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Investing Your Time

Ecclesiastes 3:1-22

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The song *Dust in the Wind* was recorded and released in the mid 1970s by a group by the name of Kansas. Immediately that song soared to the top of the charts, in large part because the words of the song resonated as true with many of those of us that lived in the 70s. It was really a song about the despair of life: you live, you die. What's the point? Is there any meaning and purpose in life?

Many people were struggling with those same feelings and wondering if there is any point to life. I mean, really what does it matter if you're wildly successful...or if you struggle your whole life—if you live, you die, dust to dust? What's the point?

Well, here we are 25 years later, and if anything, the tension in that question is greater as people continue to struggle. What's the point? What gives life meaning and purpose? I go to work; I crank it out. But in the end, what difference does it make?

The words of the song *Dust in the Wind* sound very much like the Book of Ecclesiastes. I would invite you to turn with me to the Book of Ecclesiastes. It's right after Psalms, Proverbs... Ecclesiastes, chapter 1.

In chapter 1, verse 1, Solomon identifies himself as the writer and refers to himself as “the Preacher.” That's very important to understand. If I were to say to you that no amount of money, no amount of wealth, no amount of pleasure can ultimately satisfy, if you were cynical enough you might say, “How do you know that, Bryan? Have you ever had a million dollars? Have you ever had a billion dollars?” Well, that's a legitimate comment.

But if there was ever a person in the history of mankind that literally had it all, it would be Solomon. From Genesis 3, the Garden of Eden...on, nobody has ever had what Solomon had. Solomon had unlimited power. Solomon had unlimited wealth. Solomon had unlimited access to pleasure. He had everything this world has to offer. As a matter of fact, he says that several times through his writing here.

You know, sometimes people have a certain amount of money and they are convinced, *If I just had some more, I'd be happy*. And that's what keeps driving that. But what Solomon says is he didn't even have that. He's had it all. And it's all empty. It's vanity; it's worthless. That's what he says in verse 2. It's a phrase that repeats itself throughout the writing. It's all worthless. It has no value. It doesn't bring meaning to life.

There's another phrase that's repeated over and over again. You find it in verse 3, and that's the phrase “under the sun.” Basically that phrase is referring to life on this planet—life that is consumed with the business of this planet—and it's vanity; it's empty; it's worthless; it has no meaning or purpose. And Solomon is wrestling through this book with what gives life meaning and purpose. Or is this all there is?

Solomon talks about a number of things. In two weeks we're going to talk about wealth from the Book of Ecclesiastes. But for this morning, I invite you to turn to chapter 3, where Solomon talks about this concept of time. This is one of the more familiar Old Testament passages. It's often read at funerals and occasions like that. But it's very important to understand Solomon wasn't writing something that was just kind of poetic and felt good. It's actually a writing filled with a degree of sarcasm and a lot of despair, as he recognizes that time marches on and there's nothing he can do to stop that.

There is an appointed time for everything. And there is a time for every event under heaven—

**A time to give birth and a time to die;
A time to plant and a time to uproot what is planted.
A time to kill and a time to heal;
A time to tear down and a time to build up.
A time to weep and a time to laugh;
A time to mourn and a time to dance.
A time to throw stones and a time to gather stones;
A time to embrace and a time to shun embracing.
A time to search and a time to give up as lost;
A time to keep and a time to throw away.
A time to tear apart and a time to sew together;
A time to be silent and a time to speak.
A time to love and a time to hate;
A time for war and a time for peace.**

What profit is there to the worker from that in which he toils? I have seen the task which God has given the sons of men with which to occupy themselves.

(Ecclesiastes 3:1-10, *NASB)

What he's saying in the first couple of verses is that ultimately God is in charge: that God is the author of time; God is the author of life. God has appointed a time and a season for everything, and God's plan and purpose will be accomplished in perfect fulfillment.

From Genesis 3 on, there is this tension in the Bible between those who seek to be their own gods—to be the masters of their own fate, the captains of their own ship—versus those who acknowledge that God is God. This tension really is felt all through the Scriptures, and that's what Solomon is talking about here. He's talking about the reality that he's not his own god: *that life is full of circumstances I can't control, and you're born and you live and you die—and you cannot ultimately change those things.*

Solomon uses a technique in poetry that's called mirrorism. Mirrorism is just simply presenting the polar opposite. There's a time for birth; there's a time for death. And he goes through this list of opposites, in essence to cover from one end of the scale to the other.

It's not really necessary to go through and define each of these specifically. The point he's trying to make is the fact that God is in charge with every event, every circumstance from the beginning to the end. And you ultimately can't change that.

He talks about, what is the profit of our toil, of our task, of our labor? And this is a topic he has picked up in chapters 1 and 2 and continues here. When he's talking about toil and task and labor, what he's talking about is the incredible effort we put into trying to change what is inevitable. In other words, when we believe that we are our own gods, we will give our lives to try to somehow change what we cannot change. We're trying to be the masters of our own fate.

Yet, the reality is God has a plan; God has a purpose. God controls life; God controls death; God controls circumstances. And we can't change that. I understand that I was born, that I will live and I will die. And I will experience circumstances in my life, most of which I cannot change or control. And that's the reality of it. I either acknowledge God is in charge, or spend my life trying to change what I cannot change.

He says:

He has made everything appropriate in its time. He has also set eternity in their heart, yet so that man will not find out the work which God has done from the beginning even to the end. (v. 11)

He is saying that God will make everything appropriate, or beautiful, in His time. God doesn't do this on our timetable; He does this on His timetable. And because God is eternal and He sees the beginning from the end, in God's perfect timing everything will be worked out *exactly* the way He planned. That is the way it works.

At the bottom of that verse he ultimately says, "But we, because we're limited to time, cannot know that. We cannot know the beginning from the end." All we see is this brief period of time by which we walk on this planet. And we cannot see the big picture. Often that's what generates a lot of this despair and confusion.

But in the midst of this discussion, he introduces this unusual phrase: "God has put eternity in their heart." This is a concept that comes up numerous times in the Scriptures; it's just phrased in different ways. Ultimately what he means is God has put within our hearts a longing for that which is eternal, a longing for that which lasts. In other words, the despair that we feel because of the brevity of life and the circumstances of life—and just as the writer of the song *Dust in the Wind* was feeling—that's actually generated because God has put within our hearts a longing for something more.

We look at the brevity of life and we say, "God, tell me this isn't all there is. Tell me this can't be the whole story. There's got to be something more!—or it's worthless; it's empty; there's every reason for despair."

This is what separates us from the animal kingdom. A cow is born, a cow lives, eats grass and dies. And there isn't one day when that cow has an anxiety attack because that's all there is to life. A cow doesn't even process that. A cow just lives and dies and doesn't really care if that's all there is. A cow doesn't resonate with the words of *Dust in the Wind*. But we do—because God has put eternity in our hearts. There's something within that cries out and says, "Tell me this isn't all there is. There has got to be something more!"

Imagine with me if we were to draw a timeline—which is better termed a timeless line. If I were to shoot a laser to the east, it would go into Iowa and all the way across to the east coast and eventually it would go out through the earth's atmosphere and penetrate out into the solar system. It would just go indefinitely...never have an end. And the other direction the same thing: a line that goes through Colorado and ends up through the west coast and penetrates the earth's atmosphere, goes into the solar system, through the Milky Way. It has no end, this timeless line that is that vast.

And on that line there is this small section that represents the period of eternity where there is time. This is from the beginning to the end of time—in essence, Genesis to Revelation. We tend to think that's all that there is. But in the scope of eternity, it's a very short period of time.

In the midst of that very short period of time, let's imagine I were to take a razor blade and make the skinniest slash possible on that timeless line. That represents the duration of my life within the period of time. It is so small that the only thing I can use to even mark it is a razor blade. Now whether I live 20 years, 40 years, 80 years or a hundred years, it's really not even discernible in that small of a slash. But the reality is, that's my life. That's the time I have; that's the duration. If all I live for is the slash, my life will have no meaning and purpose. There's nothing to that.

We feel that sense that says, *Tell me that's not all there is. That can't be all there is to life!* We have this longing to somehow connect to that which goes on forever. *Tell me there's more to this than just what's in that slash.* Well, that's what Solomon is talking about here.

I know that there is nothing better for them than to rejoice and to do good in one's lifetime; moreover, that every man who eats and drinks sees good in all his labor—it is the gift of God. (vs. 12-13)

He's talking about those people who acknowledge that: God is God, and I'm not the captain of my own ship, but God is sovereign; God is in control of time; God is in control of life; God is in control of circumstances. So rather than spending my life fighting what is inevitable, I accept that. I embrace it, and I recognize that all I know is that today I have life. And whatever my circumstances, whatever my situation, today is a gift from God. I embrace that and I seek to invest my time today in that which ultimately matters. I have no guarantee of tomorrow; yesterday is past. He says,

I know that everything God does will remain forever; there is nothing to add to it and there is nothing to take from it, for God has so worked that men should fear Him. That which is has been already, and that which will be has already been, for God seeks what has passed by. (vs. 14-15)

He talks about the fact that the only thing that lasts forever is that which is connected with God. We can't add to it; we can't take away from it. God will fulfill His perfect plan in His own good timing, and that ultimately will come to pass. And that's all that will ultimately last.

But God has created it this way so that we would fear Him. It doesn't mean to be afraid of Him; it means to revere Him. Ultimately, time causes us to be dissatisfied with this life. I recognize that time is marching on and time takes my loved ones away from time. Time just keeps marching and I can't stop it.

But I also look at the things of this world and I find myself thinking, *There's got to be more to life than this.* And that causes me to acknowledge, *Maybe I'm not my own god. Maybe I'm not the master of my own fate. Maybe there is one greater than me who is controlling the picture from the beginning to the end.* And this despair that we feel in life is actually to lead us to acknowledge that God is God, and therefore we will connect to that which lasts forever.

Verse 15 is a little bit hard to understand. As a matter of fact, there are several verses in this chapter that are worded in a way that's difficult to understand. What he's ultimately saying is, for God there is no past, present, and future. For God, tomorrow is as clear as yesterday—it has already happened—because God isn't limited to time. God is outside of time; He is timeless. Everything is *done*, for God. So God sees the whole picture as if it is all completed.

Therefore, God is the only one who knows the beginning from the end. God is the only one who knows the appropriateness of time and seasons and what will be accomplished. And Solomon is acknowledging that God is God and He's the only one who knows that.

Furthermore, I have seen under the sun that in the place of justice there is wickedness and in the place of righteousness there is wickedness. I said to myself, "God will judge both the righteous man and the wicked man," for a time for every matter and for every deed is there. I said to myself concerning the sons of men, "God has surely tested them in order for them to see that they are but beasts."

For the fate of the sons of men and the fate of beasts is the same. As one dies so dies the other; indeed, they all have the same breath and there is no advantage for man over beast, for all is vanity. All go to the same place. All came from the dust and all return to the dust. Who knows that the breath of man ascends upward and the breath of the beast descends downward to the earth? And I have seen that nothing is better than that man should be happy in his activities, for that is his lot. For who will bring him to see what will occur after him? (vs. 16-22)

What he's saying there is, when he looks around the world, what he sees is not paradise. What he sees is chaos; what he sees is injustice; what he sees is unfairness. Where there should be righteousness, there is wickedness. Where there should be fairness, there is injustice. And all of that causes us to be dissatisfied with this earth. If this was a pleasure cruise, if this was the Garden of Eden, we'd kick up our feet and say, "This is fine." And that would be a disaster. God doesn't want us to settle for this earth, for life under the sun. So this earth is filled with turmoil and struggles and circumstances out of our control—in order that we might be tested.

That word "tested" in verse 18 is a word that means to separate out. And what are we separated out from? He tells us we're separated from the beasts. God wants us to be different from the beasts of the field. What he's ultimately saying is that if we don't understand this—if we don't understand the reality of that which is eternal, and all we live for is what happens in that little slash—that at the end of our lives what we have accomplished is no different than a cow in the field. We live just like the beasts. We were given time; but rather than investing that time in the things that matter, we spent our time and accomplished no more than the beasts of the field.

He goes on from there to say, "You know, the beast of the field—it's born, it lives, it dies, dust to dust." And if we are not connected with that which is eternal, our lives are no different than that; we've accomplished no more than that. I don't care if you've made millions of dollars; I don't care if you've built a tremendous business; I don't care if you've been a worldwide celebrity—at the end of the day, if it isn't connected to that which is eternal, it makes no difference! You have accomplished as much as a cow in the pasture.

You say, "Now wait a minute, that's not true. I mean, I built this great business and I think a hundred years from now it will still be going." Oh, my, that's impressive! Let me put that on my timeline. So I'm going to get my razor blade and I'm going to put this little tiny slash a hundred years from now. It's so minute you can barely even see it on the timeline.

But will that still matter 10,000 years from now...100,000 years from now? If not, then what's the point? What's the point if it's here today and gone tomorrow? Really, what was that about? And that's what Solomon is saying. What's the point? That accomplishes nothing. And it's no different than the beasts.

Apparently when Solomon was writing this there was a belief that what distinguishes people from the beasts is that when people die, their breath ascends upward; and when the beasts die, their breath ascends downward. But Solomon is challenging that and saying, "Where in the world did you get that? Nobody knows that. Actually the difference between people and the beasts is not that. The difference is whether or not people acknowledge God is God and connect with that which is eternal. And those who don't are really no different from the beasts in terms of what they accomplish in the time that they were given."

Then he goes on to repeat again, "The only way to be happy, the only way to be satisfied, the only way to have purpose and meaning in life is to accept the fact that God is God—that I'm not God.

And God is in charge of time; God is in charge of life; God is in charge of circumstances. Rather than fighting that and trying to change what is ultimately unchangeable, I just simply accept that and I settle in that. And what I know is, I have today. I don't know if I have tomorrow, and I don't know what tomorrow will bring. But I have *today*. And I need to wisely steward today as a gift of God. This is the time that I have today."

So what do we do with this whole concept of time and managing our time? Ultimately, the reality is if all you live for is what's in that little slash, I guarantee you, you will have a life of despair—a life at the end you'll look back and say, "What was it all about? What was the point? What did we really accomplish?"

The only way to find meaning and purpose in life is to connect with that which is eternal. And of course, we understand that starts by being rightly related to the One who is eternal. It starts with a relationship with Jesus Christ. God has made it possible through Jesus Christ that we could be rightly related to a God who is not limited to the slash, but the God of the eternal.

Once we have entered into a relationship with God, then in a general sense we need to understand that every day must be lived for that which ultimately lasts. Do you realize that God has given you the remarkable privilege that from that skinny little slash that is your life, you can be a part of something that will still matter 10,000 years from now...100,000 years from now? It will matter forever! That's a remarkable thing: from that little slash you can be a part of something that will matter forever. God has invited you to be a part of that and not just spend your hours in the slash.

How do we do that? Do we all have to become pastors and missionaries? And the answer is no, of course not. You just need to understand that every day is a gift of life. Every day is a gift of life to be invested in that which ultimately matters, to live for more than just the slash. You say, "How do we do that?" Well, it's a matter of understanding. Tomorrow morning when you get up, understand that if you have trusted Jesus as Savior, you are a missionary on assignment, and you have the most unique assignments: you go into the school; you go into the neighborhood; you go into the marketplace; you go to the construction site; you go to where you recreate. And you have an opportunity to represent Jesus to the world.

Tomorrow morning your highest priority is not making money. Your highest priority is not getting promoted. Your highest priority is none of those things—not that there's anything wrong with any of that. But your highest priority is to ultimately represent Jesus and to see that God has placed you in a very specific place—with certain gifts, certain talents, certain opportunities—in order to make a difference for eternity. To understand that *must* be your highest priority. And every day must be a kingdom day: I use the platforms that God has given me to have an opportunity to influence other people that they, too, might know Jesus and experience this eternal life.

The Bible talks a lot about eternal life. It isn't just a duration of life; it is a quality of life. It's a life that goes from the slash to that which lasts forever. And I have a chance—even in the midst of that slash—to experience that life that goes on forever.

Once I have that, it's my responsibility to influence others that they, too, might know that. In a general sense, that's what we're all called to. In a specific sense, there's no question that the New Testament teaches that the instrument through which God will accomplish His plan and purpose in our generation is His Church.

If you have trusted Jesus as Savior, you are a member of the Church. Whether or not you've signed something on the dotted line is irrelevant to God. The moment you trusted Christ as Savior, you

became part of His Church. And God has called you, God has wired you, God has equipped you to fulfill a role within His Church that will make a difference for eternity.

It's easy to say, "Well, you know, I need to do that someday when my kids get a little bigger...or someday when I retire...or someday when these circumstances change." You have no guarantee of that. All you have is a guarantee that you have *today*. And you will be held accountable for how you invested today. Yesterday is a canceled check; tomorrow is a promissory note. Today is the only cash you have, so you better spend it wisely.

Almost every Christian I talk to will immediately say, "Yes, I'm living for eternal things." Let me ask you a question: Are you really? That's easy to say, but are you really? Is that your passion? Is that what you're thinking about when you get out of bed in the morning? Is that what you're thinking about when you go to work? Is that really the priority of your life? Is it reflected in what you do with your time—in your willingness to connect and serve in your local church? Are you just spending your time? Or are you investing your time in that which will last forever?

Our Father, we're thankful that You are the author of life; You are the giver of time. So many times we spend hours with so much anxiety and stress and labor, trying to change that which is just inevitable. Lord, help us to acknowledge that You are God and that we are not; that You are in charge of time; You are the author of life; You're in charge of circumstances. And today I just need to accept what is and make the most of this day as it relates to that which will last forever.

Lord, I thank You for the remarkable privilege that within this slash of time that You have given us in respect to eternity, You've called us and granted us the opportunity to be a part of something that 100,000 years from now will still matter. Lord, help us not to miss the moment, but to wisely steward our time. In Jesus' name, Amen

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