

LIVING LIFE BACKWARDS

Scripture from Ecclesiastes 1:1-11 (2 other Scripture readings start on page 4):

Everything Is Meaningless

1 The words of the Teacher, son of David, king in Jerusalem:

² “Meaningless! Meaningless!”
says the Teacher.

“Utterly meaningless!
Everything is meaningless.”

³ What do people gain from all their labors
at which they toil under the sun?

⁴ Generations come and generations go,
but the earth remains forever.

⁵ The sun rises and the sun sets,
and hurries back to where it rises.

⁶ The wind blows to the south
and turns to the north;
round and round it goes,
ever returning on its course.

⁷ All streams flow into the sea,

yet the sea is never full.

To the place the streams come from,
there they return again.

⁸ All things are wearisome,
more than one can say.

The eye never has enough of seeing,
nor the ear its fill of hearing.

⁹ What has been will be again,
what has been done will be done
again;

there is nothing new under the sun.

¹⁰ Is there anything of which one can say,
“Look! This is something new”?

It was here already, long ago;
it was here before our time.

¹¹ No one remembers the former
generations,
and even those yet to come
will not be remembered
by those who follow them.

MESSAGE:

In a recently published study of the *Book of Ecclesiastes*, the author begins with the following words: *“I am going to die. By the time you read these lines, I may even be dead. It’s not that I have a virulent disease or a terminal illness. A doctor has not pronounced on how I am going to die. I don’t know when I will die, I just know that I will. I am going to die and so are you. But here is why I wrote this book: I am ready to die.”* (*Living Life Backwards*, p. 1) Now this may sound like a depressing way to begin a book, but it’s really not. It only sounds glum to someone who views death as the end of something good rather than the beginning of something better. When the author, David Gibson, says *“I am ready to die,”* he isn’t hinting at suicide or expressing despair over an unhappy life. Quite the opposite, he is rejoicing because he knows that when his life in this world ends he will be entering a new life which is as superior to this life as the heavens are higher than the earth. I’ve never heard it expressed better than it was by your former pastor, Dennis Mann. When a member asked him to pray for healing for an older woman whose health was failing, he responded: *“I will pray for God to heal her—but you need to*

understand that if she dies, she's healed." Have you ever thought of dying that way? As being healed? As leaving behind this fallen world and entering a restored Garden of Eden? Because that is what death is for a believer. As it says on my Great-Aunt Belle's gravestone in Pierce City, Missouri: *"Death is but the dawn of eternal day."*

Down through the ages, generation after generation of Christians have been comforted by this promise of eternal life. And that's what Christianity is all about, folks! In the Christmas Carol *"It Came Upon a Midnight Clear,"* one of the verses goes this way: *"All you beneath your heavy load, by care and guilt bent low; Who toil along a dreary way with painful steps and slow; Look up! For golden is the hour come swiftly on the wing; The Prince was born to bring you peace—of Him the angels sing!"* The song the angels sang to the shepherds at Bethlehem on the night of our Savior's birth has cheered many a struggling soul through the years. It was the promise of that song that cheered God's children through the era of the Old Covenant. It inspired King Solomon when he was a young king to write his own song—the *Song of Solomon*—a love song to God. But sadly, in the course of his life, Solomon's love for God grew cold and his faith grew dim. By the time he was an old man, he was singing a very different kind of song—we might call it a dirge or a lament. In modern jargon, it might even be called "the blues." We know this lament as the *Book of Ecclesiastes* and it begins like this: *"Meaningless! Meaningless! Utterly meaningless! Everything is meaningless! All things are wearisome more than one can say....What a heavy burden God has laid on men! I have seen all the things that are done under the sun; all of them are meaningless—a chasing after the wind."* (Ecclesiastes 1:2, 8, 13-14)

In the final years of his life, Solomon was toiling along a dreary way with painful steps and slow. He no longer drew comfort from the God of his youth who had made him the wisest man who ever lived and given him everything a man could ask for. All he could see was a fallen world where people led meaningless lives and ended up dead and forgotten. He would have agreed with a bumper sticker I once saw that said, *"Life stinks—and then you die."* The world Solomon describes in *Ecclesiastes* was bleak and barren and was governed by four rules: nothing lasts, life is monotonous, the world is deteriorating, and in the end you die.

Now it may shock you to hear me say this, but as far as it goes, Solomon had it right. His four rules pretty much do govern this fallen world.

First of all, nothing lasts. Youth and vigor turn into age and decrepitude. When I started exercising many years ago, my goal was to "buff up"—to get stronger and healthier and—let's face it—more attractive! By the time I hit sixty, I was struggling to maintain the status quo, to keep things from going to pot. Now I'm doing whatever I can just to slow down the rate at which things are going to pot. The trouble is, it's like sweeping water uphill—sooner or later the water is going to win. The actress Joan Collins once said that being born with beauty is like being born with a lot of money and then gradually losing it all. Things that used to arouse our enthusiasm now seem boring. As the old saying goes, "Life Get's Teejus—Don't It?" Instead of looking forward to new experiences we spend our time

dotting on old ones. We keep looking for something permanent, but everything around us keeps changing. Nothing lasts—not even our memories.

Then there's the monotony—the endless repetitiveness of life. As Solomon puts it, "Generations come and generations go; the sun rises and sets again; whatever will be has already been and there's nothing new under the sun." Two thousand years ago St. Paul visited Athens, the home of Western civilization where science and philosophy had their origins. Athens boasted a proud intellectual community who professed to have open minds and said that they were eager to hear what Paul had to say. But when he preached the Gospel to them, most of them sneered and he made very few converts. He later wrote that, "*The message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing.*" (1 Corinthians 1:18). Today we see the same thing happening in universities and seminaries throughout Europe and America, where the Gospel is regarded as foolishness and the Scriptures are edited to say what "intellectuals" think they ought to say. As Jesus said: "*I praise you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and learned, and revealed them to little children.*" (Luke 10:21)

Then there is the fact that all things are in a state of deterioration. For Solomon wisdom brings sorrow and knowledge brings grief. Honest labor turns into drudgery and pleasure settles into boredom. As St. Paul put it, all creation is in bondage to decay. Physicists call this "entropy"—the principle that all forms of matter and energy move from a more highly organized state to a less organized state, from order to disorder. The Bible calls it a fallen world which groans under the curse of sin.

Finally, there is the inevitability of death. We come from dust and to dust we will return. Fools die, but the wise man dies along with the fool. No man knows when his hour will come: he only knows that it will come. In the end, the grave will swallow him as it has swallowed all who came before him. Whether you think that life stinks or not—you're gonna die.

This was the world as Solomon saw it in his old age, where a life lived under the sun was meaningless, a "chasing after the wind."

But for those of us who live life under a different Son—the Son of God—it's a different story altogether. Even though we too suffer under the trials and tribulations of a fallen world, we have been allowed to see another world that lies beyond its boundaries and awaits us. It's, a world where in the words of Isaiah, "*Gladness and joy will overtake us, and sorrow and sighing will flee away.*" (Isaiah 35:10) And once the knowledge of that world is planted safely in our hearts, our life here is leavened with joyful anticipation. God gives us strength for today and bright hope for tomorrow. It's a life which in some ways is like a life lived backwards.

It's a life which doesn't begin at infancy and find meaning in the passing glories of this world, where nothing lasts, monotony rules, everything deteriorates and you end up dead. It's a life which starts with faith that death is but the dawn of eternal day and then lets the light of that future day illuminate our journey through this fallen world.

It's a life informed not by worldly knowledge that brings cynicism and worldly wisdom that brings sorrow, but by divine knowledge that brings joy and the wisdom of God that brings salvation.

It's a life that began when we were born again of water and the spirit and filled with a childlike faith that accepts and believes mysteries and revelations from God that are hidden from the wise and learned.

It's a life where we know that even though "here we have no enduring city," we are already citizens of a heavenly city, the New Jerusalem of God, a city not made with human hands which does not need the sun or moon or stars to give it light, but which basks in a divine light that emanates from God Himself. A city whose dwellings are eternal, where everything lasts, all is new, nothing deteriorates and death has been swallowed up in victory.

We can live by the light of man's reason alone, or we can live life "backwards" by the light of faith. We can live by created light or we can live by the light of the Son of God.

Solomon started out in the light and ended up in darkness. Lord, help us to remain in Your light. Amen.

Psalm 63:1-8 A psalm of David. When he was in the Desert of Judah.

¹ You, God, are my God,
earnestly I seek you;

I thirst for you,
my whole being longs for you,
in a dry and parched land
where there is no water.

² I have seen you in the sanctuary
and beheld your power and your glory.

³ Because your love is better than life,
my lips will glorify you.

⁴ I will praise you as long as I live,

and in your name I will lift up my hands.

⁵ I will be fully satisfied as with the richest
of foods;
with singing lips my mouth will praise
you.

⁶ On my bed I remember you;
I think of you through the watches of the
night.

⁷ Because you are my help,
I sing in the shadow of your wings.

⁸ I cling to you;
your right hand upholds me

2 Corinthians 5:1-10 Awaiting the New Body

⁵ For we know that if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, an eternal house in heaven, not built by human hands. ² Meanwhile we groan, longing to be clothed instead with our heavenly dwelling, ³ because when we are clothed, we will not be found naked.

⁴ For while we are in this tent, we groan and are burdened, because we do not wish to be unclothed but to be clothed instead with our heavenly dwelling, so that what is mortal may be swallowed up by life. ⁵ Now the one who has fashioned us for this very purpose is God, who has given us the Spirit as a deposit, guaranteeing what is to come.

⁶ Therefore we are always confident and know that as long as we are at home in the body we are away from the Lord. ⁷ For we live by faith, not by sight. ⁸ We are confident, I say, and would prefer to be away from the body and at home with the Lord. ⁹ So we make it our goal to please him, whether we are at home in the body or away from it. ¹⁰ For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each of us may receive what is due us for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad.