

ECCLESIASTES
Ecclesiastes 3:16-22
“Is This All There Is?”
March 10, 2024

Ecclesiastes 3:16-22

¹⁶ Moreover, I saw under the sun that in the place of justice, even there was wickedness, and in the place of righteousness, even there was wickedness. ¹⁷ I said in my heart, God will judge the righteous and the wicked, **for there is a time for every matter and for every work.** ¹⁸ I said in my heart with regard to the children of man that God is testing them that they may see that they themselves are but beasts. ¹⁹ For what happens to the children of man and what happens to the beasts is the same; as one dies, so dies the other. They all have the same breath, and man has no advantage over the beasts, for all is vanity. ²⁰ All go to one place. All are from the dust, and to dust all return. ²¹ **Who knows whether the spirit of man goes upward and the spirit of the beast goes down into the earth?** ²² So I saw that there is nothing better than that a man should rejoice in his work, for that is his lot. Who can bring him to see what will be after him?¹

Is this life all there is?

As Chuck Colson would say after coming to Christ and forming Prison Fellowship, “Where is the hope?”

I remember the beginning of the Christian song “Heaven in the Real World” by Steven Curtis Chapman recorded in 1994 that sampled portions of Colson’s sermon. Colson said...

"Where is the hope? I meet millions of people who feel demoralized by the decay around us. The hope that each of us has is not in who governs us, or what laws we pass, or what great

¹ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Ec 3:16–22.

things we do as a nation. Our hope is in the power of God working through the hearts of people. And that's where our hope is in this country. And that's where our hope is in life."²

It was a needed reminder when I first heard it, and no doubt those who were incarcerated and heard Colson preach needed this. I'm certain there are many here today who just need that prompting of hope. Why?

It should be obvious.

This world is broken. Sin is rampant. Right is wrong. Wrong is defined as permissible if not celebrated as right. And most people are having their perspectives on life molded by so many influences that eventually, even Christians just throw their arms up in the air (figuratively if not literally) and basically echo the Preacher, Solomon from this book by saying "Is this all there is? What a waste!"

Where is the hope?

Not where most people are searching, that is certain.

Some search for hope in their political stances and chosen politicians. Others in their news source of choice. Some in their horoscopes, spiritual advisors, and self-actualization tactics. Some even in their chosen peddlers of evangelical tropes and religious teachings online or in books. It is the nature of humanity to long for and look for meaning in actions, attitudes, and even other people.

Yet, all too often those whom we elevate are revealed to be less than trustworthy, immoral and evil even. And when that happens, we end up like Solomon writing this book declaring that life is empty, worthless, harsh, empty, and ultimately nothing but vanity.

² Steven Curtis Chapman. "Heaven in the Real World." Sparrow Records.

Where is the hope?

Oh, there is hope. That's what we will discover today.

Sometimes it is hard to remember the points that I leave with you in sermons, so today, I think I will make it a bit easier for you to remember. At least that is my hope. And...if you can remember these points, my hope is that you remember the ultimate answer to all the questions we address today.

So, here are my three points of remembrance from this passage of scripture. Ready?

- 1. Ring around the rosie, pocket full of poseys.**
- 2. Ashes, ashes.**
- 3. All fall down.**

I'm working to make this work for us, but let's look at this together.

RING AROUND THE ROSIE, POCKET FULL OF POSEYS

There is much mythology regarding where this phrase in the nursery rhyme or song began. You can do an online search and discover many possible results.

While some like to go dark and say this is entirely about the bubonic plague, it seems it is more relatable to the plot of the movie "Footloose."

If you've not seen the film, Kevin Bacon shows up in a small town where dancing has been outlawed by the direction of the local pastor. You know, we are always about raining on everyone's fun.

There's more to the story, but that's the gist. So, in the early 19th century in England and America, there was a strong push against dancing by many Protestants. However, not unlike the kids in Footloose, the children of this era found ways to dance regardless. One was by holding hands and

circling a child in the middle of the circle who was called the rosie, or rosebush, as a symbol of love.³

So, the ban on dancing led to encircling the Rosie and “dancing” together around her as a sort of mockery of the rules. Poseys in the pocket? It rhymed and if it meant something, we just don’t care now.

Now, I truly do not care about the nursery rhyme, but his theory about it makes sense. Why? Because ever since there have been government leaders and religious leaders there have been people frustrated with what they have viewed as injustices. The “Footloose” dancing bans are not the real issue. But, even Solomon in his writings found injustices in places where he believed, rightly so, they should never be.

Where?

- In the halls of justice...in the courtroom.
- In the temple (or church.)

Ecclesiastes 3:16

¹⁶Moreover, I saw under the sun that in the place of justice, even there was wickedness, and in the place of righteousness, even there was wickedness.⁴

“Moreover, I saw...” which could be translated, “I saw something else” links us to all the things mentioned in previous verses related to vanity, frustration, emptiness, and a desire to not want to continue living.⁵ It’s like the person who airs all their grievances. You think they’re done, and then they inhale a big breath, turn back to you and say, “And another thing...”

³ Hall-Geisler, Kristen. “What Is the Real Meaning behind ‘Ring around the Rosie’?” *HowStuffWorks*, HowStuffWorks, 8 Dec. 2022, www.people.howstuffworks.com/ring-around-rosie-meaning.htm.

⁴ *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Ec 3:16.

⁵ O’Donnell, Douglas Sean. *Ecclesiastes: Reformed Expository Commentary* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R, 2014), 82.

This is the other thing.

In the place of justice: in that day it would be the city gates where rulings were made and transactions occurred. Yet, in this place which is supposed to be where we could say the statue of Lady Justitia, standing blindfolded with her scales would be, is where those who have money win more than lose. Those who have power are not prosecuted as they should be. Those who have a connection can get off without a fine. Those who do not have any of those benefits, even if innocent, may be found guilty. That blindfold on the statue represents impartiality and the scales represent fairness.⁶ Solomon is saying the statue is lying for he has seen far too many instances where justice has not been meted out and people have benefited by being unrighteous and others have been punished wrongly.

Not just something reserved to thousands of years BC, it seems.

Then, he says that even in the temple, wickedness is evident. Evil in the most holy of places is being uncovered.

Fast-forward to 2024 and the stories of pastors caught in sin, deacons abusing parishioners, mega-church pastors being fired for ungodly acts, lawsuits between churches and former pastors, sexual sins, abuse, and more.

That's what appears in the news feeds, not to mention the ones who have not done anything illegal but are simply padding their pockets off peddling a false gospel masquerading as truth. The illicit hucksterism of evangelicalism is sickening.

The trading of biblical orthodoxy for a cultural worldview either affirming of all current sinful trends or the other end of marrying the church to politics while subtly preaching a message that Jesus is not enough, so you'd better do something to get your community on track.

⁶ O'Donnell, 83.

In the place of justice, there is injustice.
In the place of righteousness, there is unrighteousness and evil.⁷

Where is the hope?

Ring around the rosie... the government and church are corrupt, so we need to do something about it. Or not? Maybe this is just how it is and it would be better to just abandon all hope? That's the message of Solomon, right? That seems to be where he has landed.

He continues...

ASHES, ASHES

Now, the nursery rhyme has us in our circle and suddenly we are saying “ashes, ashes” and while I don't really care what the original meaning was, or even if it were the words “ashes, ashes” this does lead well into the next portion.

What is the historic saying that would be said at a graveside by a priest or minister? “Ashes to ashes. Dust to dust.”

There's history there as it hearkens back to the creation of man as the Imago Dei, image-bearer of God.

Genesis 2:7

⁷ then the LORD God formed the man of dust from the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living creature.⁸

Solomon's writings and thoughts revealed in Ecclesiastes seem to always go back to Genesis, the creation, and the Garden of Eden.

⁷ Bartholomew, Craig G. *Ecclesiastes: Baker Commentary on the Old Testament Wisdom and Psalms* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2009), 177.

⁸ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Ge 2:7.

This is true here as well.

In his lamentation of all that he sees as worthless, he states...

Ecclesiastes 3:19-20

¹⁹ For what happens to the children of man and what happens to the beasts is the same; as one dies, so dies the other. They all have the same breath, and man has no advantage over the beasts, for all is vanity. ²⁰ All go to one place. All are from the dust, and to dust all return.⁹

This leads down a rabbit hole of questions for many.

- So, do animals and people end up in the same place?
- Do all dogs go to heaven?
- What about cats?
- Are the humanists right? Is this all there is?
- What if this eternity is a myth?
- Did Solomon even believe in heaven?
- Wait...do animals have souls?

So many questions and so many wrong answers come from those.

What we know from the fullness of scripture is that only humans are the imago dei, image-bearers of God. Only humans can repent of their sins, receive Jesus as Lord and be saved.

Is this all there is? No. But the questions come, right?

I mean, most every Christian has asked these same questions. Likely never in the Sunday School class or in the small group, but they've been asked, if only in our minds.

⁹ [*The Holy Bible: English Standard Version*](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Ec 3:19–20.

And Solomon, the Preacher, does us a service by being bold enough to ask in front of everyone the questions in their minds.

Here's the point. He's not considering eternity. That was addressed last Sunday. He is considering that which he absolutely knows. What he knows by virtue of seeing and experiencing first-hand is that people live. They breathe. They eat. They drink. They laugh. They exist. Animals live. They eat. They drink. Some animals are our companions. Others we must be careful around. Regardless, people and animals seem to be on the same track here on earth. At least from one perspective. Then...they die.

People die and are buried.

Animals die and decompose.

Solomon's assertion is that no one has "direct first-hand empirical evidence of what happens to the human spirit after death." At the funeral parlor or the gravesite, no one can verify that the soul went out, down, up, down, or anywhere else.¹⁰

So, by eyewitness account...ashes, ashes. We all end up in the same place.

But, in all this doubt. These hard questions that continue to arise, we still have that question ringing in our ears, "Where is the hope?"

ALL FALL DOWN

Where is the hope? Our hope, our assurance, our certainty is not found in the halls of justice, is not found even in the temple or religion, but in the one, the only one whom deserves our worship.

Jesus Christ, Son of God, God the Son, as the youth group song of the 1990s states, "Came from heaven to earth, to show the way, from the earth

¹⁰ Meyers, Jeffrey. *A Table in the Mist: Meditations on Ecclesiastes, Through New Eyes Bible Commentary* (Monroe, LA: Athanasia Press, 2006), 94.

to the cross, my debt to pay, from the cross to the grave, from the grave to the sky...Lord I lift your name on high.”

Yet, Jesus really did not come to simply show the way for Jesus is the way.

He said so when clarifying to his disciples...

John 14:6

⁶ Jesus said to him, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.”¹¹

Where is the hope? In the one who faced the evil exposed in the place of justice and temple firsthand. In the one who has promised to bring judgment upon the oppressors and persecutors in his time. In the one not constrained by the shifting winds of cultural. In the one who is the way, the truth, and the life.

In the one...the only one...worthy of our worship.

All fall down.

¹¹ [*The Holy Bible: English Standard Version*](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Jn 14:6.