The Brutal and Helpful Honesty of Ecclesiastes

Leann Williams November 1, 2026

My recent experiences with my mom's continuing decline into Parkinson's psychosis and normal dementia have sensitized my heart and provoked my thinking to consider the end of my own time on Earth. I've participated in a contemplative monthly Zoom group that focuses on our own aging leading to death euphemistically called an Evergreen Circle. I've also recently read a book entitled *Living Life Backward* by David Gibson. The subtitle is: *How Ecclesiastes teaches us to live in light of the end*.

I was raised in conservative Bible churches believing that the book of Ecclesiastes in the Bible was merely the ranting of a disgruntled old guy. Others in my circle believed that Ecclesiastes is a picture of people living without God in their lives. David Gibson embraces the book as full of wisdom and observations about human life on this planet for all of us. He encourages careful contemplation of these observations in order to make wise choices for however much life we have left.

By wording that last statement as I did, I led you to the first concept in the book of Ecclesiastes. Many translations say in the opening statements, “Vanity of vanities, says the preacher. Vanity of vanities, all is vanity." Other translations say, “Meaningless! Meaningless, says the teacher. Utterly meaningless! Everything is meaningless.” I think both of those translations miss the meaning of the word which in Hebrew is *hebel.* It certainly can and has been translated as vanity appropriately in passages relating to idol worship. But it literally means breath or vapor. Think of a whisp of smoke that is here and then vanishes. I believe in Ecclesiastes the preacher is referring to the shortness or brevity of life. This would be consistent with other passages such as Psalm 39:4 and 5 which says, “Lord, make me know my end, and what is the measure of my days; let me know how fleeting my life is! Behold, you have made my days a few handbreadths, and my lifetime is as nothing in your sight. Surely every man at his best is a mere *hebel* - breath.” I do not believe life is meaningless. It is brief in time.

SO, the first hard truth is that life is brief and we all die which may be no surprise to you. But, a lot of human effort is spent trying to delay, hide, or deny this reality.

After the first declaration that life is as fleeting as a wisp of air, the Preacher asks the question, "What is there to show for a lifetime of work?" We will get an answer in chapter two.

The Preacher speaks in chapter one of the cyclical nature of life. Generations come and go, the sun rises, sets, and rises again. Wind comes and goes in unpredictable ways, and rivers run to the sea while that water returns to the rivers. He also points out that humanity has a very poor memory and keeps repeating what we have done before.

The Preacher says there is nothing new under the sun. That statement made me consider, is there truly nothing new? Perhaps things take different forms. Certainly, communication has changed forms over the years. But good communication is vital and complicated and probably always has been. David Gibson notes, "There is nothing new about humanity in the unfolding of all our progress."

We will all die AND the Preacher says we are unlikely to be remembered. When I read that, I realized I have a box of pictures from my grandmother, and I do not know who a lot of the people are. My children would probably not recognize their great-grandparents. It is part of the reality of life. We will be forgotten. Gibson says, "The Preacher wants the reality of our death to sink into our bones and lodge itself deep in our hearts... because he is writing a book about what it means to live."

The Preacher recounts how as king he sought wisdom and considered all that is done on the earth. His conclusion: It's all chasing after the wind. The Hebrew word here is *rehooth.* It can mean striving for. The root word has to do with pasturing or shepherding. Our efforts to control life are like trying to shepherd the wind.

He also concludes that what is crooked cannot be straightened, and what is lacking cannot be counted. I think he is saying that life is not fair and you can't change that. Accepting that can shape your life here and now. Let me give you a personal example: In my Evergreen circle I was thinking about regrets and resentments. My parents both had early life challenges. My dad was physically abused by his mother who eventually ended up in a hospital for mental illness. My mother, as a toddler, lived through the depression in a one-bedroom flat with her parents, grandparents, and aunt none of whom particularly liked each other. My dad's childhood was crooked and could not be straightened. My mom's early childhood lacked the love and tenderness her little soul needed. What was missing could not be counted. As a result, I never received great parenting. I could carry resentment for that. I never got support or encouragement for pursuing education or learning a skill. I regret not finishing my education as I would have wished. I now have the opportunity to choose to hold on to regret and resentment, or to let it all go and choose gratitude for all the ways my life has unfolded in spite of crooked and missing elements. We all get the opportunity to choose gratitude over resentment and regret. I do not dismiss the sadness of those crooked and missing elements and now name them to myself as disappointments.

So, now we know life is short. We have limited time on earth. Life is not something we can control. Life is often unfair and we can't change that. We will die and be forgotten. WOW! The Preacher is not holding back! Given those truths, he reports on all the ways he tried to make life meaningful. He describes his pursuit of pleasure, laughter and wine, and judges them to be like smoke that vanishes, passing fancies with nothing to gain.

Next, the Preacher turned to work and building material wealth. He built houses, planted vineyards, gardens, orchards, and irrigation systems. He accumulated slaves, herds, flocks, silver and gold, treasures, musicians, and more. Then, he realizes that he has no control of any of those things. He will die and not know what happens to all of it.

He answers the question from chapter one, "What profit does a man get for all his labor under the sun?" His answer is that we all die and can't take anything with us. Wise or fool, rich or poor, we all come to the same end. There was no profit under the sun in the end.

At the end of chapter two the Preacher gains clarity. He says, "There is nothing better for a person than that he should eat and drink and find enjoyment in his toil." It's not the same statement as "Eat, drink, and be merry for tomorrow we die." The Preacher adds, "This also I saw was from the hand of God." David Gibson summarizes, "Death reorients us to our limitations as creatures and helps us to see God's good gifts right in front of us all the time...Instead of using these gifts as a means to a greater gain in the world, we take time to live inside the gifts themselves and see the hand of God in them. "

The source of satisfaction, enjoyment, and contentment is not found in the experiences, achievements, or possessions we have in life. It's in receiving these things with gratitude from our Creator. What is to be gained in life? Not much that is lasting. Life itself is a gift to be lived with gratitude and joy.

Chapter three opens with this familiar passage:

> To everything there *is* a season,
> 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 pluck *what is* planted;
> A time to kill, And a time to heal;
> A time to break down, And a time to build up;
> A time to weep, And a time to laugh;
> A time to mourn, And a time to dance;
> A time to cast away stones, And a time to gather stones;
> A time to embrace, And a time to refrain from embracing;
> A time to gain, And a time to lose;
> A time to keep, And a time to throw away;
> A time to tear, And a time to sew;
> A time to keep silence, And a time to speak;
> A time to love, And a time to hate;
> A time of war, And a time of peace.

There does not seem to be an order or progression to this list. It's kind of messy. Just like life. I think that's the point. Life is full of a broad spectrum of feelings and experiences, not all of them pleasant. We can choose to accept what is and has been an embrace it all with all the messy feelings that come.

The preacher returns to his question with two new observations. Ecclesiastes 3:9 – 12

"What profit has the worker from that in which he labors? I have seen the God-given task with which the sons of men are to be occupied. He has made everything beautiful in its time. Also, He has put eternity in their hearts, except no one can find out the work that God does from the beginning to end."

I really looked for a deeper meaning to the word "beautiful" to get God off the hook for the terrible things that happen in life. Bur, the Hebrew word used here means beautiful. And we have seen terrible things transform a person who chooses to let beauty come from ashes.

The next verse tells us that God has put eternity in human hearts. Here, the translation is not so clear. The word translated "eternity" is the Hebrew word *olawn* which relates to time and relies on the context for specific meaning. It can mean ancient time, continuous, indefinite, or everlasting, past or future time. Since the root word holds the idea of a vanishing point or something properly concealed, this verse has been translated in many ways. God has set, put, planted, or placed the world, eternity, ignorance, or knowledge in our hearts or minds. I think the meaning is better found in reading verses 11 & 12 together.

The Voice version of the Bible reads, "God has made everything beautiful for its time. God has also placed in our minds a sense of eternity; we look back on the past and ponder over the future, yet we cannot understand the doings of God." I think those words get to the point. After a long list of the variety of good and bad, lovely and difficult, joyful and sorrowful times that make up our lives, the Preacher says God can make something beautiful even from the worst of it. Then he says there is a longing for a deeper understanding of how things will become beautiful deep in us. And we won't always get the answers we long for.

Ecclesiastes asks us to look at the harsh realities of life. By looking at how little control we have, how short our lives are, and how much we may never understand, we are free to make choices for here and now. We can choose to find joy, satisfaction, and meaning in the smallness of our lives. Mother Teresa said, "Not all of us can do great things. But we can do small things with great love."

There is more to the book of Ecclesiastes, but for today, as we await an election with the awareness of what we have heard today from the Preacher, let us choose to live in our moment of time with gratitude, and trust that God can make beauty no matter what the outcome.