

Eternity in Our Hearts

Ecclesiastes 3: 1-15

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When I first discovered the radio, I loved the pop songs on the Top 40. Like the Monkee's *I'm a Believer*, Neil Diamond's *Sweet Caroline* or even Van Morrison singing *Brown Eyed Girl*. It was all upbeat and pretty much just for fun. But one Friday, my friend Steve Haynes came over to spend the night. He liked music, too, but his stuff was different. Steve could go into a near mystical state talking about music that *really mattered*. There were people out there who were living and dying to make music that was important. He told me about some guy named Jimi Hendrix. My eyes grew wide and my heart pounded as Steve told me about this man who was so into his music that his shirt would just rip as he played the guitar. Of course, Steve let me know, I could never understand from mere words—you had to see Hendrix, to hear him to understand how much it *mattered!*

Then Steve pulled out a record he had brought with him. Cool cover. “Listen to this. It's from the Bible.” The needle hit vinyl and Roger McGuin's twelve-string guitar arrested the room with its clarity. Then the Byrds sang, “To everything—turn, turn, turn--there is a season--turn, turn, turn--and a time to every purpose under heaven.” Can you believe it? It's the Bible, man, and it's so cool. Yes, it was cool. Music that mattered. Secret sounding, mystical, and it was the Bible. He even showed it to me in Ecclesiastes 3.

So what are the odds that two elementary kids listening to rock music in Miami would both end up as theologians? I didn't see Steve Haynes for years, but it turns out that he never lost his spiritual passion. I emailed with him last week. He's been a professor of religion at Rhodes College for thirty years. I wonder if he ever plays Hendrix or the Byrds for his students. He sure sparked something in me that's never gone away: the belief that expressing the truth is a passionate endeavor. You can get hold of things that matter so much your shirt might rip off as you talk about it. Something important is going on. Turn toward it. Turn, turn, turn. Turn from the game and turn to what matters most.

Ecclesiastes contains the words of Solomon as he contemplated the meaning of life. Our passage from chapter 3 is much beloved. There is something very comforting about this acknowledgement of the rhythms of life. “To everything there is a season, and a time for every purpose under heaven...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 keep and a time to throw away.” The passage comforts us with the recognition of the seasons of life, and the hope that where you are now is all right. It’s part of a greater plan. Things are unfolding as they should.

But as beautiful and poetic as this passage is, there is still something missing. It’s soothing to acknowledge the rhythms of the world. But does that really tell us anything about why we are here? Is it any real comfort in our losses and leave-takings to know that it’s all part of the great circle of life, if we have no grasp of the purpose? What is the reason behind it all?

Solomon realized there’s another problem, too, and a deeper one: “God has put eternity into man’s heart, yet so that he cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end.” Eternity is in our hearts. We know there is more to life than the game of living for distractions while you toil away until you die. There has to be more. We know we were meant for God. But we can’t figure out how to connect. We don’t know how to fulfill this longing. So we return to the world’s game hoping it will bail us out. It never does. There is no such thing as simple enjoyment of each hour, free from the haunting dissatisfaction that is the lot of a fallen humanity. The answer is in God, Ecclesiastes knows this, and tells us so. But *how* we connect to God simply can’t be expressed. Solomon, in the midst of his prosperity and the quest for enlightenment, is silenced by the mystery of God for which he yearns.

If Ecclesiastes were all there is to the Bible, we’d be in a depressing state of affairs indeed. Ecclesiastes blows the cover off the game of the world, but has no satisfying alternative for us. If it’s true that there’s nothing new under the sun, then we are left with doing the best we can, trying to be happy during a short, vain life lived under the eye of an inscrutable, nebulous God. And that’s exactly where many people live each day. Eternity is in our heart. We know we are meant for more. But we don’t know how to get there. By ourselves, we can’t figure out who God is or what he is doing.

Centuries after Solomon, the apostle Paul would engage the lost and yearning culture of the world around him. Paul was in Athens, home of scholars and philosophers. The world then was full of religion and full of opinions. Temples were everywhere. People worshipped all kinds of gods and all worship was tolerated. Mixing and matching was also fine. You could worship one god but still go to the feast for another god. The scholars debated but never resolved their

differences. This was just the way it was. Everything was acceptable as long as you agreed that spirituality was a very personal affair.

Paul noticed that amidst all the temples and shrines of Athens, there was one marked, "To the Unknown God." Just in case none of our spiritual expressions quite got it right, we want to acknowledge a god who might be there but that we didn't know about. The phrase literally reads to the Agnostic God. Agnostic means "without knowledge." So the shrine was to the God who might be there but we don't have enough knowledge about to name with certainty, the unknown God.

Paul realized that the shrine to the Unknown God represented Solomon's truth that people have eternity set in our hearts. We yearn to know the true God. But we cannot, by our own reasoning or wisdom, find out who this one true God really is. So Paul engaged the scholars around him by first appealing to their recognition that there might be a God as yet unknown to them.

"What you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you." Now that's a bold beginning. Paul declared that where the greatest minds of the day had acknowledged a gap in knowledge, he was going to fill it in. What the academics could not reach by reasoning upwards, Paul would make known as a revelation that came down from heaven. His address to the philosophers of Athens is brilliant.

First, he proclaimed not a small, manageable deity. Paul believed in a personal God who created all the heavens, the earth and all the people in the earth. This huge God, though, is actually quite near to all of us. He sustains each one of us moment by moment: "He himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything." The Unknown God is actually bigger than all the deities of the Greek pantheon. He's way more than our interior sense of spirituality. He is the Creator who holds everything together. He made each of us, and he made each of us with a yearning to know him personally.

So Paul echoed Solomon when he declared that God made people in order "That they should seek God, in the hope that they might feel their way toward him and find him." We have been created with a homing device inside us. We arrive in the world seeking God. It's just what Solomon said, "You have put eternity into man's heart." But Paul also recognizes the same problem. We have to feel our way toward God. The path is not immediately clear. We are groping in the dark. Because we cannot see God. We know in our guts that there is a God but we do not naturally have enough information to know who this true God is. We are born as searchers.

Then Paul startled the Athenians by telling them how near they were to what they sought. The God who seems impossible far is really quite near. “Yet he is actually not far from each one of us, for ‘In him we live and move and have our being.’” The one true God for whom you search is right here next to you. He’s giving you breath. He’s giving you thought. He’s giving you sight.

You are just missing one key piece of knowledge. And I’m going to share it with you. For the missing piece can only be found if God himself shows you where it is. You can’t be Prometheus who climbed Mt. Olympus to steal fire from the gods. The true God does not dwell on earth so you can never force him down here. But here’s the news. He willingly came down to us. He has made himself known. You can leave agnosticism, being without knowledge, and have true knowledge that leads you to know and rejoice in the true God who made heaven and earth.

The times of being without knowledge are over. God forgives you for not knowing before. But now it is time to know. What I am about to tell you will take you from not-knowing into a radical transformation of mind. This will change everything for you. A change that comes from knowing the truth. For here, where we are surrounded by all the religious options in the world, I am telling you the true path that God has made known. Here’s the deal: the one true “God has fixed a day in which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed.”

Explosion! We have been debating religion and philosophy for centuries. Everyone has an opinion. We are feeling our way in the dark and it’s the quest that we love. This is just the way it is. We are used to not knowing. In not knowing, no one is right and no one is wrong. Now you’re telling us that there is definite knowledge about God to be had. As long as the missing piece could never be found, we were free to wonder and do just what seemed best to us. But now you are telling us that we are accountable. And that things won’t always be the way they are. This God of yours is going to call it to a halt and render judgment. And that judgment will be based on a man, a man! that this God has appointed. You are saying that God is one particular way and not another. That’s offensive. That’s absurd. That’s a scandal.

But Paul wasn’t finished shocking them. He concluded by saying that the proof that this man is the measure of all things is that God raised him from the dead. The man who is the judge is the man who got up from the dead. He is the one with whom we each and all have to do. It is time to move from not-knowing to

transformed knowing. From ignorance to awareness. The unknown God has made himself known. His name is Jesus Christ.

For many of Paul's audience, this was too much. They mocked him. People don't get up from the dead. There can't be just one true God. You can't have this definite knowledge. Others were intrigued. They had to think about it awhile and hoped to hear Paul speak again. But a few heard Paul and believed. They understood the implications of what he was saying. The man who gets up from the dead is the Lord. Their greatest philosopher Socrates did not get up. Their greatest military leader Alexander did not get up. The mightiest ruler Augustus Caesar did not get up. But Jesus got up from the dead. The impossible happened. He is Lord. And he is the connector. He brings eternity into the world. He brings God into our hearts. He fills our spiritual emptiness with presence. He satisfies our inconsolable wound with his forgiveness and mercy. He brings peace into all this dying with the reality of his resurrected life.

The great Edinburgh professor H. R. Mackintosh put it this way:

When I look into the face of Jesus Christ and see the face of God, I know that I have not seen that face elsewhere and I could not see it elsehow, for he and the Father are one.

Solomon knew that God has set eternity into our hearts. We feel that we are meant for more than the endless turning wheel of times and seasons. But unaided, we cannot find out who God is. The Greeks in Athens built an altar to an unknown God for they were groping for him, feeling their way in the dark. Humans long for the true God but we are mired in our inability to know him unless he makes himself known. We can't get to him; he has to come to us. To our world. To our minds. To our hearts.

This he did in Jesus Christ. Here is news. God is this way. The way he is towards us in Jesus Christ. Not another way. Jesus is the man who God has appointed and by whom we will all be judged. We condemned Jesus to die, for he threatened our agnosticism and our preferred means of coping with the world. But God raised him from the dead. And he calls all people now to change their minds about him. See the one true God shining in the face of Jesus. See your King and kneel before him. See the Truth and yield to it. Let your mind be changed and then discover that the eternity for which you long is not far from you. He's right here. As near as your next breath. Breathe him in by faith. As the Byrd's sang, Turn, turn, turn. And discover that now is the time to know God as he truly is.