

**LIFE MATTERS 6: A STUDY IN THE BOOK OF ECCLESIASTES
ECCLESIASTES 9:1-6,11-12
FEBRUARY 7, 2016**

Well it is Super Bowl Sunday and this is a sad room, and rightfully so. Neither the Cowboys nor the 49ers are in the Super Bowl. In fact, neither one of them even made the playoffs. For the 49ers, coming off several years of being in the Super Bowl or right in the vicinity of the Super Bowl, I don't think anyone could have predicted that by the end of 2015, this team would be in last place without the same coach or quarterback and most of the rest of the guys retired or in prison.

The thing is no one can ever really predict anything in the NFL, in some sports, maybe, but not in the NFL. You can win the Super Bowl one year and miss the playoffs the next year. Case in point, the 13 experts who picked who would play in and win the Super Bowl 50 today, 9 of 13, 70%, picked the Super Bowl to include the Indianapolis Colts. Not a single one picked the Broncos or the Panthers to be even playing in the Super Bowl. If you moved out wider, of 64 professional sports outlets, not a single one picked the Panthers and only three picked the Broncos to be in the Super Bowl, and that was probably from the newspapers in Denver.

These things are unpredictable. They rarely go the way you think they should. They rarely go the way you want them to. As it turns out, this is true for more than football. Life is completely unpredictable. We speak with certainty and confidence, but we often miss the mark and life often surprises us. A few quotes for you to consider:

From the Quarterly Review in 1825, "What can be more palpably absurd than the prospect held out of locomotives travelling twice as fast as stagecoaches?"

In 1943, IBM chairman Thomas Watson predicted a world market for about five computers.

In 1956, the head astronomer for the United Kingdom said, "Space travel is utter bilge." Our predictions rarely turn out, but we make them anyway. Our expectations rarely turn out, but we have them anyway. Four years ago, who would have predicted that gas would drop by almost two dollars? Four years ago, who would have predicted that the guy who said, "You're fired!" was in contention for the top job in the country? Who could have predicted the drought and now El Nino? Who could have predicted the natural disasters and the terrorist acts?

The answer of course is no one, but we try anyway. The highest selling books and most popular talking heads are the prophets and foreseers. The futurists make sense of the future and tell us where it all fits. The problem, of course, is that they don't have much better luck than the Super Bowl predictions. Over a period of 35 years in the 20th century, two-thirds of all forecasts made by social scientists were just plain wrong.

This is a truth that is embarrassingly honest in hindsight, yet we always tend to forget it when looking ahead. Life is unpredictable. For you, me and everyone else, life is utterly and completely unpredictable. The question of course is, "Now what?" If you finally resign yourself to the fact that we will only ever master year end reviews and never yearly forecasts, we will only master reports and not predictions. Then what should we do?

Qoheleth comes to the same conclusion. At the end of his long life, he has fully declared that he has seen it all and nothing shakes out the way he hoped it would. There are too many hiccups and major earthquakes that completely change who we are and what we planned.

Ecclesiastes 9:1-2

In verse 1, he says everything we do is in God's hands, yet we don't know how it will turn out. Love or hate. Good or evil. We aren't quite sure which way things will break. Verse 2 is the reminder that we all share a common destiny of death. As you well know, this is the only prediction that is fully guaranteed. One out of one people die. You can take that to the bank or take that to the graveyard. It is our shared common destiny. The question is about

everything that happens in between, from our first breath to our last. What do you do with such an unpredictable life?

If you are new with us or haven't been here in awhile, we are studying the book of Ecclesiastes for our yearly Life Matters series. To kick off the year, we remind ourselves what is important with a renewed emphasis on our three life goals: Life in God, intentional Christ-centered worship; Life with Others, living your life in Christian community; Life for others, serving and sharing in Jesus' name. We are spending two weeks on each of these life goals, and today we are focusing on Life for Others, serving and sharing in Jesus' name, being his hands and feet to a broken world.

To do this study, we are looking at the challenging book of Ecclesiastes. At the heart of it, Ecclesiastes is asking the big question, what is the meaning of life? Remember this book is authored by Qoheleth, the gatherer or teacher. *Ecclessia* is the Greek word for church, but it really just means the called out or gathered ones. Qoheleth is teaching this gathering and he is talking about the meaning of life. He is a man who has had it all. He has been successful. He has found love. He has tasted great wine and enjoyed great food. He has done great works for God and for man, and still, at the end, he is asking what is the meaning of life?

To answer that question, he keeps finding the hebel nature of life. Hebel meaning absurd or futile or vane or meaningless. Qoheleth is at the end of his days. In his early days, everything fell into place and made perfect sense. Life was predictable and followed predictable patterns. That's why he wrote Song of Solomon. He did it as an ode to love and to what love looks like. He writes Proverbs and explains how life works. He gives directions with promises of how things will turn out. Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and he will direct your paths. Raise up a child in the way they should go, and they will not depart from it. Live a life like this as a woman and mother, and your children will rise up and call you blessed.

Except of course, you all know sometimes your paths don't feel directed. They feel downright confused. Your child was brought up in the way he should go and has departed

from it. You did live a righteous life as a mother and none of your kids think you are blessed. While the Proverbs are wise and beautiful, they are not ironclad promises; instead they are directive and hopeful but not always fulfilled.

I think towards the end of his day, Qoheleth learned life isn't so predictable. Things don't always turn out. Now what?

Ecclesiastes 9:11-12

He says that's just how life works sometimes. The person you thought should win didn't. The wise person doesn't prosper. Time and chance happen to them all. Qoheleth has lived long enough to see some injustice. To see "C" students become rich while Valedictorians ended up working for them. Life isn't an equation that adds up. In fact, it is being in the right place at the right time. The race doesn't always go to the swift. I found a guy who perfectly illustrates this.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WOrIv8sB4vg>

Last man standing. Can you imagine the day when Steven Bradbury is old and gray talking with his grandkids, "Grandpa, tell us again how you became a world champion ice skater. Tell us the story of how you won it all?" "Well kids, everyone else crashed, and I went from last to first." Last man standing happens in all parts of life to all types of people. It's easy to look at the business world and wonder how some people have advanced to the level they have achieved. It's easy to look at relationships and see people with many kids who don't really enjoy their progeny, while others who are righteous and pleased for kids don't even have them. It's easy to see this in people with no morals who are applauded while those with integrity can't seem to get ahead.

We have a last man standing world that often seems to be predicated on time and chance. Not always on righteousness. Not always on justice. Just everyone else fell down and that

person got ahead. It's really kind of like Wheel of Fortune. I don't know if you saw this, but one of the worst Wheel of Fortune candidates to ever cross the show was on recently. I want you to watch as everything falls in his lap, and he still wastes it away.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dtSYXxoc0Zw>

This is the world we live in. Where predictions rarely come true. Where everyone is just guessing, and that means a lot of times life doesn't turn out how we think it should. Time and chance happen to us all. So, what do you do with a life like this?

I want to change how you are thinking about this today because just as much as time and chance allow fortunes to slip through our fingers, we can forget how lucky we are. For the most part, if we are sitting here today, we have already won the wheel of fortune. To live where we do, when we do and how we do, we have hit the jackpot. While it is okay to spend a few minutes concerned about the jobs that passed us by or the opportunities missed, we have so much.

Most of the world is looking at our health, education, peace and job opportunities, and they are wondering why we landed where we did. I have talked about this before, but when you are born here, you can forget how much this place affords us. You can forget how far ahead we are compared to the rest of the world. My point being, as smart as you are, as motivated as you are, if you were born on the other side of the globe, there's a good chance you would not have what you have today. Bill Gates would not be a billionaire if he weren't born at the right time and the right place. His nerdy mind and entrepreneurial spirit would have been useless in early Rome. Mark Zuckerberg would likely not be a media mogul if he were born in war torn Sudan.

I tell you all of this to remind you of something I am sure you already know, you are extremely privileged to live where you live and when you live and how you live. No matter your experience, work ethic or education, you would not be this successful if you grew up

in the slums of India. If you were born as a woman in many parts of this world, you would have no voice and no chance to be educated. Time and chance have been kind to us. Think of it like this, based on current global population estimates, if you were to go back in the womb tomorrow with an equal chance of being born anywhere in the world tomorrow, you would have about a 4% chance of landing here again. How would you feel about taking such a spin? Let's take it one step further. About 20% of the world lives in extreme poverty. That means they subsist on \$1.25 per day or less. You have a better chance of being born into extreme poverty than you do being born into America. Would you spin that wheel? In those countries of the world, the mortality rate tells us one in six children die, whereas it would be one in 165 in the US. Would you spin that wheel?

Beyond where you are born, there are plenty of other ways the wheel of misfortune can land on you. One in ten Americans struggles with addiction. They are born with a disease that leads them to consume drugs, alcohol and numerous other substances towards their own destruction. You might not be an addict now, but would you spin that wheel. One in two men and one in three women get cancer. The wheel of misfortune touches all areas of life.

This brings us to life for others. If the world really does work like this, our first reaction is how can I make sense and order out of this world? How can I control it and help it bend toward me? What I want you to consider today is all of the people who have drawn the short straw. The wheel hasn't been kind to them. They weren't born in the right place. They were born with a crippling disease. How can you bend toward them?

I think if there was a reset button every year and the wheel was spun to determine our location, our age, our gender, our healthiness, we might be a bit more empathetic and proactive to help those who landed in a bad spot. It's so easy to forget that time and chance have helped to land us where we are. Not matter what we think about our own efforts, we are extremely privileged to land where and when we did.

So when we look at such an unpredictable world, my encouragement is for you to become something predictable in someone else's life. They might look at 2016 and think nothing is certain and who knows what will happen next, but they know you will be there. They can count on a person who calls themselves a Christian, and they count on you showing up. On you serving. On you giving.

In two weeks, we will have our next Serve Sunday. We are in our third year of Serve Sundays. If you are new here, Serve Sunday is something simple and yet profound. It's our little way of telling a watching world that they can count on us. It's our way of serving those who didn't have the best spin. Three to four times a year we plan a lot of work and organize a lot of jobs in the community, meaningful jobs that bring hope and redemption.

Let me give you a few examples from our upcoming Serve Sunday. We have Easter egg preparation for the kids in Oakland. We have partners in Oakland and a lot of these kids weren't born with an easy road. The same percentage of global poverty applies to national poverty and kiddos born in America have a one in five chance of being born poor. Which affects their education and health, which affects their future potential from day one. So we do many things with and for these kids, and this one is tangible and real. We help bless them by pointing them to Jesus and Easter. We help them to feel loved and supported.

One of our own members came up with a ministry called Cards for Soldiers. She helps organize getting handwritten notes to soldiers on active duty in foreign locales. We are feeding the homeless by packing lunches. We are having a breakfast meal served to the homeless in downtown San Jose.

In all of these things, we are trying to be Jesus to a hurting world. In an unpredictable world, we are trying to make it predictable that Christians show up to serve. Like a thing you just count on and expect.

We do all of this because a gold medal was placed around our neck. A victory was declared that we didn't really earn. In a sense, we are all beneficiaries of the last man standing syndrome. Jesus took the fall and gave us the victory. That's the very definition of grace.

I'm guessing you might have heard it in the beginning, but Ecclesiastes 9:1 makes it quite clear, despite all of this talk about time and chance and wheels of fortune, we are all in God's hands. Nothing is lucky or surprising to him. We are where we are supposed to be. The question is are we doing what we are supposed to do? The things you have been entrusted with are not just for your enjoyment and pleasure. If you know your life is all an outgrowth of grace, it should change how you view others around you.

John Bradford was a protestant minister around the time of the reformation. Early in his career, he saw a man being led to the gallows for breaking the law. Bradford saw this man and said those iconic words, "There but for the grace of God, go I." Meaning, without grace, he would be in the same shoes. He knew he was not far removed from brokenness and sinful behavior.

As it turns out, John Bradford himself was executed by the state for having a voice of reform against the Catholicism enforced by Mary Tudor. As it turns out, even with the grace of God, there went he. That is ultimately the point. We want to be a community that is predictably serving others and one another on a regular basis because one day you will be on the receiving end. You will spin the wheel of misfortune and in a moment where nothing makes sense, you will be certain of one thing. That Christians will show up. That you will be loved. I don't know what 2016 holds for any of us but I do know what I hope is true, that we all show up for each other this year. That we love tangibly and often to those around us. That we are the hands and feet of Jesus who never fail to show up.