

Introduction:

- A. *Illus.*: **Pete Seeger** was a famous folk singer when I was young. He wrote a lot of protest songs—about the Vietnam war, unfair labor practices, government. Folk music was all the rage and Seeger was a key voice. He’s especially known for one song. He wrote, “Around 1961 I got a letter from my publisher saying, ‘Pete, I love these protest songs you keep writing, but can’t you write another song like ‘Goodnight Irene’?’ I was a little angry and sat down at a reel-to-reel tape recorder and spoke into the mike, ‘Howie, you better get yourself another songwriter. This is the only kind of song I know how to write.’”

“I pulled a piece of paper out of my pocket on which I’d copied words from the Bible a few days before and started improvising an irregular melody for them. I rearranged the order of verses slightly so they’d rhyme a bit... I found that the word ‘turn’ repeated three times after a verse made a singable refrain. Then I sang it all into the tape recorder and mailed the tape. A few days later Howie wrote back: ‘Wonderful. Just what I was looking for.’ He got it to Roger McGuinn and the Byrds who made history with it.” [Turn! Turn! Turn! Book and CD by Pete Seeger & Wendy Anderson Halperin, (2003)]

To everything (turn, turn, turn)

There is a season (turn, turn, turn)

And a time to every purpose, under heaven

- B. It’s a curious thing how these eight verses from Eccl. 3 became one of the anthems of the 1960s. It was regarded then as an anti-war song, though I can’t really see why. But these are beautiful words, indeed. Listen to **Eccl. 3:1-8...** They are beautiful but also wistful. I feel as though there is

a kind of yearning in them; a wondering. Each line bears the stories of the best and worst of times, of rich lives and lives ended too soon. There are tears here and smiles.

I. THERE IS DIVINE POETRY IN THE CYCLES OF LIFE (3:1-8)

- A. These poignant lines don't lend themselves easily to analysis. Some lines have a kind of kinship with the next. There are the dark times—death, the broken embrace, war—and yet set as they are here, there is even a rightness, a *timeliness*, in these.
- B. These scenes are not miniatures. They are panoramas. “*A time to kill and a time to heal*” may spread over decades or more. Over lifetimes. “*A time to be silent and a time to speak*” may, of course, be pertinent to this afternoon’s conversation, but it may also span a century.
- C. There’s an unspoken implication here. If there is a time for everything then life is not random, and there must be a timekeeper. These are not a catalog of the random happenings. There is a mighty hand steering all life. The Divine Scheduler. The King of the calendar and the clock, the Governor of the seasons and generations.
- D. What’s more, these seasons cannot be hijacked; cannot be turned from their courses. There cannot be a time to search without a time to give up the search. Sooner or later, “a time to keep” must resolve to “a time to throw away.”
- E. We read these 14 lines (a multiple of the Bible’s perfect and complete number 7) and, despite the heartaches embedded in some of these words there is a beauty, a completeness, as right as the waning and waxing moon or the sun’s rising and setting. **There is divine poetry in the cycles of life.**

The flower children of the 60s stopped singing after v.8. Pete Seeger hadn't written v.9 on the paper in his pocket. Author **Dave Gibson** calls the next line a sucker punch. You're feeling warm and wise, arms flung wide to the world, in touch with your inner hippie, and then, "*What do workers gain from their toil?*" "*In the end does it really matter what anyone does?*" MSG "*I have seen the burden God has laid on the human race.*" Uff-dah!

Most of us here are Christians and this burden does not rest upon us with such heaviness as it does upon others. But listen to what **Jean Paul Sartre**, the famous French existentialist wrote, "*It was true. I had always realized it—I hadn't any 'right' to exist at all. I had appeared by chance, I existed like a stone a plant, a microbe. I could feel nothing to myself but an inconsequential buzzing. I was thinking . . .that here we are eating and drinking, to preserve our precious existence, and that there's nothing, nothing, absolutely no reason for existing.*" [in Ryken, p.94]

Why would God put this brick backpack on humans? It is actually a gift of grace in a deep cover disguise.

II. GOD BURDENS MANKIND WITH IMPENETRABLE QUESTIONS ABOUT LIFE SO THAT IN THE END WE WILL BOW BEFORE HIM. (3:9-17)

- A. Listen to **v.10-11**: "*He has made everything beautiful in its time. Also, he has put eternity into man's heart, yet so that he cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end.*" *Illus.*: I recently listened to a book about **Elizabeth Smith Friedman** who, along with her husband, was the premier U.S. code-breaker of WWI and WWII. She invented grids and systems of all kinds and could crack anything, without computers, even in foreign languages. By deciphering codes thought impenetrable by the Germans and Japanese they changed the course of history. We wish we could do that with our own lives.

God has imprinted a time code upon our hearts but we cannot decipher it. God has tantalized us with **two clues**:

1. “He has made everything beautiful in its time.” That’s the point of the poem in the first verses. Everything *fits together beautifully* if only we could see the big picture. There is a majestic elegance to all those seasons; a *rightness*, a divine timeliness. When we’re in the thick of a heartbreak or in a season of seeking without finding, everything is meaningless. Smoke and mirrors. But when we step back **there is a divine poetry in the cycles of life.**

So that’s the first clue to the code. No matter how things look, God has made everything beautiful in its time.

2. Here’s the second big clue: “He has also set eternity in the human heart.” What a teaser that is! We are born with an innate “*sense of time past and future*” [NEB]. If you say to someone, “*Imagine you could live forever,*” they are never going to say, “*Who thinks like that!?*” Humans are fascinated with time travel, reincarnation, science fiction, life after death; even life *before* birth. I doubt dogs wonder what comes next nor that cats lay there in the sun thinking about tomorrow. But we cannot free ourselves from the *instinct* deep within that this life is not all there is, not just for mankind, but for us personally.

No one captured this better than **C. S. Lewis**. “*If I find in myself a desire which no experience in this world can satisfy, the most probable explanation is that I was made for another world. If none of my earthly pleasures satisfy it, that does not prove that the universe is a fraud. Probably earthly pleasures were never meant to satisfy it, but only to arouse it, to*

suggest the real thing.” “*The sweetest thing in all my life,*” Lewis wrote in one of his novels, “*has been the longing... to find the place where all the beauty came from.*” Elsewhere he described this longing as “*the scent of a flower we have not found, the echo of a tune we have not heard, news from a country we have never yet visited.*” [quoted in Ryken, p.93]

3. But those two clues still leave us with the unbroken code: “yet no one can fathom what God has done from beginning to end.” We cannot deduce the Big Answer, or see the Big Picture. More to the point, we can’t decipher where *our* life finds its center, its meaning, when it seems for all the world that everything we do, no matter how noble, is in the end nothing but smoke in the wind. We cannot, for the life of us, figure out on our own what God is up to nor where we fit in his plan.

In Pete Seeger’s song he added the words, “*turn, turn, turn.*” It’s actually the song’s title. It takes these times and seasons of life and puts them on an endlessly turning wheel. But while they are cycles, they are also on a God-ordained course, not an endless circle. It reminds me of loops calligraphers use to practice. Cycles, but they’re moving to an end.

This Teacher’s talk in chapters 1-2 has changed from, “*everything is meaningless, nothing but smoke,*” to these strong God-statements: *God has laid a heavy burden on the human race. God has made everything beautiful in its time. God has set eternity in the human heart. Yet no one can fathom what God has done from beginning to end. Where God is involved, nothing is meaningless! **Inscrutable maybe, but never meaningless.** So our teacher next tells us two things he *does* know; two things he has decoded.*

III. THO' WE CAN'T BREAK GOD'S TIME CODE, HERE'S WHAT WE CAN DO (3:12-17)

- A. *“I know—I perceive—that there is nothing better for people than to be happy and to do good while they live. That each of them may eat and drink, and find satisfaction [seeing the good] in all their toil—this is the gift of God.”* As Christians, we read that kind of suspiciously. We want to stick our hand up in the air and go, *“Teacher! Teacher! What about all the things that Jesus taught us about pursuing the Kingdom of God and serving others? What about praying and singing, giving to good causes and sharing our faith?”* The fine commentator **Iain Provan** wrote, *“It is easy to think that because we know more than he does, we need not pay much attention to what he has to say from his more limited perspective. Even those who live in hope of the resurrection, however, still need to live a life between birth and death, and to live it in the right spirit and the right way.”*

So instead of standing with our hands in our pocket because we can't make sense of life's timing, the Bible here tells us that being happy is a good investment, that doing good is not a waste of time, that enjoying your food and drink and doing your best work are not pointless. In fact, those things are the gift of God. There are a lot of things about life we *don't* know, but these are reliable.

- B. There's something else the Teacher knows in v.14, *“I know—I perceive—that everything God does will endure forever; nothing can be added to it and nothing taken from it. God does it so that people will fear him.”* In the great mystery of all those times and seasons, God is up to timeless work. And the goal of that eternal work of God is that people will fear him. **Martin Luther** said, *“This is*

what it means to fear God: to have God in view, to know that he looks at all our works, and to acknowledge him as the Author of all things.” [in Ryken, p.96]

The smoke of life and God’s impenetrable mystery of time drives us to the great questions. **Haddon Robinson**, one of the greatest preachers of our day, began his sermon on Ecclesiastes this way: “*As I look back in my life over the last several years there was a period in which I lived in the dark night of the soul. I spent several months of my life on the sloping back of the question mark. And there was a preacher and there was a message that brought me back into the sunlight again. Without apology, I’d like to preach that message.*” [PT.com]

You can probably relate to that wonderful phrase, “*I spent several months of my life on the sloping back of the question mark.*” It is from that uncomfortable perch that many people have found God; have learned the fear of the LORD.

All spiritual life springs from that well—the fear of the Lord. Without that, who would ever humble themselves and repent of their sin. Without that, who would ever seek out the Savior Jesus Christ? Without that, who would ever desire to live righteously or set their sights on heaven? Life brings us to the end of our rope, to the end of our hoarded resources, to the end of our understanding, and some who stand there look finally to God. Our friend **Bill Cargill** wrote to me, “*Ecclesiastes is an outline for the long path I took to following Jesus. It simply says, I tried everything and found it all worthless. The only thing left to try is Jesus.*”

Conclusion

Corrie ten Boom survived the Holocaust. She was the only one from her strong Christian family who did. They had been hiding Jews in their home in Holland and were caught by the Nazis. She was sent to Ravensbruck where her beloved sister died. Through a clerical error she was released on the day she was scheduled to be killed. In her later years she was widely sought as a Christian speaker and was author of the bestseller, *The Hiding Place*.

“During Corrie’s presentations to audiences, she would often hold up the back side of a blue cloth of embroidery with hundreds of tangled threads hanging down from it. Many wondered if she was holding up the wrong side by mistake.

As she held up the messy side of the embroidery, she would ask, *“Does God always grant us what we ask for in prayers? Not always. Sometimes He says, ‘No.’ That is because God knows what we do not know. Look at this piece of embroidery. The wrong side is chaos. But look at the beautiful picture on the other side – the right side.”*

Triumphantly, she flipped the cloth over and revealed an extravagantly embroidered crown – symbolizing our crown of eternal life. The crown was beautifully stitched with threads of many colors but also gold, silver, and pearls. *“[In our lives] we see the wrong side, but God sees His side all the time. One day we shall see the embroidery from His side and thank Him for every answered and unanswered prayer.”*

“Although the threads of my life have often seemed knotted, I know, by faith, that on the other side of the embroidery there is a crown.”