse of time with eternal salvation.

And Jesus came announcing the arrival of a new season of time, the inbreaking kingdom of God. The time is fulfilled, the kingdom of God is at hand, repent and believe in the gospel, Mark 1 15.

And scripture says, at the right time, God died for the ungodly, Romans 5 verse 6. And in his death and resurrection, he abolished death and brought life and immortality to life through the gospel.

[9 : 49] this is the offer of salvation in Christ, that the eternity that God places in our hearts might overflow and fulfill the longing that you and I have, that time doesn't have the final word, that the dust of death will lead to the glory of eternal life.

The sweetest thing in all my life has been the longing to find the place where all the beauty came from. Do you know the giver of this beauty? Have you received this gift?

This is the fulfillment of the longing for God's eternity that we glimpse here in Ecclesiastes 3. Which brings us nicely to the second beam of light, the longing for God's justice.

And the preacher introduces the vanity of injustice in verse 16. Read it with me. Moreover, I saw under the sun that in the place of justice even there was wickedness and in the place of righteousness even there was wickedness.

And actually, chapter 4, verse 1 gives us even more of this. Again, I saw all the oppressions that are done under the sun and behold, the tears of the oppressed and they had no one to comfort them.

[11 : 00] On the side of their oppressors there was power and there was no one to comfort them. I hardly need to point out how deep the longing for justice goes in our human hearts.

Stories of white-collar crime and world leaders stealing from and murdering their people. Black lives matter. The problem again here is death. Just think for a moment how much public indignation there is whenever a prominent guilty person dies before they receive their just desserts, before they get that sentence and live out the consequences of their crimes.

There's outrage. Death seems to make vanity out of our ideas of justice, doesn't it? Our modern culture, well, we respond to the vanity of injustice in at least two ways, pretty extreme ways.

Either we see people aggressively pursuing a type of mob justice via social media where they seek to cancel and punish anyone who they decide is guilty, or you see people, on the other hand, just slipping into a sort of cynicism and detachment and this hope that, well, with any luck, I'll get my chance to game the system and come out ahead.

But there's a better option. There's a better option. Let me remind you again of verse 17. God will judge the righteous and the wicked for there is a time for every matter. Ian Proven elaborates on this.

[12 : 24] If there is a season for everything and a time for every matter under heaven, then there must be a time for justice. Therefore, rather than simply getting angry and sad about all the oppression we see in the world, we can trust God to make things right in the end.

Can you see how this connects to that longing for eternity placed into our hearts? Because as surely as Jesus Christ reveals the hope of eternal life through his resurrection, he also reveals the hope of divine judgment beyond death.

Hebrews 9, verse 27, we are destined to die once and after that to face judgment. So the promise of perfect justice releases us from those extreme responses to perceived injustice.

We're not responsible to cancel every wrongdoer, but neither are we free, therefore, to just live with self-serving apathy towards our neighbor. The promise of perfect justice opens the door for a better way to live now with eternity in our hearts.

So verse 12 and 13, I perceived that 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.

[13 : 46] This is God's gift to man. God's gift here is the freedom to enjoy the time that we're given, to seek the good for ourselves and our neighbors, to discover that there's a new type of joyful work in the world that is not mere toil, as Paul puts it, we give ourselves fully to the work of the Lord because we know that our labor in the Lord is not in vain.

That's 1 Corinthians 15, 58. We love and serve Christ in our daily work and we love and serve our neighbor in everything we do. We uphold what is true and just and beautiful and God promises that he will answer the longing in our hearts for that true justice.

And let's wrap it up. You know, I was really struck by how that film critic chose to describe the movie Soul.

Remember he said he called it a catechism in a new religion radiating tranquility. And the astonishing thing about the movie Soul is that the main character learns almost nothing from his experience of dying and visiting the afterlife.

All of his growth and his discoveries and his revelations actually come from returning and rediscovering everything that this world has to offer without thought of eternity or justice.

[15 : 12] And Ecclesiastes 3 and the whole biblical perspective is exactly the opposite, friends. All of our meaning and our growth and our satisfaction in this life are only meaningful because eternity has broken into the vanity of toil under the sun.

God has placed in each human heart a longing, a longing for God's eternity, a longing for God's justice. And it's when we live into that longing and its fulfillment in Jesus Christ that we experience joy and maturity and lasting pleasure in the present and into eternity forever.

Amen. Amen.