

Dust to Dust

Finding Meaning . . . Under the Sun, Part 12

Ecclesiastes 3:18-22

Discussion Guide

Main Idea:

Death is a sure thing. It is a promise. It matters not whether you are the buzzing insect over the trash container or the CEO of a multibillion dollar company, all living creatures experience death. Without perspective from God's point of view, it would be easy to conclude that death is the end; however, God knows the details and holds the power of life after death, which He has given us a glimpse into through the scriptures. What should we do when we learn about life in eternity? This knowledge should inspire us to enjoy the place God has assigned for us here under the sun, but also anticipate the place God has prepared for us in eternity.

Discussion Points:

Because sin has entered the world, death is a certainty.

- How does this knowledge affect the world at large? Civilizations? Cultures?
- In what ways do or should believers live their lives differently than unbelievers in light of their knowledge of death and life after death?
- What have you personally done with this knowledge? How has it formed or transformed the way you make decisions and live your daily life?

In light of the knowledge of death and life after death, Solomon encourages his reader to rejoice in his work, for that is his lot (*Ecclesiastes 3:22*).

- In our current culture, what are some of the current attitudes regarding one's 'lot in life'? How does cultures and governments attempt to solve perceived problems for people?
- What implications does this verse hold for the believer?
- How can a believer share the truths of God and love of Christ by rejoicing in his work?

God knows the details and hold the power of life and death.

- What attributes and characteristics of God are reflected in the above statement?
- How can and does this knowledge sustain a Christian believer?
- Why do we know that God's promises of eternal life will be completed and His words will be true?

Discussion Guide Cont.

Gospel Connection:

The Gospel of Jesus Christ is the truthful answer to the problem of death. Jesus' sacrifice of the cross and His resurrection allows the believer to be forgiven of sin and cleansed, then gives the hope and anticipation of eternal life in heaven with the Lord.

Practical Implications:

Think: Do I know what will happen to me after I die? Have I considered Christ as my personal savior?

Pray: Praise God for His merciful plan of salvation. Thank Him that we can enjoy life and work under the sun and that we look forward to the place God has prepared for us in heaven.

Do: Enjoy the work that God has given you to do. Look eagerly toward your home in the eternal kingdom, as well.

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Finding Meaning . . . Under the Sun, Part 12

Ecclesiastes 3:18-22

There is little doubt that King Solomon wanted his son, Rehoboam, to read his journal and learn from it, but I seriously doubt Solomon had any idea his journal would be read and studied for the next 3,000 years. Right up until today.

So far, we have learned how Solomon writes with a down-to-earth, hard-hitting, in-your-face, take-it-or-leave-it kind of realism. His quill is often dipped in the acid ink of futility and frustration. His journal includes verses you probably won't ever memorize – certainly not for the sake of encouragement.

At times you are convinced his diary could be categorically entitled, "Life is difficult, and that's on a good day." That will never be put on a coffee mug. "Life is hard and then you die." Thank you Solomon, for that insight.

But we have also discovered that in the midst of his frustration, longing, despair, and discouragement, the Holy Spirit is guiding him to offer deep counsel and perspective for all of us living down here, under the sun. As we pick our study back up, Solomon is going to do that same thing, again, as he writes some new entries in his journal.

He starts out with despair and frustration but ends up with inspired counsel. He doesn't just write, "Life is hard and then you die", he actually provides insight not just about experiencing death but how to experience life.

Let's pick it up where we left off -
Ecclesiastes 3:18.

Then I said in my heart with regard to the children of man (Adam) that God is testing them that they may see that they themselves are but beasts. (now Solomon clarifies what he is referring to in this regard) For what happens to the children of man (Adam) 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 (Ecclesiastes 3:18).

What Solomon is doing here is making two straightforward observations.

Observation #1 – Death is impartial

Death comes to all living creatures; animals die, but so do people. It does not matter if you are the biggest CEO in the corporate world or the biggest dog in the neighborhood, when it comes to death and decomposition, humans don't get a free pass over the animals. Solomon is simply referring to life under the sun that we can see, and, from what we can see, humans are no better off than animals.

Solomon makes an observation now, but will later point us to biblical revelation, which we will uncover as we study further along. If all you have is observation down here under the sun, without the truth of God's revelation, you might end up with all kinds of wrong

conclusions. You could end up with wrong views about where you came from, how you are supposed to live your life, what is going to happen after you die, and where the universe is heading, for that matter.

Let me give you an illustration of rejecting divine revelation in favor of man-centered observation down here under the sun and the kind of despair which, by the way, saturates our world today because of it. One author wrote with this depressed and cynical perspective: 'I realize I am going to die and forever cease to exist.'

By the way, let me interject here – if all you have is observation without the benefit of revelation, it does appear to be true that when you die, you cease to exist.

'I realize I am going to die and forever cease to exist. (He continues) My life is just a momentary transition out of oblivion into oblivion. And the universe, too, faces death. Scientists tell us that the universe is expanding, and everything in it is growing farther and farther apart . . . eventually all the stars will burn out and all matter will collapse into dead stars and black holes. Mankind is a doomed race in a dying universe and because the human race will eventually cease to exist, it makes no ultimate difference whether it ever did exist or not. Mankind is thus no more significant than a swarm of mosquitoes or a barnyard of pigs, for their end is all the same.'ⁱ

Here is a shorter quote from Voltaire who denied God's word and ended up with the same despair as he wrote 300 years ago: "We are insects living for a few seconds on atoms of mud." That is so encouraging. You ought to put that on your screen saver.

Beloved, this is logical conclusion based solely on observation without the benefit of revelation.

Now don't misunderstand Solomon's opening statement here, he isn't going that far. He isn't denying the uniqueness of mankind in creation; he isn't denying the immortality of the human spirit or the future of our glorified bodies; he isn't denying the resurrection of the

human race to an eternal destiny or the future of a new universe which God will recreate at the end of human history, for that matter.ⁱⁱ

God's revelation fills in the blanks for us – you need not despair. Solomon is simply making the observation that the human race and the animal kingdom all end up reverting to dust following death. But he is frustrated about that observation, even though he has been the great King of Israel and his body will no doubt occupy a splendid casket at some magnificent funeral. There will be some animal somewhere that will die in some hole in a tree without ever being noticed, and both of their bodies will revert to dust.

Observation #2 – Death is a promise

Here is where Solomon brings in some divine revelation. He actually quotes from God's own words to Adam and Eve back in *Genesis 3*. In fact, he uses the same word for *dust* that God used in Genesis. Notice:

All go to one place. All are from the dust, and to dust all return (Ecclesiastes 3:20).

What happens to your body after death is not an accident, it is a divine promise. This is the promise God made to Adam when he and his wife were expelled from the Garden of Eden. God promised them that their sin would effectively bring about the reversal of creation.ⁱⁱⁱ God created Adam from dust, and because of sin he was going to return to dust. This reversal would affect not only the human race but the animal kingdom as well.

As Adam and Eve were being expelled from the Garden of Eden, God spoke to Adam:

By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread, until you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; for you are dust, and to dust you shall return (Genesis 3:19).

Solomon is quoting, in *Ecclesiastes 3*, God's promise to Adam. Yes, he is frustrated that his body and some animals will experience the same reversal back to dust, but Solomon is recognizing that it is all the result of sin. Every death on planet Earth is an exclamation point that God is keeping His promise that sin entered the world and death by sin. Every casket that eventually fills with dust is an Amen and so-be-it to the word of God. "Dust to dust" has been the epitaph throughout human history, but that dust is not the end.

**Who knows the details of life after death?
God does.**

What Solomon does next is provide some clues about life after death for the believer by asking two rhetorical questions. For the first he writes, in *verse 21*:

Who knows whether the spirit of man goes upward and the spirit of the beast goes down into the earth? (*Ecclesiastes 3:21*).

In other words, who knows the details about life after death? If all you have is your own observations down here under the sun, you'll have no idea what happens after death. And notice that Solomon doesn't answer the question. He presumes he does not need to answer the question because he assumes we will all chime in and say, "God knows."

Who knows? Well, that's a capital "W".
Who knows? God knows!

Who knows the details of eternal life? The eternal Creator of life.

Who knows what happens after death? The Creator who experienced death on our behalf so that He could give us eternal life.

Did Solomon know any of this? Sure he did. He writes the answer later in his journal, in *chapter 12:7*:

And the dust returns to the earth as it was, and the spirit returns to God who gave it (*Ecclesiastes 12:7*).

Again, the critical answer is not a matter of observation, it's a matter of revelation.^{iv}

**Who has the power to make life after death possible?
God does.**

The second rhetorical question is delivered back in *verse 22*:

Who can bring him to see what will be after him? (*Ecclesiastes 3:22b*).

In other words, who has the power to make life after death possible? Who has the ability to give someone life after death so that they can see beyond their death to see and experience eternal life? Solomon doesn't answer that question either because he assumes everybody in Israel already knows the answer is that God has that power of giving eternal life.

Solomon was aware of other passages in the Old Testament that answered this question for him. His own father, King David, wrote of life after death and the confidence of the believer of spending eternity with God (*Psalm 49*).

For those of us alive today, we enjoy completed revelation with much more detail about eternity. We can listen to God the Son promise those of us who follow Him that He has *gone to prepare a place for us in His Father's house* (*John 14:1-3*).

God's word further promises that those who follow Christ *will rise again to a better life* (*Hebrews 11:35*).

Paul wrote to Timothy this same promise that Christ has *brought life and immortality to light through the gospel* (*2 Timothy 1:10*).

What have you done with it?

This isn't a matter of observation down here under the sun, this is revelation from the Creator

of the sun, revelation that we hold in our hands between the covers of our Bible. What a gift from God! This is an incredible gift from God! This doesn't mean that we stop observing, that we stop exploring, or that we stop researching; we simply understand that apart from divine revelation, we might end up filling in the blanks with the wrong answer.

What about all the people that don't have a copy of this Book, God's inspired revelation? Well, that is the mission of the believer through the ages and the church today, to make disciples of all nations, and God has a lot to say about that mission as well.

But the real question right now isn't about all those other people and what they have done with it, the question is, what have you done with it? Left alone, your observation might be that animals and humans cease to exist after death, that God doesn't even exist to begin with, that the universe is going to implode, that life is a meaningless mystery and we are really nothing more than insects living for a few seconds on atoms of mud.

This was the despair of Mauriac, the Nobel Prize winner for Literature in 1952, who lamented in his unbelief as he wrote, "You can't imagine the torment of having had nothing out of life and of having to look forward to nothing but death, of feeling that there is no other world beyond this one and that the puzzle will never be explained."^v

This is the tragedy of living life and trying to find meaning down here under the sun yet denying the revelation of the Creator of the sun, who designed the puzzle and knows the answers and has the power to eventually put all the pieces of the puzzle together.

In the meantime, even for the believer, there sometimes seems to be missing pieces in the puzzle of our own lives. How do we live down here under the sun?

Well, this paragraph in Ecclesiastes that seemed to start out so pessimistic and negative, once again includes encouraging truths. Whenever you acknowledge the word of God, the promise

of God, the plan of God, the creation of God, and a future eternal life with God, life takes on new meaning.

There are at least two timeless principles to wrap up with.

Enjoy the place God has assigned for you.

Look back at *verse 22* where Solomon writes:

So there is nothing better than that a man should rejoice in his work, for that is his lot (Ecclesiastes 3:22).

In other words, don't spend your life in regret, greed, complaint, or revenge. You have one life – make the most of it.

Solomon reminds us that our lives are not accidents. You have been assigned your work by God; your work is God's gift, whatever it is. . . it might be in the kitchen, the courtroom, or the classroom. Do your jobs well and ask God to give you joy in the effort. The devil can't have your soul, but he certainly wants to rob you of your joy. So if you go through life and don't thank God, obey God, and praise God, you are really not worshipping God.

How do you worship God? By thanksgiving, self-sacrifice, humility, praise, obedience, and trust. All of that in scripture is tantamount to worship. Worship isn't just on Sunday morning, but on Monday morning. And our lives can be wasted if God is not worshipped. This week will be wasted if God is not worshipped. So praise Him, thank Him, trust Him, and look for things to thank him for.

Warren Wiersbe wrote on this text the illustration of the farmer who prayed at the dinner table, "Lord, thank you for good food and good digestion."^{vi}

How true. And the older you get, you are just as grateful for good digestion as you are for good food. Why else would you start pouring chia seeds over everything in sight? Stop it. I've seen people pour chia seeds on ice cream! That isn't biblical.

Anticipate the place God has prepared for you.

Solomon has hinted in *verse 22* that God alone has the power to bring you beyond death into seeing and experiencing eternal life. So, don't waste your life and, while you're at it, don't forget your future. Anticipate the place God has prepared for you.

The difficulties of life down here under the sun can actually have a redeeming purpose. God has a way of using them to develop a deeper longing for the life with Him that is to come. Don't forget your future.

Paul David Tripp writes along these lines with this illustration:

I am persuaded that the whole purpose of camping is to make a person long for home! On that first day in the woods, putting up the tent is exciting, but three days later your tent has unpleasant odors you can't explain. You love the taste of food cooked over an open flame, but three days later you are tired of foraging for wood and irritated by how fast it burns.

You were excited at the prospect of catching your dinner from the stream running past

your campsite, which is [supposed to] be teeming with trout, but all you have snagged are the roots on the bottom.

You're now four days in and your back hurts, there seems to be no more firewood to forage, and you're tired of keeping the fire going anyway.

You look into what was once an ice-and-food-filled cooler to see the family-sized steaks you had reserved floating gray in a pool of water. You begin to think fondly of home. You stand there hoping that someone will break the silence and say, "Why don't we go home?"

Your four days in the wilderness have accomplished their mission. They have prepared you to appreciate home!

Our world isn't a very good amusement park [after all]. It's actually a broken place groaning for redemption. Earth is meant to make us long for [Heaven]. [Time] here is meant to prepare us for eternity.^{vii}

This manuscript is from a sermon preached on 1/5/2020 by Stephen Davey.

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i Quoted in David Jeremiah, *Searching for Heaven on Earth* (Integrity, 2004), p. 38

ii Adapted from Benjamin Shaw, *Ecclesiastes: Life in a Fallen World* (The Banner of Truth Trust, 2019), p. 49

iii David A. Hubbard, *The Preacher's Commentary: Volume 16* (Thomas Nelson, 1991), p. 115

iv Shaw, p. 50

v Philip Graham Ryken, *Ecclesiastes: Why Everything Matters* (Crossway, 2010), p. 64

vi Warren W. Wiersbe, *Ecclesiastes: Be Satisfied* (Victor Books, 1990), p. 40

vii Adapted from Paul David Tripp, *Forever: Why You Can't Live Without It* (Zondervan, 2011), p. 37