

A Search For The Meaning Of Life (6) - Our Sense Of Eternity

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[0 : 00] Come with me please to Ecclesiastes chapter 3, reading at verse 9, and we'll read through to verse 15.

What gain has the worker from his toil? I have seen the business that God has given to the children of man to be busy with. 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.

I perceive 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, this is God's gift to man.

I perceive that whatever God does endures forever. Nothing can be added to it, nor anything taken from it. God has done it so that people may fear before him.

That which is already has been. That which is to be already has been. And God seeks what has been driven away. And as we look at these verses we remind ourselves of the overall theme of Ecclesiastes, or of our study of Ecclesiastes at least, which is a search for meaning or purpose in human life.

[1 : 22] And we've seen up to this point how the writer's gone about that. And last time we looked at the beginning, the first part of chapter 3 there, these various times that are mentioned here, which we saw as the span of human emotions and the span of human experiences, that everything is taken into account there, and that there is a time appointed by God for everything.

So that again, the supremacy and the control and the greatness of God comes across in that. And he follows now into these verses where, again, God is now more specifically mentioned.

You recall that at the very beginning of Ecclesiastes, we came across the phrase, Under the sun, everything is vanity, everything under the sun is vanity. And we saw that was the Ecclesiastes, the writer actually looking for meaning and purpose in life, but not taking account of God just for the purposes of looking to see if you could find a key or a meaning to human life without taking God into your reckoning, without thinking about God as part of your search.

And that's why he came to the conclusion that all was vanity and futility. And now he's beginning to bring God into the picture for us. He mentions God in verse 26 of chapter 2 there, the one who pleases him, God is giving wisdom.

So as he begins to think about God and takes God into his reckoning, he's again amplifying that and expanding on that here in verses 9 to 15.

[2 : 55] And there are three things that come across to us that we can look at briefly. We can just summarize it. It's not an easy passage in some ways to deal with, but hopefully summarizing in these three ways will help us to understand and clarify it somewhat for us.

First of all, it tells us that our human life, our present life, is joined to eternity. Our present life is joined to eternity. Verse 11 there, he has made everything.

This is God, of course, he has made everything beautiful in its time, which again refers back to the first eight verses. He has made everything beautiful in its time. Also, he has put eternity into man's heart.

So that's the first point, that our present life is joined to eternity. Second point is that our present life is in fact God's gift.

It's a gift from God so that in it we are able, if we have the mind to do that, to make the best use of the present life. Verse 10, I've seen the business that God has given to the children of man, or gifted to the children of man, to be busy with.

[4 : 07] And you come to verse 13 as well. Also, that everyone should eat and drink and take pleasure in all its toil. This is God's gift to man. So you see, the writer of Ecclesiastes, while he's looking at things in a sense very darkly, because he's leaving God out of the picture for his own exercises, for his own purpose of examining things as they are in human life, he is not a pessimist.

He's only leaving God out of the picture for this reason, in his calculations. But now that he's brought God into the picture, he's quite sure that life as it is, even with all its toil and with all its difficulties and its trials and its disappointments, nevertheless, it is God's gift to man.

It's something where you find opportunities to really benefit and take pleasure and experience joy and experience happiness amongst it all.

So our present life is God's gift. Thirdly, our present life should be joyfully productive. Joyfully productive. Verses 12, down to the end of the passage there, where he speaks about people actually coming to do good as long as they live, to be joyful, that everyone should eat and drink and take pleasure in his toil.

This is God's gift. So not just a gift, but we should have the present life, something that we have as a joyfully productive life and not look at things as if God were left out of the picture altogether.

[5 : 37] So let's look at these three points. Firstly, our present life is joined to eternity. Now, if you cast your mind back to God's creation of human beings, as described in Genesis, the opening chapters of Genesis, you find how differently human beings were spoken about by God as he came to create them.

He didn't actually come to create them in the same way as other life, other forms of animate life, even animals, were created. When he came to create mankind, when he came to create human beings, he held a conference, as it were, within himself.

The Lord said, Let us make man in our image. And in the image of God he made them. Male and female he made them. In other words, there's obviously a different approach by God to the creation of human beings because, as God well knew and as that tells us, he was going to make human beings in his image.

They were to be the image bearers of God in this world. We haven't time to go into all of that. It means, if you want to find out a bit more about it, maybe you can register for the lectures in the castle.

That's just a wee plug. But it's something that is important in its own right, that we're made in the image of God and placed above the rest of God's creation because of that.

[6 : 54] No other form of life is spoken of in these terms. We are unique in that sense as human beings. In other words, God made us for life with himself.

God made us for fellowship with himself. God made human beings as beings capable of holding conversation with God, fellowship with God, of knowing God, of trusting in God, of looking to God in a special way by faith and trust and hope.

We are made for God himself. God made us for life. That's one of the aspects of he has put eternity into man's heart. As you look into your own heart and aspirations, as you see something of the way that your mind works and the thoughts that go through your mind, it's maybe not always obvious that you are made for eternity, but as we go through the study today, I hope we can see that's indeed what the writer is saying to us.

Now, of course, not everybody admits that. Atheists don't admit that, at least not outwardly, that we were made for God because they say God does not exist. Of course, the Bible tells us that that kind of thinking is really just due to a distortion in the knowledge we have by our fall in Adam.

We came to have our knowledge distorted. Our minds aren't functioning the way they should. Go to the book of Psalms just a short time before this. In the Bible, you'll find Psalm 10, for example, where you find verses 3 to 4 there.

[8 : 26] The wicked boasts of the desires of his soul, and one greedy forgave curses and renounces the Lord. In the pride of his face, the wicked does not seek him.

All his thoughts are, there is no God. Psalm 14, you'll find the same thing. Ephesians chapter 2 reminds us that even before we came to know the Lord, before the Lord came and changed us and showed us himself, we were just like everybody else, without God, without hope in the world, walking by our own imaginings.

But God has put eternity into man's heart. Even in that fallenness and in that distortion, there's still something there that really can't be explained other than that God made us for eternity, that God has put eternity in our hearts.

I've been reading through a biography of C.S. Lewis in the last few couple of weeks. That's a biography by Alistair McGrath, C.S. Lewis, a biography, a couple of quotations from it today.

It just so happened to fit in with these studies that we're going through in Ecclesiastes. And of course, Lewis was an atheist as he began his career or his life in Oxford University.

[9 : 50] He was then a convinced atheist and came to know the Lord through, not the way that everybody comes to know the Lord, but he came to know the Lord. God was real, and God in Christ especially was real.

But that's what he said. 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, only to arouse it to suggest the real thing.

And from that, Lewis went on to his famous Narnia Chronicles, which I'll mention in a minute as well. So Lewis is really saying, we are actually human beings in this world that we belong to, but not only are we made for a bigger world, we're part of a much bigger picture.

We're part of God's great plan for the universe. And we've not really appreciated that because our mind has become distorted by sin. Our thinking is not the way it should be, and we've left God out of the picture.

[11 : 01] And that's now what the writer to Ecclesiastes is seeking to actually explain. Why does he actually tell us about all of these frustrations in human life? It's not just simply due to the fact that we are fallen, that we are sinful, that we don't function inwardly in our souls, in our minds, in our relationships together, the way we meant to, the way we once did.

It's not just simply that. It's that we were made for eternity. We can't find satisfaction in this life, in this world, because we were ultimately made for another world, for a bigger world, for eternity.

And the fact that God has put eternity in your heart, and in my heart, is one of the reasons, if not the main reason, that you cannot find satisfaction from the things of this life. Even the greatest pleasures of this life, if you confine them to this life, the things that you can have an abundance of in this life, that you may wish you had more of in this life, but you have more of them, whether it's finance, whether it's worldly pleasures, whether it's any of these things, it doesn't matter how much you multiply them, it doesn't matter how much they're heaped up, all through the course of your life, they will not satisfy the aching of your soul, the need for satisfaction, the need to be loved, the need for security, the need to know that all is well.

Because we're made by God for eternity. And only things marked by eternity will actually satisfy our souls as they've been made.

Only Jesus, only God and Christ, like we said to the children, there is no other name given under heaven among men whereby we must be saved. There is salvation in no other.

[12 : 42] There is security in no other. There is happiness, there is contentment in no other but in himself. And that's why all of these frustrations and limitations and in many ways anguish as well.

That's why he mentions here the toil. The question in verse 9, what gain has the worker from his toil? It is toil. His life is not easy. And he's taking account of that.

He's not dodging that. He's not just saying, well, you're made for eternity, so living a life of toil is no big deal. It's not really that serious an issue. It's not really something that affects you too much.

It does. Of course it does. But he's saying the reason it does is that we're made for another world. There's something in us. There's a God-planted awareness that we belong to eternity.

We don't belong to this life other than just to live it in preparation for eternity. We're not confined to this world. He has put eternity in man's heart, yet so that he cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end.

[13 : 52] You see that what he's saying there is that although we have eternity in our hearts, we don't understand the big picture that we're part of because it's bigger than we can bring into our minds.

God is God, and God's plan is God's plan, and it's vast, and it's huge. It involves us. God himself has put eternity in our hearts. We know that we're part of a bigger picture, but there's so much of it that we can't understand, that we can't put together, that we can't really just piece together and find that it fits together the way God knows it does.

Here again is what Alstom McGrath says in his biography of C.S. Lewis. The Chronicles of Narnia resonate strongly with the basic human intuition that our own story is part of something grander, which, once grasped, allows us to see our situation in a new and more meaningful way.

In other words, what Lewis was doing in The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe, and all of these chronicles of Narnia as they combined together, what he was doing was basically saying to us, this is part of a bigger picture.

This is actually something that you're just seeing a little tiny fragment of. And when they went through that wardrobe, the children came into that bigger world.

[15 : 21] Lewis is really saying by that, this is what human beings are like. This is what they were made for as well. We're part of that bigger picture because God has put eternity into man's heart.

And that, of course, is itself such an important point to carry with us because the devil will want to persuade you. Forget about these things. You're not made for eternity.

Just take as much out of this life as you can because that's all there is to it. But God is saying, that's the lie. That's the lie over which you could lose your soul, over which you could enter into a lost eternity.

God has made us for eternity with the intention, at least with the offer now to us in the Gospel, that we will live with Him and know eternal life.

That's what Jesus brings. That's what you find in Him. That's what the Gospel offers to us. Nothing less than eternal life because we were made with eternity in our hearts.

[16 : 29] That's the first point. An out-present life is joined to eternity. Secondly, our present life is God's gift. Of course, if you went to Psalm 130, things could be very different to what the Ecclesiastes writer is saying, that our present life is God's gift.

Psalm 130, if, Lord, you should mark iniquity, who could stand? In other words, if God had dealt with us exactly as we deserved, this life would not be a gift.

We wouldn't have the opportunities we have. We would just have what we deserve. We'd be lost forever. And God wouldn't be unjust in marking that against us. But He said, there is forgiveness with you so that you may be feared.

Instead of marking us up for condemnation eternally, instead of marking us up to be cast away from Him forever, which is what we brought on ourselves, what we deserved, there is forgiveness with God.

There is loving kindness. There is grace. There is mercy. Why? So that you may be feared. So that we will respect you. That we will give you the honor that is due to you.

[17 : 40] That's what the words mean. And that's really now what He's saying. The life that we presently have, though far from perfect, nevertheless, it's given to us by God.

And you see, when you see life as you live it here in this world, as God's gift, as appointed by God, as under the administration of God, as under the control of God, under the sovereignty of God, under the care of God, then you're in the best position to deal with your burdens.

Because you don't see them as just a loose amalgamation of difficult events that have no meaning. You then come to see them as arranged by God in His purpose, so that with a proper use of them and faith in Him, we will benefit even from the most difficult issues of this life.

That's why He's saying here, He has given, He has made everything beautiful in its time. And that really reflects back on the first eight verses, a time for this, a time for that, and a time for this.

As we went through that, we saw how exactly, how precisely, God has arranged everything. And that's so with your life and my life. Even when we can't make meaning of it, when we can't put it all together, when we can't answer all the questions, from God's perspective, looking at it from God's side, that thing is out of place.

[19 : 06] He hasn't given you a certain amount of difficulty or suffering or trial or challenge or illness at stages of your life just haphazardly.

He's not just thrown that in any old way. It's exactly as He intended. And as you see that it's exactly as He intended, so you can come to Him and say, Lord, I know that You meant this for me.

So help me to benefit from it. Help me to progress. Help me to see that it is right in its time. That it's placed by You in its own time, in its own space, in its own place in my life.

It's a bit like Romans 8, chapter 8, verse 28, isn't it? Where it says that, For those who love God, all things work together for good to those who are called according to His purpose.

He brings God's purpose into it. But you see what He's saying is, all things work together for good, not haphazardly, not just one event here and one event there, but together, joined together, joined meaningfully by God together, His purpose together.

[20 : 19] They work together for good, for good ultimately. Even if it doesn't all come about in this life, for the Lord's people, for those who trust in Him, heaven will all be about seeing how this present life was fitted together by God to ultimately bring them there.

and we'll see the purpose of it, we believe, then in heaven, the way you cannot see it here. And it's not just God's creation that's meant it, making everything beautiful in its time and putting eternity into our heart.

God's control of everything is something that faith accepts. You could say in some ways that faith's outlook is linked to the outcome.

And what I mean by that is that the outlook of faith as it sees all things under God's control, under God's arrangement, and that everything in its time is appropriately set by Him, that's faith's outlook.

So the outcome is in many ways determined by that. In other words, what we make of the events is really what we do through faith, through that acceptance, were then in a position to make, even of the difficult events of life, what you wouldn't otherwise make of them.

[21 : 45] Think of Paul, for example, writing to the Corinthians. And he mentions in 2 Corinthians, chapter 4, some of the really extreme difficulties that he himself faced.

And elsewhere in these letters to the Corinthians, and in 2 Corinthians especially, he mentions the dangers he was in, the beatings, the persecutions, everything that came his way.

Yet this is how he, what he says in 2 Corinthians 4, and verses 17 to 18, where he says, Our light afflictions, which are momentary, are working for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory.

What is he saying by that? He's saying that God has his hands upon these light afflictions, as he calls them. They weren't light really in themselves, but they were light against the weight of glory that was awaiting him.

They're working for us, he says, a far greater weight of glory. Why? Because God is using them. Because they're part of God's program. Because God knows what he's doing. While he says, we look not at the things which are seen, which are temporal, which pass away, but at the things which are unseen, which are eternal.

[23 : 06] That's where Paul has his focus. That's what he's calling the Corinthians to focus on as well amongst the difficulties, the challenges they face. Our afflictions are real. We have toil, as Ecclesiastes' writer is saying.

We have that toil. That toil is real. And it's difficult and it makes life difficult. But for the Christian, for the person whose faith is in Christ, that light affliction is working for them.

It's productive. It's something that's taking them on towards what God has in store for them. Because they're looking beyond these themselves. They're looking beyond the things of time.

In other words, they're no longer looking at things under the sun. They've taken God into the reckoning. They know that calculation without God is futile.

That all is vanity and vexation of spirit. But with our trust in God and with eternity in our hearts, our present life is God's gift.

[24 : 13] Think today, amongst all the challenges and the difficulties you face, look at all the advantages you have. Look at the opportunities you have.

Count your blessings day by day. Where do they come from? Who has set your life so that you're able to actually progress in a way that knows the teaching of the Bible, knows the gospel, knows how beneficial it is to belong to God's church?

Where does all that from? Where does every good and perfect gift come from? It comes down from above, from the Father of lights, with whom is no variableness nor shadow of turning.

He has put eternity in our hearts and he answers that by giving us so many advantages or accompanies that by giving us so many advantages, so many things in this present life.

Now I know that's easy to say. I know that's easy to just specify that from a pulpit. Struggles of life are sometimes very, very hard. They take us into deep pain and longings and regrets and many things that cause our heart truly to be disturbed and sometimes agonize.

[25 : 33] But everything that God has done, he has made everything beautiful in its time. Sometimes we can't see the luster or the beauty of the work of God's hand.

Sometimes the toil of this life obscures the beauty from us, the losses of this life, the changes of this life.

but below the surface of every pain, if we have faith in God, there is the beauty of God, the beauty of his perfect being, the beauty of his wisdom, the beauty of his knowledge, the beauty of his perfect plan, the beauty of who he is and what he does.

So our present life is joined to eternity and our present life is God's gift with all its struggles and our present life should be joyfully productive.

Look at what he is saying from verse 12 onwards just briefly. I perceive 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.

[26 : 50] This is God's gift to man. He is not saying there that enjoying life is just following your own pleasure. It is not like the world very often is, a godless, hedonistic lifestyle.

Not as it that silly mantra that just says don't worry, be happy. That is not going to give you security or a sense that everything is well.

It is not that sort of thing. It is rather that someone like Johnny Erickson Tader, for example, I am sure you all know George Erickson Tader's life and what happened to her when she was young.

She was paralyzed, largely paralyzed from the shoulders down at least, in a diving accident. She came to really express anguish and struggle for a couple of years and she came to know the Lord and has lived by God's grace a remarkable life, a shining trophy of grace.

I watched a video of her just recently that's available on YouTube where she explains how she so often wanted God to cure her, to release her from this paralysis, to bring her back to a state of physical health again.

[28 : 06] And every time she just agonized and prayed to God but it just didn't happen. And she came to realize that there are things that are more important than what life is outwardly or physically, what she called a deep cleansing.

The cleansing of our inward part, of our souls, of our minds, of our aspirations, of our thoughts. And as you read, as you look at that video and see her in her wheelchair dressing this large crowd, she speaks about going to the Holy Land, as she said, to Israel and coming to something that just opened up as she said before her as she was being wheeled in her wheelchair along, she came across this site of the Pool of Bethesda.

And she says there, Oh, how often I had dreamed about the Pool of Bethesda and the cures that were spoken of there at that pool for people who had these illnesses.

How I wished I had been one of them. But you know, she said, in the wheelchair on my visit there, I sat and I wept. And I wept not because God hadn't cured me like those who were dipped in the Pool of Bethesda.

I wept because He had given me something even better. That cleansing of me inwardly. And she wrote, in another place, she wrote, God is more concerned with conforming me to the likeness of His Son than leaving me in my comfort zones.

[29 : 46] God is more interested in inward qualities than outward circumstances. Things like refining my faith, humbling my heart, cleaning up my thought life, and strengthening my character.

You see, that's what the Ecclesiastes writer means about there is nothing better than to be joyful and to do good as long as we live. And that we should eat and drink and take pleasure in all this toil.

This is God's gift to us. This is life as it is. But it's not without God if we choose to take Him into our life and trust in Him and put our life in His hands.

That's what life's about. That's what we must make of it. And we don't have long in this life to do it. And that's why the final verses are so important.

whatever God does endure forever. Nothing can be added to it nor taken from it. And God has done it so that people will fear before Him. Now He's not again being pessimistic as we said at the beginning.

[30 : 53] That's in fact just something that adds to a sense of comfort, a sense of well-being, a sense of security. If it's the case that God's work is something that stands as it is, that it doesn't need to be adjusted, that you don't need to add anything to it or take anything from it in order to be accepted, in order to have satisfaction, in order to have that well-being in your life, then doesn't that give you a sense of comfort?

That you know God is not going to change His mind over everything or anything that He places in your life. God has no regrets. no regrets.

God has no regret even over the giving away of His Son to the death of the cross. No regrets. No adjustments.

No corrections. He's God. And that's the God that the writer here is bringing us to.

God as He has purposed. Depending on God. That is indeed the purpose of the whole book, isn't it? When you come, as we'll eventually come to the end of the book, God willing, you remember how it ends.

[32 : 11] This is the end of the matter. All has been heard. Fear God and keep His commandments for this is the whole duty of man.

To honor God. To revere God. God. To love God. Because the fear he mentions there is not the fear of being afraid of God. Not the fear that takes you away from God.

It's the fear of God which is the beginning of wisdom. The fear that reveres, that honors, that loves, that serves, that worships Him. The fear of giving Him His place.

The fear that involves giving Him His place. and trusting in Him as God. May He bless His Word to us.

Let's pray. Thank you.