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Don’t Miss the Moments

The Re-Think Series

Ecclesiastes 3:1-15

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I think pretty much everybody, if you ask them, would say that they do not want to waste this one life they've been given. They want, ultimately, for their lives to matter. Yet I would say a majority of those people will ultimately waste their lives, chasing the things of this world that ultimately do not matter. That's what we want to talk about. If you have a Bible, turn with us to Ecclesiastes, Chapter 3. So we're coming to the end of 2025, 365 days that you'll never get back. So, what did you do with the 365 days you were given? And is it possible, as we look into the year to come, that maybe you need to rethink some things, to really live these days for the things that matter.

If there was anyone who you could say had it all, it would certainly be Solomon, who is believed to be the author of the book of Ecclesiastes. He had unimaginable wealth. He had power; he had fame; he had pleasure; he really had it all…and yet he was absolutely miserable. As a matter of fact, he opens his book, Chapter 1, Verse 2 with these words:

> **“Vanity of vanities”, says the Preacher,**
> **“Vanity of vanities! All is vanity.”** (*NASB, Ecclesiastes 1:2)

The Hebrew word translated **vanity** just means empty, worthless. It has no meaning. That's his summary of life. He has it all, and he's absolutely miserable. He talks about a number of subjects, but the unique thing about the book of Ecclesiastes is you don't really get the release from the tension till you get to the last two verses of the last chapter. And finally he says, “*…unless God is in it.”* But it's also true, all along the way in Ecclesiastes, there's little hints that point in that direction. So, in chapter 2 he's talking about the futility of labor, and you work from sunup to sundown, and at the end of the day, what difference does it make? Then he rolls into chapter 3, where he wants to talk about time. What do we do with the time we've been given? There's probably a number of reasons why people ultimately waste their lives, but certainly one of the top reasons, in my opinion, is what I refer to as the danger of a monotonous life. Most of life will not be lived in the big moments. Big moments are pretty obvious; we get those. But most of life is lived in the monotony of everyday stuff, and that's what Solomon is talking about.

Chapter 3 records probably the most familiar text in the book of Ecclesiastes. It's a poem all about time. I've heard this read at graduations. I've heard it read at weddings and funerals, but it's really important to understand Solomon is not suddenly in a very thoughtful, introspective, poetic, philosophical mood. He's absolutely miserable. He ends chapter 2 saying:

> **This, too is vanity.** (Vs.26)

It's empty. It's worthless, striving after the wind. The original text did not have a chapter break so he rolls right into this conversation of time. This poem is filled with cynicism and sarcasm. Let me read it to you.

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. (Ecclesiastes 3:1-8)

Solomon uses a Hebrew technique that's called mirrorism. This poem is filled with all kinds of cynical, sarcastic phrases, so mirrorism is the idea that you present one thing and then present the polar opposite of it. So, *There is a time to live and there is a time to die.* Basically the poem is, "There's a time to live; there's a time to die…and a bunch of stuff in between. It's not really necessary to go through and dissect every line of the poem to try to figure out what it means. The meaning here is found in the technique itself. It just creates a very monotonous poem. One way to understand this is there's probably quite a few of you that, when I started reading it, you were with me. Little by little, more and more of you dropped away, until by the end of the poem, I'm pretty much reading it by myself, because at some point it's like, "Okay, okay, I get it; you know, like, move on!" But that is the point. It's reflecting the monotony of life. I get up…drink a cup of coffee…eat a piece of toast…go to work. Work all day…go home…do this…do that…a little more this…a little more that…go to bed. The next morning I get up and I just do the same thing. Days turn into weeks; weeks turn into months; months turn into years…a life wasted!

You add to that this crazy busyness that defines our culture. I've said for years that I believe it's the emptiness of our culture that drives the pace. Today there's more and more research that affirms that is indeed true. There are two things happening. One is people are desperately searching for significance, and there's this belief that if I'm really busy, I must really matter. But we can't find the significance we long for. So the busyness becomes what they're referring to as a numbing strategy, no different than any other addiction. It's simply a way to preoccupy myself so I don't have to look at the emptiness of what has become of my life. So the two things feed on each other and become this cycle that causes us to waste one day after another. A couple thousand years ago Socrates wrote, "Beware of the barrenness of a busy life." This is not a new problem. So, verse 9:

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. (Vs. 9-10)

Solomon is asking the question, "What is the point of all that? Busy doesn't mean anything, but that you're busy. It doesn't mean you're significant, doesn't mean you have great value, doesn't

mean you're important, it just means you're busy. And at the end of the day, "What is the point of that?"

I have these conversations with people regularly, and here's what I usually hear, "Well, it's my job;" "It's my boss;" "It's my business;" "It's my kids;" "It's the school…it's the coach…it's the sports…it's the activities." In other words, "It's everybody else's fault." And what I always say is, "At some point you have to own the fact this is your life. At the end of the day God will hold you accountable for what you did with the days you were given. And in that moment you can't say it was everybody else's fault." I realize it's a culture out of control; that is the point. But this is your life, and you only get one shot at it. You don't get to relive any days. So, at some point you have to say, "This is my life. I own it, and I'm going to make the decisions I have to make to live for the things that really matter." Verse 11:

> **He has made everything appropriate** (…probably better translated, "He has made everything beautiful") **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.**

There are a couple of things there that are really important. One is: "What does he mean by **eternity in our hearts**?" Basically what he's saying is, "There's something deep within us that is dissatisfied with the emptiness of life. Something from deep in my soul cries out, 'There has to be something more than this. There has to be something different. This can't be all there is.'" It's that emptiness that drives people to be more and more busy. The idea of **eternity in our hearts** is a reflection of what it means to be made in the image of God. There's something deep within us that feels like I was made for something different, for something more, and the reason you feel that way is because you were.

Genesis 1 and 2 paints this beautiful picture of what you were actually created for: to experience this deep, soul-satisfying relationship with God, in a place God Himself called Paradise. That's what you were actually made for, and that's what God wants to ultimately deliver you back to one day. So empty, meaningless boredom is very dissatisfying.

I have a couple of horses at home, and I can tell you with great confidence, they love boredom. They're most happy when they stand in the pasture all day long and eat grass. This is like the best life they could have. But we're not made like that. There's something deep within us that longs for more.

The second thing in verse 11 that Solomon is saying is that ultimately God is writing a story, and at the end of the story it will be beautiful. But we can't see that. All we see is a tiny moment in time. So our perspective is skewed. All we have is the moment, one day at a time. Corrie Ten Boom, who spent time in a Nazi concentration camp, wrote about this particular verse and created the imagery of a tapestry—that all we see is the underside of the tapestry, and it's full of threads and tangles and knots—and it's not really very pretty at all. But what God sees is the top side of the tapestry, and little by little He's weaving these threads, writing a story that ultimately will be beautiful. This leaves us with the responsibility to find the beauty in the moments that come each day. They are there, but you do have to look for them. Verse 12:

> **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.** (Every day is a gift.) **I know that everything God does will remain forever; there is nothing to add to it and there is nothing to take away 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.12-15)

I just want to highlight two points there. One is: he clearly says that God considers each day a gift. At the end of verse 15, **God seeks what has passed by**…basically meaning God is going to hold us accountable for the days we've been given and what we did with those days. They may become monotonous to us. They may just be one day after another, but to God they're a gift, and He wants to know, "What did you do with the gift you were given?"

Tomorrow it will be exactly 27 years since I had my first open heart surgery. As a matter of fact, it was so much fun I did it again 15 years later. But the first one—1998—I was 39 years old. I was working out at the gym and I thought everything was fine. But it wasn't fine. For me one of the pivotal moments was when my cardiologist came out of the cath lab and the first words out of his mouth were, "Bryan, there is no human explanation for why you are still alive. No one in the cath lab can figure it out." I have been very clear since that moment that every day since then is a gift. I have been on bonus time since 1998. If we were to take a quiz this morning, everybody in the room would say, "Yes, I know I'm mortal." But I'm going to suggest that you don't really know that until you go through something that reminds you of how fragile life really is…and you better see every day as a gift.

So what does this mean in practical terms? Well, first let me start with what it doesn't mean. It doesn't mean that every day has to be super intense, super spiritual, that every moment of every day is some sort of intense spiritual thing at the church, every moment the doors are open. That's not what it means. It's definitely not what I'm saying. As a matter of fact, that's just a good way to make a mess out of your life. Maybe the best way to capture it is to go back to the Christmas story tucked away in the Christmas narrative in Luke Chapter 2. There is a comment made of Mary that came off the page to me in my mid 20s.

I remember, vividly, Patty and I were just starting a family and noticing, really for me, the first time those words. The angels have come; the shepherds have come to visit the Christ child. It's this amazing moment of everything that's going on. As you get this sense that it's all starting to quiet down a little bit, Luke says this, **"…and Mary treasured these things, pondering them in her heart.**

I grew up in the fundamentalist movement, and I heard countless preachers toward the end of their life, talk about how they lost themselves in the ministry and neglected their family and lived with all these regrets. And I remember thinking. "That is a dumb way to live." But I also remember those words and thinking, "That's the key…*to treasure the moments and ponder them in your heart…*because you don't get any of them back."

We're kind of an artsy family—all of us in our own way—and we just happen to be a family that loves our sunrises and our sunsets. I don't know if you saw the sunrise yesterday. It was absolutely

spectacular. So, a week ago today I was watching the end of the Steelers-Lions game. If you happened to watch that, the last minute was utter chaos. So I'm deep in the game and I hear a voice from another room, “Honey, come quick. Look at the sunset.” I said, “Just a minute, honey, I'm watching the end of the game.” She said, “You don't have a minute; you better come now.” So, I did, and it was spectacular! It was like the western sky was on fire. You only get a couple of minutes and it's gone. I thought about that when I went back to the TV, because I can just rewind a little bit and watch the end of the game, but I don't ever get another moment to see that sunset. The artwork of God—a moment of worship—perhaps a glimpse of the world as it, one day will be again.

Last February, Patty and I were in Hawaii visiting our daughter, who was living there. And true to who we are as a family, she lined up a place every single evening we were there to watch the sunset. On this particular evening, the sun was setting on the ocean. It just looked like it was literally going into the ocean, with the beautiful red reflecting off the water. It was absolutely spectacular! There were a few other people, maybe 12 to 15 other people, most of them younger people, who were also there to watch the sunset. But I looked at them and noticed pretty much every single one of them was looking the opposite direction. The sun sets that way, like this. They were all taking selfies of themselves with the sun setting in the background. I turned to Patty and I said, “That right there is a commentary of where we're at as a culture. You're completely missing the moment because you're making yourself front and center,” I guess to post on social media to say to people, “Look at me. I'm in Hawaii,” instead of putting your phone down and drinking in and capturing this beautiful moment that you can't have back again. There was a big part of me that wanted to yell at them, “Hey, the sunset is that way,” but I'm not much for public disturbances, so I didn't.

Over the years, one of the things I have seen is that it is common when people are diagnosed with a terminal illness, they quickly are able to separate the difference between what matters and what doesn't matter, and to see each day as a gift. It makes me think of my friends, Bob and Donna McCullough. Bob and I went to high school together at Lincoln High. We were in the same graduating class, ’77. We played football together. Donna was in the class right behind us, but once we graduated from high school, I didn't see Bob again until 2016. I remember the weekend I was out in the foyer, and I looked up and much to my surprise, there's Bob and Donna. Bob and Donna became part of the Lincoln Berean family, and it was wonderful having them here. Donna was a loving, caring, kind, wonderful person, but about two years ago she was diagnosed with ALS. It was a devastating diagnosis. ALS is just a difficult, hideous disease. It wasn't long until you began to see the effect the disease was having on her body. Bob and Donna came every Saturday night. They sat right over here. But little by little you could see it becoming more and more difficult for Donna to walk, difficult to talk. You could just watch her deteriorate. Yet week after week they were here. She was always so encouraging, always so happy, so excited to be here, so affirming and appreciative of things people were doing. But on a few occasions we had a conversation, and she was concerned about what the end of this story might look like. She was asking questions I really couldn't answer, probably nobody could answer. The thing I kept saying is, “You can't lose sight of the days you have; each day is a gift. You need to live each day to the fullest and treasure it.” She and Bob took that to heart. There were multiple times where I was in their home and we had similar conversations, and Bob would say, “Honey, we can't do anything about that. We have today. Let's just treasure being together today.” And they did, one day after another after another.

Donna was getting pretty close to the end and she asked if I would come over. She wanted to talk to me and, for a little bit she wanted to talk to me without Bob there, so we sent Bob away. At this point Donna couldn't talk, so she had to type it into her iPad and push a button, and the machine would say it for her. She was typing on her pad. She pushed the button and the very first words out of her mouth were, "I wouldn't change these last two years for anything." I was absolutely stunned! I just kind of stared at her, seeing the effect of this disease on her body. I knew how hard this had been, and I found myself thinking, "I can't believe you just said that." It's like this sacred moment where you don't know what to say. She went on to say, "Never in her life had she ever experienced the depth of love relationship with Jesus like she had over the last two years." She said, "Never before in her marriage had she ever experienced the depth of the love and intimacy that she and Bob experienced together." Bob had retired early; he was her caregiver. He was with her all the time. She says, "It's never been more beautiful than this." She looked at the impact on her kids and her grandkids and, as hard as it had been said, "I wouldn't trade these last two years for anything." I remember leaving the house. I was inspired; I was challenged to remember every day is a gift. You don't want to miss the things that matter each day. It was only a few weeks after that that Donna passed. I know this has been a really hard season for Bob, his first Christmas without Donna. But I know for certain what Bob is clinging to in his grief are these beautiful moments that they shared together, that he will hold onto until the day the two of them are together again in the presence of Jesus…moments they'll never get back…better not miss them!

Some of you have heard this story before. I've told it before of Christmas shopping with my oldest daughter, Ashley. When we lived in Broken Bow, I started a tradition with my girls. When they got about four or five, I would take them all day shopping and usually we'd go to Kearney or Grand Island. We would eat out; we'd play games; we'd do all kinds of stuff and buy things for their sisters and their mom. We'd make a whole day out of it. I took something that otherwise would have been very unpleasant for me at Christmas time—shopping—and made it one of my favorite things at Christmas. On this particular occasion, this may have been the first time Ashley and I went, and by the end of the day we had had just a beautiful time together. I put her in the car and buckled her in. She wanted all the presents with her, so I piled them all on top of her. She had her arms around them. It was starting to snow, the big snowflakes. It was about an hour and a half from Kearney to Broken Bow, so I put on some Christmas music. It was probably five minutes and she was sound asleep. And I remember looking over at her and asking, "God, is it possible for this moment to last forever?" Even in the moment I knew it was fleeting. I'd better catch it now, because they don't last very long. Well, of course the moment didn't last, and life goes on. There were a lot of years of Christmas shopping together. As a matter of fact we never missed a single Christmas season until Ashley turned 25. She was part of the church-planting-team that was going to Spain with Ryan. In December of that year, she wrote a blog entitled, "Things I will miss." Here's what she wrote. "Every Christmas since I was, I think four, my dad has taken me on a father daughter date to go shopping for my sisters and my mom. Now that I'm an adult, it's become one part of the holiday season that I look forward to the most, regardless of how much or little shopping I actually need to do. I LOVE, (in all caps) the time with my dad. Last night we went shopping. So we drove home from Omaha with dinner leftovers and gifts in the backseat, listening to the Oak Ridge Boys' Christmas and watching the snow fall. I couldn't help but think how perfect the moment was, but it's only a moment, and as with most things lately, there is a sadness behind the good things. It's likely that will be the last time I go Christmas shopping with my dad." It was interesting she was

having the same emotions that I had had 20 years before…capturing the moment…because the moments don't last.

But what I've realized over the years, it's not so much that the moments just go away. They become part of the thread that make up the tapestry of the story God is writing…moments that matter, moments to treasure that are woven into the tapestry that become part of the story God is writing that will ultimately matter. Tomorrow Ashley turns 41. A few weeks ago she texted me, "Hey, Dad, want to go wander through some stores, do a little Christmas shopping, eat out together?" I said, "I'd love to." Another moment to cherish…another thread in the tapestry…another part of the story that God is writing that will ultimately matter.

I promise you every day in 2026, there will be moments, if you choose to see them. Each day is a day you'll never get back. But each day has moments that you can treasure, that you can ponder. They're the moments that give life meaning and purpose, moments that create the thread that becomes part of the tapestry that is part of the story that God is writing. There will be moments. I just hope you don't miss them.

> *Our Father, we celebrate the moments that are not really lost. They just become part of the tapestry, the beauty of the story that ultimately gives life meaning and purpose. Lord, may we live each day as a gift from You. Like Mary, may we treasure the moments, ponder them in our hearts, so that we might live for the things that ultimately matter. In Jesus' name, Amen.*

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