

PIECES WITH NO PATTERN

Ecclesiastes 3:1-15

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Who likes doing jigsaw puzzles? I want you to imagine you have been given a 5000-piece jigsaw puzzle. The problem is they have given you all the pieces in a paper bag. The original box with the picture is gone. You are left with the pieces but no pattern. You can imagine the frustration you would have in trying to put the puzzle together. I find it hard enough when I have the picture in front of me. Now try it without the photo on the box. How are you going to know what piece goes where? In fact, what is the picture you are trying to put together. You can assume the pieces do fit together to make a beautiful picture. Puzzles usually do. But you cannot see it.

This is the sort of problem the Teacher is facing now in our text. He says that we as human beings are very well aware of the pieces of the puzzle that life consists of. That's because we live them with the ebb and flow of life. The daily joys and struggles of life are the pieces of the puzzle. But our problem is that we are ignorant of the big picture. And it is this big picture that the Teacher says we all yearn to know. Seeing the big picture is to know the full purpose and meaning of our lives. It's about being able to see where our difficult stuff fits in to that picture and gives it meaning. It's about being able to see why this or that happened. Let's look and see how the Teacher deals with the issue.

The first eight verses are one of the well-known passages in the Bible. They were, in fact, the lyrics of the song 'Turn, turn, turn,' by the 'Byrds' in 1965. The Teacher lists the various joys and struggles in life. (Ecclesiastes 3:1-8) *"There is a time for everything, and a season for every activity under the heavens: a time to be born and a time to die, a time to plant and a time to uproot, a time to kill and a time to heal, a time to tear down and a time to build, a time to weep and a time to laugh, a time to mourn and a time to dance, a time to scatter stones and a time to gather them, a time to embrace and a time to refrain from embracing, a time to search and a time to give up, a time to keep and a time to throw away, a time to tear and a time to mend, 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."* Most of these events I think we understand. I'll just explain a couple. Israel is a dry stony land. "...to scatter stones" is a reference to throwing rocks on a farmer's field to stop them sowing their crops as an act of aggression. "...to gather them" is to clear the land for crops. "...a time to tear"

refers to the ancient custom of tearing your clothing as an expression of grief. A “...*time to mend*” refers to getting over the grief. You mend your torn clothes and move on.

A common mistake is to think the Teacher is giving advice here. Often people think that he is saying ‘A wise person knows when to do what. That there is a right time for everything.’ But he is not doing that. He is not saying, for example, that the wise person knows when to make war and when to make peace, as true as that may be. We can see he is not talking about the right time to do things because we cannot wisely plan our own birth or death. Nor do we plan a time to weep or laugh. Rather the Teacher is observing that all human activities occur again and again. There seems to be an ebb and a flow that we have no ultimate control over. What we have in these verses are the pieces of the puzzle. But, none of these gives the ultimate meaning to our existence. Note how the Teacher has listed opposing human activities. For example, “...: *a time to be born and a time to die, a time to plant and a time to uproot...*” Do you expect to find the meaning of your life in having children? They will provide you with joy, but not the ultimate meaning to everything. Don’t forget, they too, eventually, like you, will die. Do you see the purpose in living in the planting of crops? Sooner or later you will have to cut them all down again. Or think of “...*a time to weep and a time to laugh, a time to mourn and a time to dance...*” Has a loved one died? Then mourn at the funeral. But remember, there will be laughter and dancing at a wedding next week. And so, the examples go on. Nothing we do has permanence. For each thing we do, which we think can give purpose to our lives, there is something else at another time that contradicts it.

In response to these contradictions the Teacher asks (Ecclesiastes 3:9) “*What do the workers gain from their toil?*” In other words, ‘What’s the point of it all? What is the point of doing the one thing if later you will undo what you have done?’ There is a massive effort to make a peace agreement. But later there is war again. You buy all this stuff but later you need to clear it all out when you move to a new house. In other words, since everything we do has its opposite, no one can find lasting meaning in any human activity.

The Teacher describes the human frustration (Ecclesiastes 3:10-11) “*I have seen the burden God has laid on the human race. He has made everything beautiful in its time. He has also set eternity in the human heart; yet no one can fathom what God has done from beginning to end.*” This burden, or frustration, you notice is the contrast between ‘time’ and ‘eternity’. In other words, we live in ‘time’, in hours, days and years. But we have ‘eternity’ in our hearts. We live moment by moment. But our minds can take us anywhere into the past or the future. In our hearts we know that there must be some

eternal purpose to our lives. We are not just animals living for the moment, going from meal to meal. Whatever we do, or whatever happens to us, we sense is for a reason, a purpose beyond the here and now. A boy and his dog sit outside at night. The dog yawns and goes to sleep. The boy stares at the stars and ponders. Both boy and dog are locked in time and space. But the boy has eternity spiked into his brain. We can look at the vastness of space and sense life is more than just daily working and eating. We can think years in advance and dream of the future. Or worry about it. We know that time, and meaning, is more than just here and now. But although we have this sense of 'eternity' we *"...cannot fathom what God has done from beginning to end"*. And therein lies our problem. It is so frustrating when we can observe the parts of the puzzle and know there is a pattern, but still be unable to figure the whole thing out. If only we knew the big picture we would understand the point to things we do and experience. Then we would also understand the meaning in our suffering.

Now there is a change in approach here. In chapter 1 the Teacher had also said, *"What do people gain from all their labour... under the sun?"* He concluded *"All things are wearisome... what has been will be again...everything is meaningless"*. Notice how he added the words 'under the sun' that first time? In other words, life with no God. That is what makes things meaningless. But now in here in chapter 3 his approach is different. Now he acknowledges his faith in God. He sees God is one who has everything in hand. He never doubts that God knows what he is doing. God has a plan for all of life, *"...from beginning to end"*. In all the confusing events of our lives, whether it's the things we accomplish or the stuff we suffer, God is working out his own purposes. As the Teacher says (Ecclesiastes 3:11) *"...God has made everything beautiful in its time"*. The Teacher does not mean everything mentioned in his list of life events are necessarily beautiful in themselves. Some are deeply tragic things. Rather he means they have a sort of beauty in that they have their own specific place and purpose in the mysterious plan of God. Our 'burden' is that we cannot see it. 'How does my sickness or the suffering of injustice by the poor fit into God's plan? How can child sexual abuse or the atrocities of war, or genocide fit into God's plan?' We know that God in his providence has everything in hand. We do not doubt God has a plan. But we are frustrated because while we realize it is there, we cannot 'fathom' it.

So how do we live with this 'burden', this frustration? The teacher tells us in (Ecclesiastes 3:12-14) *"I know 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 in all their toil—this is the gift of God. I know 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."* Notice how the Teacher says twice 'I know that'. The first time it relates to people.

The second time to God. We can say these are his two basic articles of faith that realize the distinction between God and people. The problem for us human beings is that ever since the fall, we have been dissatisfied with our limitations of what we can know or do. As Genesis 3:5 says we want to be *"...like God."* We want to be our own God. We like to think we know it all. We can sort out everything ourselves. But the Teacher says the best thing we can do is to know our place and know we are creatures of God. We must accept we are limited. And then find satisfaction in the things we can know and do. Which is obeying God in our lives. We will find life satisfying when we simply 'trust and obey'. That means also that we should let God be God. Let God know and do what only he can do. He perfectly achieves his will. *"Nothing can be added, nor taken from it."* Try as we like we are not going to *"...fathom God's purposes."* So, it's better to accept our status as limited creatures and let God be the Creator. It is better to accept our circumstances and be happy in the situation God places us and *"fear him"*. That is the point to life, to acknowledge God and be in awe of him.

Now while it's true that the details of God's plan are not known by us, the heart of God is very clear to us. It has been made clear in the Christ. Jesus said in John 14 *"Anyone who has seen me has seen the father."* And that makes all the difference. For in Jesus we see the love of God. And through Jesus' death and resurrection we see the forgiveness of God. And we see the coming of his kingdom. In many ways, as New testament people we can see God's purposes more clearly than the Teacher could. For in Jesus we know God. We see him as a loving Father who can even use the difficult times of our existence for our spiritual growth. God is using our daily activities and struggles to mold us to be more like Jesus. In fact, we can say that Jesus is the pattern. He is the big picture, the beautiful picture of the jigsaw puzzle. He is the design according to which God in his plan is molding us. In Ephesians 1 Paul refers to (Ephesians 1:11) *"...the plan of him who works out everything in conformity to the purpose of his will..."* And he always mentions God's people in that plan as being '...in Christ'. In God's plan Jesus is the template God uses as he chips the rugged edges off us. It is under the rulership of Jesus that the kingdom is coming. If we have trouble putting the pieces of the puzzle together, it all seems so meaningless, look at Jesus. If we fail to see how our suffering can be for good, then look at Jesus on the cross. There we see the example of how God makes things 'beautiful in its time'. There at the cross we see the ultimate in evil and suffering and meaninglessness. The Son of God, come in human life, left to die. Yet it was in God's plan for our salvation. If God can take the greatest injustice and turn it to our greatest joy, then God is perfectly able to take all our activities, even the bad and the sad and the contradictory and make it "beautiful in its time". Even if we cannot see it now. We simply are to let God be God and trust him, while we live obediently to his Word. God will eventually call everybody and everything to account. Then the pattern,

the big picture will be clear. (Ecclesiastes 3:15) *"Whatever is has already been, and what will be has been before; and God will call the past to account."* Then God will turn over his magnificent tapestry and instead of seeing threads going everywhere in a meaningless fashion we will see the beautiful picture he is making. Then we will understand the meaning to it all. Then we will bow deeply and quietly and be in awe of God.

Ecclesiastes says we have a choice. As our culture says 'We have no need of God. There is no God. We have the wisdom to handle life. We work hard and enjoy our riches and pleasures'. But be aware. The Teacher's research has proven it, without God it all comes to nothing in the end. It's all a puff of wind and gone. But with Jesus, everything has meaning and flows into eternal joy. Before you exit this life, you must make a choice. Which will you choose?