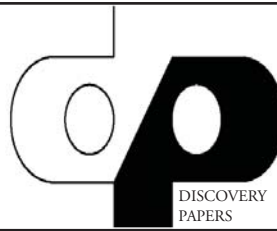


IS ANYONE LISTENING?

SERIES: SEEK AND YOU SHALL FIND



Catalog No. 100620
Ecclesiastes 3:1-11
Matthew 7:7-11
5th Message
Steve Zeisler
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We are in a series of sermons that compare Ecclesiastes and the Sermon on the Mount. The voice of the skeptic and the voice of the Lord, interacting on the same subject matter.

Because of these studies, I have been asked more than once why Ecclesiastes is in the Bible. Why does God-breathed scripture contain an investigation of life 'under the sun,' absent divine revelation. This statement from chapter 3, verse 11 points to an answer:

**[God] has set eternity in the hearts of men,
yet they cannot fathom what he has done from
beginning to end.**

The Searcher, in Ecclesiastes, does not write to advance skepticism or promote despair. His investigations bring us to the end of self effort. God has set inside us a longing for something this world cannot provide, for an existence that transcends the limits of time.

He set eternity in our hearts. But does God also act to answer the longing He has created? Jesus' words are simple: "ask and it will be given to you" (Matthew 7:7) and "How much more will your Father in heaven give good gifts to those who ask him?" (Matthew 7:11).

The circles of time are relentless and uncaring. Each day churns out its 24 hours with no attention to the burdened heart, no expression of love, and no offer of help. We long for experience that is not ruled by time in which truth, beauty, and love don't fade. Our Father is waiting for us to ask so that He can give these good gifts to His children.

First lets consider the most famous section in the book of Ecclesiastes, a brilliant work of poetry in which the rule of uncaring time is examined.

Ecclesiastes 3:1-11

**¹There is a time for everything,
and a season for every activity under
heaven:**

**² a time to be born and a time to die,
a time to plant and a time to uproot,
³ a time to kill and a time to heal,
a time to tear down and a time to build,
⁴ a time to weep and a time to laugh,
a time to mourn and a time to dance,
⁵ a time to scatter stones and a time to
gather them,
a time to embrace and a time to refrain,
⁶ a time to search and a time to give up,
a time to keep and a time to throw away,
⁷ a time to tear and a time to mend,
a time to be silent and a time to speak,
⁸ a time to love and a time to hate,
a time for war and a time for peace.
⁹ What does the worker gain from his toil?
¹⁰ I have seen the burden God has laid on men.
¹¹ He has made everything beautiful in its time.
He has also set eternity in the hearts of men; yet
they cannot fathom what God has done from
beginning to end.**

There is a stark beauty in the symmetry of time viewed as a series of pairs: something desirable and something difficult; something demanding and something rewarding. And it is true to our experience—much as we wish for a stable peace, we know that human societies will return to war; mending and tearing and mending are inevitable. The symmetry makes for good poetry, but it also testifies that time is relentless. "Yesterday, all my troubles seemed so far away. Now it seems as though they're here to stay. Oh, I believe in yesterday."¹ The calendar does not care about my longings for eternity or belief in yesterday. Yesterday was yesterday, today is today, and tomorrow will arrive as scheduled.

What can we learn from examining some of the Searcher's, Koheleth's, images-in-pairs?

Everyone has had the experience of laughing at an awkward moment or saying the wrong thing at the wrong time.

But there is more at stake here than mere social clumsiness. A broken heart can be deeply wounded—being on the receiving end of a romantic breakup when it is “time to refrain from embracing.” Or the embrace can end after a long marriage when one partner outlives a beloved spouse and faces life alone. The impersonal march of time pays no attention.

I lived in a fraternity when I was a sophomore in college and a guy whose class had graduated two years before, continued as a house resident (unknown to the university) during that year. His specialty was party planning. According to the Searcher there is a time to be planted and a time for the plant to be uprooted. Long lasting fraternity life is nothing to aspire to.

No one welcomes the dour wedding guest who does not know when it is time for joyful dancing. There is a time for everything, but our preferences are not taken into account. Time marches on and tramples all who get in the way.

Most tourists to Israel visit Masada. It is fortress atop a steep rock promontory near the Dead Sea. Built by Herod the Great, it served Israelite zealots who resisted Rome in the first century and is now a symbol of modern Israel’s determination to survive, though surrounded by enemies.

On my first visit to Israel I took a tram to the top of the fortress. On a subsequent occasion I hiked up the steep trail on a hot day and found myself much more aware of the history of siege and struggle, hope and fear by taking the long way. Most of us want to take the tram to the top of all the mountains in our life. We want to skip the hard part. But Koheleth’s poem reminds us that we cannot have joy without sorrow and that with disappointment comes awareness that we are really longing for eternity.

Jesus has a word for those who long for God’s good gifts.

Matthew 7:7-11

⁷“Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. ⁸For everyone who asks receives; he who seeks finds; and to him who knocks, the door will be opened.

⁹“Which of you, if his son asks for bread, will give him a stone? ¹⁰Or if he asks for a fish,

will give him a snake? ¹¹If you, then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good gifts to those who ask him!

Prayer changes everything, but we find it difficult to enter God’s presence in honest and hopeful expectation that He will respond to us. We get distracted or tongue-tied or believe ourselves unworthy (note: all are welcome, everyone who asks, receives). We have the attention of a loving Father.

It is important to observe, too, that there are three stages in this instruction.

‘Asking’ is speech in which we make our requests known to God. ‘Seeking’ engages our Father as a person (not an ATM machine) who will make Himself known and help us see ourselves. Finally, ‘knocking’ removes the barriers (including our hard hearts and disbelief) which stand between us and the Father.

God is not capricious, cruel, uninvolved, or distant. He is our Father who knows what we need before we know it ourselves. He loves us and will give us only what is best for us.

A question occurs naturally then, “What about prayers that are not answered (or seem not to be answered)?” Because we are dealing with an infinite God and His genuine love, prayer will always be mysterious. We should not expect a simple or formulaic process. But there are a couple of observations that may help us understand.

First, there is often a request of the heart that gives rise to the prayer we verbalize and our Father hears both our heart and our words. The student who prays to God for admittance to a particular college is really asking the Lord for the best place to learn, make friends, and enter adulthood. God may answer the heart’s prayer by saying no to “the college of my dreams” and guide His beloved child to a much better school.

Second, there may be stages to God’s answer of our prayers. A woman in our body told me her story of quitting cigarettes. Having become a Christian, it took three years of wrestling and prayer to end the habit (including

quitting for nine months during a pregnancy, starting again and finally quitting months later). She came to realize that in addition to the addictive properties of nicotine, she smoked when she was anxious and uncertain of being accepted by others. The process of self discovery and inner healing took three years and the request to quit cigarettes was then answered.

Our Father answers our prayers in a manner that, in His wisdom, He deems best for us. Those who ask, receive, but the timing and means may surprise us.

Finally there are times when our requests are hurtful to us and He needs to say “no.” Our Father will not give us a snake, if we ask for a fish; nor will He give us a snake if we ask for a snake.

Martin Lloyd-Jones, a British preacher from the early 20th century says this:

I thank God—let me put it like this bluntly—I thank God that He is not prepared to do anything that I may chance to ask Him . . . In my past life I, like all others, have often asked God for things, and have asked God to do things, which at the time I wanted very much and which I believed were the very best things for me. But now . . . I say that I am profoundly grateful to God that He did not grant me certain things for which I asked, and that He shut certain doors in my face. At the time I did not understand, but I know now and am grateful to God for it.²

The relentless turning of time makes us long for eternity and bids us enter the school of prayer. As needy children we ask our Father for a loaf of bread. Jesus is the bread come down from heaven. Feed us, Lord, with true food.

NOTES:

¹*Yesterday*, The Beatles; Paul McCartney; John Lennon. ©Sony Beatles LTD; Sony/ATV Tunes LLC

²*Sermon on the Mount* (volume 2), p.197, Martyn Lloyd-Jones