

**LIFE MATTERS 3: A STUDY IN THE BOOK OF ECCLESIASTES**  
**ECCLESIASTES**  
**JANUARY 17, 2016**

I want to take you on a trip down memory lane. To jog your memory for such a journey, I want to show you some pictures of people you may know when they were in a different era. These are staff pictures from when they were younger.

What does this guy have to do with this guy? (Two pictures side-by-side of staffer.) I'm not sure we would hire this person today if they showed up looking like this.

When you see pictures like this, it can lead to regrets. Yes, regrets about styles and clothing, and about taking and keeping pictures. Traveling back to those moments can lead you to real regrets. You can look back at different seasons of life and think about what you would have done differently. We are just out of the Christmas season and this is the very premise of movies like *It's a Wonderful Life* and *A Christmas Carol*. To go back in life and see how you could change your mistakes. Those things you regret. Those things you broke, the people you hurt. It will keep you up late at night. It will make you ask a lot of "what ifs?"

That is a nice sentiment because if you are human, you have regrets. You think about the people you have hurt, the opportunities you missed, and if you are considering your relationship to God, you can really have a lot of regrets: all the times you messed up, all of the sinful acts and attitudes. Maybe there was a season of life spent in a church tradition where you wouldn't be caught dead in today. Maybe a season of life where your theology was way more conservative or way more liberal, and you say, "I can't believe I was like that. I wish I could change that."

This is our nature. We can look back at who we are and have disdain for what we were. I can't believe I used to date that person and acted that way. I can't believe I used to vote that way. I can't believe I used to believe that way. While some regret is healthy, I want to liberate you from that notion today. I want to give you freedom from regret based on who

God is in your life. You might be surprised where God can be found in the mistakes of your life.

If you are new here or haven't been here in awhile, we are in the middle of our Life Matters series. Each year, we revisit our discipleship path at SFC. Silicon Valley has a lot of options and there is always something new. Some churches latch on to this idea and try to come up with something new every year, a new vision, a new way of doing things for a New Year. The problem, of course, is that you have to one-up yourself each year and have to be extremely novel. The real problem is that this is fostering spiritual neophiles, an obsession with new and novelty instead of depth and practice, relearning the old rhythms and building up a long obedience in the same direction.

Each New Year we affirm that Life Matters. We know this world is complicated so we want to remind you to do three things this year if you want to follow Jesus.

### *Life in God*

*Life with others*-next Sunday is Life Groups Sunday. We will continue to preach through Ecclesiastes, but we want you to know there is an opportunity to join Life Groups. Don't miss this chance. If you have been putting it off, next week is your day.

*Life for others*-serving and sharing in the name of Jesus. I have two bits of application here.

1) An invitation to find a place to serve in this church. Fill out an information card and check *Life for others*, include your contact info and the area you would like to potentially serve. If you don't know, say that and we will help you. 2) Serve Sunday is coming up on February 21. We all sign up to corporately serve our area. We think this leads to discipleship. We think this leads to worship.

Today, we are talking about *Life in God*. One of the biggest hindrances to life in God is being beleaguered by "what ifs" and regrets.

### *Ecclesiastes 3:1-8*

Before Pete Seeger and The Byrds, there was Qoheleth. Qoheleth was a #1 chart-topping writer, in case you didn't know. These iconic words you have probably heard before. There is a season for everything, but it is much more detailed than that.

This passage starts out by using a literary device called "merisus." Merisus invokes polar extremes in order to highlight everything in between. When you say the candidate is unpopular from North to South, you mean throughout the whole country not just some weird longitudinal line. Likewise, when you say I would move heaven and earth, it is implied that includes Mars, Saturn, the moon or whatever else gets in your way.

So right away, when the passage says there is a time to be born and a time to die, it is also highlighting everything in between. There is a time to be a terrible toddler and a precocious kindergartener. There is a time to be an awkward middle-schooler, and there is definitely a time to leave the house when you are 18 so your parents can regain their sanity. There's a time for college and first job. There is a time for a mid-life crisis and retirement. There is time for all of it. There is a season for all of it.

That is the merisus in play here. Qoheleth is not just highlighting the polarities but everything in between, to plant and to reap, to weep and to laugh. There is a time for all of it. There is a season for all of it.

For an agrarian society, a season would be a meaningful measure, a loaded idea. Imagine a world where your entire livelihood is staked to how the seasons pan out. You count on the spring rains, and you count on winter not lasting too long. In an era before heavy machinery and crop insurance, you watched the seasons closely. You knew the value of each of them. How the seasons went would directly affect who you were.

For Bay Area residents, the idea of a season is not quite so meaningful. You might not know this, but there are these things called winters in some parts of the country, like Montana and South Dakota, where they actually wear parkas and snow limits how they live. There are these things called summers that get excessively hot in places like Texas and Oklahoma where they actually complain about the heat, and it affects how they live.

In a lot of places, seasons really matter. They affect how you live, and you can't get to the next one without going through the current one. You can't know the new life of spring without the death of winter. You can't experience the power of a pumpkin-spiced latte unless you have made it through the heat of summer. One can't exist without the other. They can't happen without one another. If you tinker or change one, the others won't be what they once were.

We know that, yet we think otherwise when it comes to the seasons of our lives. We spend way too much time fretting, regretting or apologizing for who we are based on who we were. When in fact, you wouldn't have ever made it to here if you hadn't gone there.

I've told you before but all through college I spent the majority of my time working as a waiter. I look back and remember those 12 and 14-hour days and wonder what I was doing? I was studying to be a pastor doing a stupid thing like waiting on tables. It was such a difficult time in my life, you can't imagine. All the stuff I had to endure. I had to serve people on a regular basis. I had to help clean up their messes and serve them even when they were the ones making a mess. I had to do teamwork and help carry other people's trays when they were falling behind. I had to be in tune to people's needs and think about what they might need and try to help make it happen, and I had to speak in front of people and tell them the specials. It was rough stuff. A season you would hope not to repeat, a season of serving people when things were messy, a season of teamwork and carrying burdens for other people, a season of being empathetic, a season of learning to talk in front of people. I can't imagine why God made me do that.

There is a season for everything that has happened in your life. Your successes and your failures. Your righteousness and your sins. Your homeruns and your strikeouts. Your sickness and your health. Who you are is directly connected to who you were, and you can't separate who you are from who you were. Here's why.

*Ecclesiastes 3:10-14*

Verse 10 - He had made everything beautiful in its time. That means, it was right where it was supposed to be and it was right when it was supposed to be. He makes everything beautiful in its time, and we can't comprehend it. Ecclesiastes 3:11 is that iconic verse. He has placed eternity on our hearts from the beginning to the end of time. He has placed an inkling and interest in eternity in our lives and yet we cannot fathom it. Everything fits in a certain place, yet we cannot make heads nor tails of it, at least not until we have hindsight. Who you were cannot be separated from who you are. The bumpy road that brought you here is the only road you can travel.

He has allowed me to wait on tables so I could be a pastor. He showed me how to memorize the evening specials so that I could memorize the scriptures. He showed me how to clean up the gunk under the table so I could clean up the gunk under a marriage, a life. Plus, I learned how to open a bottle of wine.

You are perfectly situated to be right where you are. You are perfectly calibrated and prepared to be right where you are. Even if you cannot fathom it or understand it, that is true. The bumpy road that brought you here is the only road you could have traveled.

This is not saying that everything you have done or everything that has happened was good, God honoring or God pleasing, but these things exist. Mistakes were made. Sins were committed. Worldviews were changed. Worldviews were not changed. People hurt you and you hurt other people. The point here is not that you have lived a pristine life or a holy life. The point here is that the life you have should be the life you own. God brought you here. There was a season for all of your ups and all of your downs, because they made you who

you are right this moment. When I say they made you, I mean God made you. Above all else, this is theological but also quite practical. It does you absolutely no favors to be constantly living in regret, worrying about what should have been and where you would be now. I spent a great deal of time recently with a man who was worried that he had missed out. He looked back at a date in the 1980's when he decided not to take a computer programming class with disdain; he looked back and said he missed out. He messed up. 1) What does that do for you but cause great self-loathing? 2) What can you do about it now? 3) And this is a big one; do you not trust that God will use it?

There was a king in Israel named David. Maybe you have heard of him. Before he donned the crown and the scepter, he donned the sling and staff. He was a shepherd who cared for wandering sheep. He was the little brother who dealt with antagonistic older brothers whose goals were antithetical to his own. He was a lone combatant dealing with lions and other predators. Now can you think of any instances where caring for wandering sheep or dealing with antagonistic opponents or combating dangerous predators would be helpful to the king of a nation in a tumultuous region? Before there was a coronation, there was Psalm 23. Before there was a shepherd, there was a king.

You could say the same for a man named Saul who became Paul. If any man might've dabbled in regret, it would have to be Paul. He could actually look back at a time when he was quite literally a different man with a different name. A time when he was a know-it-all, a time when he was a legalist. A time when he was a slave to the law. A time when he persecuted followers of Jesus and stood watch while they were stoned and beaten. He had a season he would rather forget. While Paul knew the freedom and forgiveness of Jesus, you would think he had regrets.

But God used all of it, and he wouldn't be Paul if he weren't first Saul. He wouldn't have been able to explain grace if he had not first known the law. He wouldn't have been able to explain freedom if he had not known what it was to be a slave. There is a time for everything. There is a season for everything. Even if you have an inkling of the eternal and even if you have the ability to revisit and reconsider what you have done and where you

have been, you ultimately will not be able to make sense of it. God has brought you here in spite of yourself. He has shown you grace and revealed himself despite your flaws and the flaws of the methods and the people who have pointed you to him.

I read a great blog post by a pastor in the Midwest named Brian Zahnd. His article was called "Losing Jesus." In Luke chapter 2, we see that Mary and Joseph have lost Jesus. They went to Jerusalem for the Passover and unbeknownst to Mary and Joseph, Jesus stayed behind. Can you imagine what was going through Mary and Joseph's mind? We lost the Son of God, this can't be good, and after everything we have made it through, how ridiculous that we lose him now. We made it through Bethlehem and running away to Egypt and then back to Nazareth. We were refugees on the run for a couple of years.

Our lives have finally settled down. There haven't been a lot of surprises. Jesus is making friends. He is learning to be a carpenter. He is studying the Hebrew Scriptures. Life with Jesus is knowable and follows a predictable path. Then they lose him. They make their way back to Jerusalem and they find him in the temple. Jesus then says those words, "Why were you searching for me, didn't you know I would be in my father's house?" Any other parent would have said, "Didn't *you* know that you would be grounded?"

This is a moment, a spiritual moment. She lost one version of Jesus. Her little boy is starting to grow up and so too is the way she sees him. The predictable pattern of life has been broken. The way she relates to him is now changed. You can see this again at the wedding at Cana. Mary begs Jesus to help the wedding couple who has run out of wine and he says, "Woman, it's not my time." Some people think this sounds harsh or impersonal but it is another moment. She has known him as an adult and as a carpenter, but with this first miracle, he is entering a new season. She has lost the carpenter, but she is about to discover the Messiah.

I'm sure these are not the only times Mary lost Jesus, but you see in it a pattern. It's part of life to lose Jesus and then find him again in a new way, to see him with fresh eyes. In fact, it wouldn't be healthy if the Jesus you knew today was the same Jesus of your youth. That

would mean you are static and worse than he is. When it comes to seasons of life, be prepared to lose Jesus and find him again, and with that, there is no purpose in looking back at previous seasons of your spiritual life with disdain or remorse. Maybe you lost Jesus a few times, but what matters is finding him again.

Mary actually lost Jesus at least one more time that I know of for certain. She actually lost him at Passover again. This time he wasn't in the temple. He was on display for all to see. Humiliated and in excruciating pain, nailed to a Roman cross and suffocating in front of a mob of people. Mary had really enjoyed "miracle Jesus" and "teaching Jesus." At first, she was worried because his teaching was ruffling feathers and angering the authorities, but she began to love this Jesus. Not now, he was lost again. "Miracle Jesus" was being replaced by condemned Jesus and "teaching Jesus" was replaced by crucified Jesus. She was losing him again.

But you know she found him again. She lost the boy who became a man. She lost the carpenter who became a messiah. She lost the messiah who became a sacrifice. After all of that loss, she found the Savior.

There is a season for everything. There is a time for everything. The bumpy road that brought you here is the only road you could have traveled. God is in the mistakes of your life. He is in the things you have lost. He is in the things you have found. A big part of *Life in God* is trusting your life to God. Trusting that he knows best. Trusting that he still loves you. That he hasn't forgotten you and will never forsake you. Even if you can't see him right now, he is there. If you feel like you lost God this week or this month or this year, rest assured that he will be found, and he will find you.