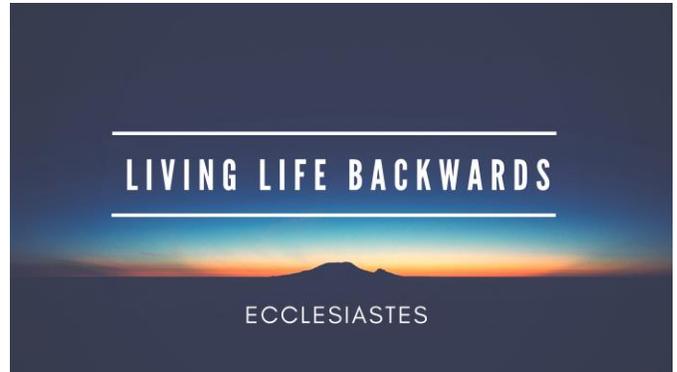


**Joy That Lasts**  
**Ecclesiastes 3:16-22**  
**Living Life Backwards, Part 4**  
**Blake Glosson                      July 8, 2018**



Please open your Bible to Ecclesiastes 3. We'll be looking at verse 16-22 this morning. First, I'd like to remind you of the four keys Pastor David gave us as we study the book of Ecclesiastes:

- Read with prayer and thanksgiving, including even right now you can go to the Lord and pray that He would give you insight into His Word this morning.
- Remember key terms such as “vanity” and “under the sun.” We'll see that second term in our passage today.
- Read the book of Ecclesiastes through gospel lenses, bearing in mind Christ's work on the cross and what He has done for us. Keep the whole Bible story in mind.
- Fourth—and I love this—David said, “Ask yourself how the book of Ecclesiastes creates longings in your heart that only Christ and His gospel can satisfy.”

I hope as we read these last verses in Ecclesiastes 3 that we will have a longing created in our hearts for a joy that lasts. That's my prayer, and it's something only Christ and His gospel can satisfy in our hearts. With that being said, please follow along as I read Ecclesiastes 3:16-22. Solomon says:

*<sup>16</sup> 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. <sup>17</sup> 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. <sup>18</sup> 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. <sup>19</sup> 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. <sup>20</sup> All go to one place. All are from the dust, and to dust all return. <sup>21</sup> Who knows whether the spirit of man goes upward and the spirit of the beast goes down into the earth? <sup>22</sup> 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?*

Would you join me in a word of prayer?

How lovely is your dwelling place, O Lord Almighty. Our souls long and even faint for You. Lord, I know that it is here that our hearts are satisfied. It's within Your presence that my heart is most satisfied, and I long for the day that I will be with You for all eternity. One day in Your courts is better than thousands elsewhere, because in Your courts we will see You and be with You face to face. But Holy Spirit, I pray that by Your grace You would allow us to see You through Your Word. We pray this for the glory of Christ our Savior and also for our joy. Amen.

According to a Russian legend, a peasant—I'll call him Fred—was told that he would receive a deed for all the land he could encompass by running in one day. So when the day came, Fred ran and ran and ran, eventually returning to the starting point—and man, was he tired. As he looked, the sun was almost down, but not totally down. So instead of trying to rest, he fought off his desire to rest. Instead he said, "I'm going to run this other direction." So he took off in another direction to try to acquire some more land. According to the legend, he got back just as the sun dropped below the horizon. And then, full of exhaustion, Fred dropped dead. The end.

When I first read this story, two thoughts went through my mind. First, "I am so glad my parents did not read this to me as a bedtime story, because, man, that is so sad. That poor guy—all of that work, then no joy to show for it."

My second thought was, "Okay, I'm 25 years old. I don't know how long God is going to give me on this earth. I really hope that's not my story. I hope I don't just work and work and work my whole life, but in the end have no joy to show for it."

So my question that I'd like us each of us to consider is this: Will you be any different than Fred, the man in the Russian legend? Will you be able to rejoice in your work? Or to put it another way, in all of your efforts in life, will you be able to have true, lasting joy? Look back at verse 22 for a moment. This is the verse I want us to focus: Solomon says, "*So I saw that there is nothing better than that a man should rejoice in his work, for that is his lot.*"

Now, when you see that word 'work,' and when you hear me preaching this morning, don't just think about work as vocational work. The word here is actually much broader than that. It comes from a root word which literally means your "doingness"—your actions or activities. So we can actually take this as all of your actions in life. In everything you do, will you be able to have true, lasting joy?

In order to answer this question, I'd like to propose that what you believe about death and eternity is actually going to determine whether or not you will be able to rejoice in your work today. Ultimately, no matter what you are working for, there are only three possible outcomes. I'm going to call them the worst-case scenario, the best-case scenario, and the better-best-case scenario. In the worst-case scenario, you will not get what you are working for which will lead to despair. In the best-case scenario you will get what you're working for, but the joy will not last, leading to frustration. But the better-best-case scenario is that you will get what you're working for and your joy will last forever.

You'll notice that that first two scenarios are describing something Solomon calls "life under the sun." That term basically means life without God—if this life is all there is. In other words, if you do not believe in eternal life—or probably more realistically for a lot of people sitting in this room, if you do believe in eternal life but you are not living with an eternal perspective—those first two scenarios become the best and worst-case scenarios in all our work. With that in mind, let's dive in and look at these three scenarios.

### **The worst-case scenario:**

- You will not get what you're working for, leading to despair.
- Input: work. Output: no joy.

The worst-case scenario "under the sun" is that you do not get what you are working for. As you're thinking, "What am I working for in life?" this is the worst-case scenario in life under the sun, a life without eternal perspective where you do not get what you are working for, leading to despair. I'm not going to spend very long on this point, because first, I just don't like worst-case scenarios. But also, I believe there's much more hope for every person in this room.

About a month ago I asked a girl something along the lines of this. "Hey, I just want to ask you this question. What is one thing would drive your to despair if you worked your whole life for but you couldn't get it?" She said something along the lines of, "I would despair if I lost the sense that I have significance. I hate the thought that if I were gone, no one would miss me." She also said, "I want to feel like I'm making a difference in this world, that I have some value."

When I heard her say this, I thought, "Man, I can relate to that. I want to get to the end of my life, look back at all my work and say I made a difference in the world. I want to think I made this world a better place." I don't think I'm the only person in this room who has this desire. But while we're looking at the worst-case scenario, notice what Solomon says in verse 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.”*

In other words, you could work your whole life trying to make this world a better place, but in the end, you will turn around, hoping to rejoice in your work, then see that this world is just as broken and sinful as when you were born.

If you are familiar with the life of Leo Tolstoy, the highly renowned Russian novelist in the 19th century, you'll know that this worst-case scenario was actually his experience. He wrote a book entitled A Confession in which he described how he worked his whole life. He accomplished virtually everything he was working for. He was a very successful writer. He had a wife who loved him. He had a large estate. He had several good kids. And by most standards, he actually had made a difference in the world.

But something happened when Leo Tolstoy turned 50. He fell into a deep depression and here's why. Leo spent his whole life thinking that with each successful endeavor, he was racking up more and more meaning and significance in his life. But at the age of 50, when suddenly he began to contemplate his own death, everything changed for him. Listen to what he wrote:

I suddenly realized I could give no rational meaning for any aspect of my life. Today or tomorrow...death will come [to me]—and nothing will remain but stench and worms. Sooner or later, [all of] my affairs—whatever they may be—will be forgotten, and I will not exist. Why, then, should I go on making any effort? How can we fail to see this?

That's what's surprising: one can only live while one is intoxicated with life. As soon as one is sober, it is impossible not to see that it's all mere fraud or stupid fraud—there is nothing witty or amusing about it. My question, which at the age of 50, brought me to the verge of suicide, was the simplest of questions lying in the soul of every man—a question without an answer to which one cannot live—[and] it was this: Is there any meaning in my life that the inevitable death cannot destroy?"

So in one sense, Tolstoy was like Fred. He was like the man from the Russian legend who worked and worked, thinking it would leave him feeling, “I have made a difference in the world.” But in the end, just like Fred, Tolstoy never got to experience the joy he always longed for.

So that's the worst-case scenario in life under the sun. If you believe that this life is all there is, or if you believe in eternal life but you're not living with an eternal perspective, the worst-case scenario is that you do not get what you are working for, and that leads not to joy, but to despair.

But that's not everyone's experience, fortunately. Some people have it a little better. So let's consider the best-case scenario under the sun.

### **The best-case scenario:**

- You will get what you're working for, but your joy (and efforts) won't last, leading to frustration.
- Input: work. Output: fading joy.

If this life is all there is, here's the best the world can offer you. In this scenario, you will get what you're working for—but your joy won't last, leading to frustration. What do I mean by your joy won't last? I'll give a silly illustration that I think highlights a really important point.

When I was a young boy, I had an unhealthy infatuation with a woman by the name of Taylor Swift. By the way, for those of you who don't know who Taylor Swift is, she was once a country artist and now she's more of a pop style artist. [I really liked her older music more.] But there were times, as a young boy, that I felt like, "Man, if I could just see Taylor Swift in concert, my joy would be made complete."

Then the moment finally came when I did get to see her in concert. I remember thinking, "Oh my goodness. Right now, Taylor Swift is standing right before my eyes. I can't believe this is happening." All I wanted to do was make the joy of that moment last forever. I wanted to extend that moment as long as I could. But I knew that in a couple hours I would be back in the car, heading home and barring some unforeseen miracle, Taylor Swift would not be in the car with me. In other words, I knew that the joy I was experiencing in that moment would very soon be gone.

So you might ask, "What did you do?" Well, I'm a finite human being and as a little boy, I tried everything I could to make the joy of that moment last. I tried to take in the smell of the Taylor Swift air. I tried to capture her voice in my ears and contain it. I just wanted that moment to last. I took a lot of pictures. And if any of you have seen anything close to as breathtaking as Taylor Swift in concert—like, if you've seen the Grand Canyon—you'll know that pictures can never do it justice.

Here's what I'm trying to get across. Even though it was literally as hopeless as trying to capture the wind in my hand, I still tried everything I could think of to make the joy of that moment last forever. As we all know very well, the joy we feel in the best moments of our lives never last forever. It doesn't matter how much power or how much wealth or how much status or how much wisdom you have—go ahead and try to make the joy of that moment last forever. It won't happen. The best-case scenario in life under the sun—if this life is all there is—is that you get

what you're working for. You feel joy—but it slips away. It doesn't last. This is why C.S. Lewis said, "There was something we grasped at in that first moment of longing which just fades away in the reality."

I'll give one more personal example of the fleetingness of joy, just to emphasize that this was very early on in life when I was noticing this trend. When I was in elementary school, I always really looked forward to my birthday. What young child doesn't look forward to their birthday? The reason why was not necessarily to spend time with my family. People were going to give me a bunch of gifts and I was really looking forward to it.

The thing was, the peak of my joy as a young elementary school-age child actually did not come on my birthday itself. It usually came a few days before my birthday. Why? Well, because I knew that as soon as the moment came, it was also just about to end. I knew that as soon as all the gifts were unwrapped and the cake was eaten and the clock struck midnight we would all be on to the next thing. Pretty soon we'd just be thinking about my sister's birthday. In other words, I enjoyed my birthday, but I could never completely enjoy my birthday because deep down I wanted it to last forever, but I knew it was only going to last one day. Even as a little kid, it was almost as if my brain was programmed to see that even in the greatest moments of joy in this life, they will always leave us longing for something more—specifically for a joy that actually lasts. All of us, I think, have felt this.

Wallace Stevens, a 20th century poet, also felt this when he said, "Even in contentment, I still feel the need of some imperishable bliss." So right now let's play a little brain game. Think about a moment when you were content or happy or joyful. In that moment, a little voice deep down inside whispered, "You know this feeling of joy isn't going to last." Unless you can ignore or suppress that little voice, it's what kills the moment. Our recognition of our complete inability to make joy last is what hinders us from being able to fully enjoy even the best moments of our lives.

One of my friends from The Rock recently said to me, "As soon as I get out of work on Friday, it's like the clock is ticking—and I'd better have fun because Monday is right around the corner." In other words, even in the moment when you finally get everything you've been working for, you still have to face the reality that the joy is not going to last, that that moment is not going to last.

Let me be vulnerable here. Even in the moments when I feel the most loved or the most respected or the most significant—even when all the deepest longings of my heart are fully satisfied—I still know deep down that an hour from now, or a day from now or a week from now, that feeling is going to slip away and be gone. I'm going to have to work for it again.

Let's say I develop a phone app that could maintain the joy of my heart. If I slide the bar over to the right, it's "full joy" and then I can leave it there for the rest of my life. Let's say I found a way to contain that joy and keep it in my heart for the rest of my life. Even then, my joy still will not last. Why? Because my joy is going to expire as soon as I expire. So that voice in my head can still say to me, "Hey, you know this feeling isn't going to last because tomorrow you might not be here." So in life under the sun, that's the best it gets. There you go—a little joy here, a little joy there, but it never lasts.

This is why if we try to live and work without an eternal perspective, it will always leave us frustrated, because we get what we long for, but it doesn't last. Here's how Tim Keller put it, and this will bring us back to Ecclesiastes 3:18-21. I love this.

Even the Lion King does everything it can to make death seem more bearable. There's even a song about it...called the *Circle of Life*, and it goes like this, in not so many words..."When you die, you become fertilizer." BUT [and here's the hope that Lion King offers]—out of that fertilizer that used to be you, grow little plants and flowers that the animals eat. And then these animals live for a while—until they become fertilizer, of course—and the same thing happens over and over again—and isn't it a lovely thought, that we're all a part of the circle of life?

In other words, isn't Ecclesiastes 3:18-21 a lovely thought? We're all just like animals. We have no advantage over them. We breathe the same air. We don't know what happens after we die. We all return to dust. But we're all part of the circle of life, so then rejoice in your work. Keller says that doesn't seem to follow. He says:

It's not a lovely thought that we're all part of the circle of life, and here's why not: A world in which everyone you love—or ever will love—is going to become fertilizer, and then you will become fertilizer, and then everyone who ever remembers anything that you've ever done becomes fertilizer—that is not a world that fits us. It's not a world that supports the most basic desire of our hearts.

And what is the most basic desire of our hearts? Keller says, "It is to have love last; it's to have beauty last; it's to know that when we do something right, it counts—and it counts forever!"

So again, deep down, what is it that you are working for? Are you working to feel respected? Are you working to feel loved? Are you working to feel valued or accepted by others? Are you working to try to make a difference in someone's life or to make this world a better place?

Whatever it is you're working for, if this life is all there is, or if you believe in eternal life but you're not living with an eternal mindset, then this is the best-case scenario: that you will get what you're working for, but joy in your efforts won't last. That's the best this world can offer you, so inevitably this reality leads to frustration. Again, if this life is all there is, each one of us in this room will say with Wallace Stevens, "Even in my greatest moments of contentment, I still feel the need of some imperishable bliss."

### **The better-best-case scenario:**

- You will get what you're working for—and your joy (and efforts) will last forever.
- Input: work. Output: eternal joy.

Fortunately, there is a better-best-case scenario in life with an eternal perspective through Christ. When I have trusted in Christ, when I have said, "God, I'm a sinner and I need a Savior," when I have humbled myself before the Lord and put my faith in Him, then I have an eternal perspective through Christ, and that's the better-best-case scenario. In this scenario, you will get what you are working for, plus your satisfaction and efforts will last forever, leading to the joy of Ecclesiastes 3:22. Your joy will last forever.

Now, when you hear that, you might ask the question that my dad also asked me when I told him about this sermon outline. I said, "It's going to be great. There's going to be a worst-case scenario, a best-case scenario and then a better-than-best-case scenario. And in the better-than-best-case scenario, you'll get a joy that lasts forever." My dad responded, "Well, you know, sometimes even Christians go through seasons in life when their joy doesn't last."

In other words, in the greatest moments of life, isn't it true that even Christians have the little voice inside their head that says, "You know this feeling isn't going to last, right?" The answer to that question is, "Yeah, Christians have that voice inside their head too. The difference is that with an eternal perspective through Christ, Christians have a better response to that little guy in the heads." That voice says, "You know the story isn't going to last. You know this feeling isn't going to last." The Christian says, "Yeah, maybe." But you know this joy is going to last. You know that all the deepest longings of your heart will one day be satisfied forever, non-stop. Then the little voice kind of crawls away. "Well, fine."

The reason why so many people have felt frustrated even in the midst of joy—the reason why Wallace Stevens says, "Even in contentment I still feel the need for some imperishable bliss" and the reason why Peggy Lee, in her song David quoted a few week ago, looked at all the joys in

life and said, “Is that all there is?”—the reason why we can feel frustrated even in the midst of joy is because without an eternal perspective, we look at the appetizers of joy as if they were the main course.

In other words, if we go to a five-star restaurant after church today—all of us together—we would sit down, ready to be treated like royalty. Then they bring us a platter full of bread. Surely we would feel disappointed and frustrated if we thought that was the main course. We might even say to the waitress, “Hey, is that all there is?” But if we know that the bread is only an appetizer pointing forward to something even better, then we could fully enjoy the appetizer for what it is. In the same way, if we look at the joys in this life, not as the main course, but as appetizers for what we will feast on for all eternity, it enables us to enjoy even the fleeting joys in this life for what they are.

So every time you feel joy, instead of dreading the fact that it’s going to fade away—and instead of like being at the Taylor Swift concert doing everything I possibly could to contain and maintain that joy—instead actually take your joys in this life and let them lead you to excitement. This can harness a worshipful heart inside us, knowing that this very feeling of pleasure and joy is something we’ll experience in all of eternity.

If someone were to ask you, “Hey, I was wondering, if God could say any words to you, what words would you want to hear from God?” I think many of us would probably respond with the six words from the parable of the talents. In Matthew 25:14-30, the master tells his servant, “Well done, good and faithful servant.” I was praying last night, saying, “I cannot wait to hear those words.” But if you remember that parable, you’ll know that the master didn’t stop with those six words. Do you remember what he said after that?

Here’s the full statement: *“Well done, good and faithful servant. You have been faithful over a little; I will set you over much.”* And here it is: *“Come and enter into the joy of your master.”* The better best-case scenario is that all the joys in this life are mere appetizers pointing to the joy we’ll experience with God for all eternity. And not only that, but we can also know with complete confidence that all of our work in this life will have eternal significance.

Look back at Ecclesiastes 3:17 for a moment. Solomon says, *“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.”* In other words, Solomon says, “In life with an eternal perspective through Christ, literally every single action you will ever make matters.” I love how Jesus put it in Matthew 10:42: *“Whoever gives one of these little ones even a cup of cold water because he is a disciple, truly, I say to you, he will by no means lose his reward.”*

Do you realize what that means? That opens up a lot of possibilities. “You’re telling me it’s not just when I go out and witness that God remembers my efforts? But He remembers when I gave someone a cup of water?” This means God is keeping a record of every single one of your efforts to be faithful to Him, even if you don’t see the fruit from it, and even if no one else in the world saw it take place. God is keeping a record of that.

Here’s how Paul puts it in 1 Timothy 5:25: “*So also good works are conspicuous...*” Some of your works are obvious and everyone can see them. But then he adds, “*and even those that are not cannot remain hidden.*” Even the good works you do in secret will not be forgotten by God. You might have forgotten about them, but God will never forget a single thing you have done for His glory.

There’s an age-old question that goes something along the lines of this: “If a tree falls in a forest and no one is around to see it fall, does it still make a noise?” I actually don’t care about the answer to that question. But one question I really do wonder and care about is this: When I take out the kitchen trash and no one is around to see me do it, will that work have any lasting significance? In life with an eternal perspective through Christ, the answer is a resounding yes. All of your works matter and none will be forgotten. As David said in a sermon a few weeks ago, “Anything you do in the name of Christ will last for eternity.”

So how does life with an eternal perspective through Christ enable us to have true, lasting joy in all of your work? It assures us that by God’s grace, every single one of your efforts has significance. Not only that, you can rejoice now, knowing that one day you will enter into the joy of your Master, which is a joy that never fades away.

So let’s look quickly at the very last sentence in Ecclesiastes 3 where Solomon asks a penetrating question: “*Who can bring [man] to see what will be after him?*” I’m so glad we have the gospel lenses. Unlike King Solomon, we have the luxury of knowing the answer to this question. Because a thousand years later, another King, another Son of David, another great Teacher like Solomon, told us the answer to this question. Jesus Himself, in John 14:3, said, “*I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also.*” That is what I long for more than anything else in the world—to be with Christ my Savior.

Christ was the One Who worked His entire life in perfect obedience to God. Did Christ have joy in His work? Was He able to rejoice in His work? Yeah. Even going to the cross to pay the penalty for our sins, Hebrews 12:2 tells us, “*For the joy that was set before him, he endured the cross, despising the shame.*” Then He rose again, so that each of us in this room who put our faith in Him—recognizing we’re sinners in need of a Savior and that we have no significance in life without Him—if we trust in Him now, we can enter into His eternal perfect joy.

I heard Pastor David say recently, “I’m so thankful that God is not dependent on my works, but that I’m dependent on God’s works.” That’s the heart song of every Christian. The reason why we can rejoice in our works is because we are no longer dependent on those works to save us. We’re dependent on the perfect work of Christ. As it says in Ephesians 2:8-9, it’s all by grace: *“For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast.”*

I’d like to close with one more quote by Tim Keller, slightly adapted from “The Longing For Home,” a sermon which, if you have 30 minutes free sometime, I’d recommend you listen to it. It helped me a lot. Keller wrote, “If you believe this life is all there is, then the more you think about your future, the less you’ll be comforted.” So if you’re suffering in your life right now, the only thing we can say is, “Well, I guess life stinks and then you die.” He’s saying if you don’t believe in eternal life, the more you think about your future, the less you’ll be comforted. He goes on to say:

But for the Christian, the more you think about your future, the more you’ll be comforted. Because in one sense, the worst thing that can happen to you—if that is death—is also the best thing that can happen to you. It’s the joy of knowing that one day you will get to be with God, the one Person who knows you and loves you perfectly.

There’s an answer to the question how does Ecclesiastes point us to a longing in our heart that only Christ and the gospel can satisfy? Right there—I have a longing to be fully loved, and in Christ that longing will be satisfied for all eternity. Tim Keller says, “It’s knowing that all your works matter. And it’s knowing that through all life’s joys, the best is yet to come.”

So with that hope in mind—with that hope we have through the blood of Christ and through faith in Him—would you please join me in a word of prayer?

Gracious Heavenly Father, You are our delight and our reward. Our relationship with You is what we long for more than anything else in this world. We have it now and we can taste it now, but Lord, we look forward to seeing You face to face for all eternity. We have confidence that even though the joys in this life are fleeting, we know You are never ending. You are everlasting. You are never failing. So please help us live with this eternal perspective in mind, so that Christ will be exalted in our hearts and that we would have joy. In Christ’s name I pray. Amen.

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