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**Pointless: The Illusion of Control**

**Scripture Reading:** Ecclesiastes 3:1-15

**Introduction:**

For our inward nights this semester, we are going through a mini-series, called Pointless, where we are looking at the Old Testament book of Ecclesiastes. In this, we are joining Qoheleth – otherwise known as the Preacher – on his quest in trying to figure out what life is really all about. Recall, Qoheleth is looking at life “under the sun,” and the central question he has in mind is this: “What’s the point?” That is, why do we do the things that we do? What’s the point of it all?

Qoheleth sets out to answer this question by first turning to pleasure. He says maybe the point of life is for me to feel as good as I possibly can. And so, being a man of vast wealth, he buys all of this stuff, tries to gain as much experience as he can, and builds great structures for himself, leaving no desire unsatisfied. But in the end, he concludes that it was like chasing after the wind. He got everything he ever wanted, experienced some of life’s greatest pleasures, and then some, and still he found everything to be meaningless.

But as we read further into chapter two, we see Qoheleth’s determination to find meaning elsewhere. He says, “Fine. If I can’t find the meaning of life in pleasure, then maybe it comes from living wisely. Surely, there is much more to be gained by living wisely than by living foolishly.”[[1]](#footnote-1) Yet despite being one of the wisest men who ever lived, he says this too is pointless, because sooner or later both the wise and the foolish end up dead, and shortly thereafter their names are long forgotten. So, what difference does it really make if I live wisely as opposed to foolishly? No one will remember me in the end.

For most of us in here – probably all of us – we probably can’t name all of the world leaders in history, let alone our own country’s presidents. And though they’re the most powerful men who ever lived, their names are still forgotten. So, how much more so for people like us? We live for a brief period of time, but after our life is over not only will the world forget we ever existed, but, within a couple of generations, our own family members won’t even remember our names.

From living wisely, the Preacher then turns his attention to work; however, this, too, the Preacher discovers is like chasing after the wind, because while some people toil for certain things those things are often left to be enjoyed and used by other people. Not only that, no matter how much we work, it seems like there are no *lasting* accomplishments, since there’s always more work to be done. There is, in other words, this unshakeable sense of futility laden within our labors.

For instance, imagine you’re a doctor. You feel some sense of futility in what you do, because you heal a patient but then they get sick, and you give them medicine but then they get sick again. A doctor will ultimately fail with every patient because no matter how many times a doctor heals them they’re all going to die eventually.

Imagine you’re an academician or scholar trying to build intricate theories after years and years of research and writing. There’s a futility there, because no matter how much you read and write, your theories always remain incomplete. And moreover, long after you’re gone, someone will either come out with a better theory, or rip to shreds the one you’ve spent your whole life working on.

If you’re a student, you experience futility, right? You spend long nights in your house trying to memorize answers for an exam, but then a week later you forget everything you learned.[[2]](#footnote-2) You dedicate hours of learning mathematical equations and formulas, though most of you will never have any use for it in the real world. There’s this never-ending, academic game where there’s always more test to study for, and where you’re always asked to prove your worth by how well-rounded you are or how well you score on standardized tests. You feel futility, that no matter how much effort you expend it makes no difference.

Or, put yourself in my shoes, and try to empathize with the futility I feel week in and week out. As a pastor, I spend precious hours of my week studying, reading, and writing, in order to craft lectures and sermons, while knowing full well within the process that most of what I teach and preach will be forgotten within mere minutes of after having delivered the lecture or sermon. So, what’s the point, when so much of it you’re just going to forget? This is what the Preacher is talking about. There is a seeming pointlessness to everything we do, and to some degree or another we all know it to be true. Thus, trying to find meaning in work, the Preacher says, is also like chasing after the wind.

With these sobering conclusions, we now arrive at chapter three, and at this point the Preacher is undoubtedly frustrated and despondent, because all of his attempts to find the answer to life have miserably failed. In fact, the more he tries to figure life out the more it makes less sense to him. The Preacher sees that life is just way too vast and way too complicated for him to think that he can find *the* answer to life. It’s a fool’s errand. And so, with his string of failed attempts, the Preacher realizes he’s finally hit a will, and by hitting that wall he’s now forced to look up and call into question an assumption he’s had, which is an assumption that many of us have. The assumption that we think we are in control.

So, tonight, what we’ll do is we’ll take up this notion of control and consider it through the eyes of the Preacher. Specifically, we’ll look at control as an obsession, as an illusion, and as something to be surrendered.

**Control as Obsession:**

The thing we have to appreciate about Qoheleth is that his quest does not begin with God, that is, he does not turn to the bible for immediate answers. Which is what he means by his common use of the phrase, “under the sun,” which translates to “life apart from God.” Instead, he begins by applying himself to sober, empirical research, through examining, weighing, and studying, to see if he can find for himself lasting meaning on this earth.[[3]](#footnote-3)

And the reason why we have to appreciate that, especially as modern Westerners who live in the age of Amazon prime and on-demand streaming, is because we have this tendency to want things immediately. Our context has conditioned many of us to carry this sort of self-entitlement that we deserve things to be handed to us immediately and that things should come easy to us, including our faith.

However, through his process, the Preacher is showing us how faith is really meaningless if you aren’t willing to go on a similar quest, because if you think faith is simply a matter of course then you’ll never understand why you need it. A faith that is handed to you, that is easily accepted, without seriously wrestling through things like doubt, evil, suffering, and even boredom is at best shallow and at worst non-existent.

Another reason why we have to appreciate Qoheleth is because he actually starts his quest from a position of great wealth and intellect. Again, Qoheleth is the one of the wealthiest and smartest men of his time. And despite having great wealth and knowledge, Qoheleth can’t help but shake the feeling that there’s got to be more to life than this. For many of us, we’re not even half as rich or half as smart as Qoheleth was, and yet many of us are okay with life. If anything, Qoheleth’s quest, and the deeper questions that are driving him, call into question the shallow nature of our own happiness. He’s saying, “You think you’re happy, but you’re not. You think you got life all figured out, but you don’t.”

So, after he concludes that looking for meaning in pleasure, wisdom, and work is pointless, Qoheleth then moves on to write something that initially seems out of place. He writes, “For everything there is a time and season…”[[4]](#footnote-4) Why does he write that here?

Qoheleth writes this because he’s starting to see the faulty assumption of his project. That is, his search for life’s answers is based upon the false assumption that he is in control of his life. But as he looks out into the world, and observes more closely at the natural course of things, he sees that there are so many things that lie outside of his control. There is a time to be born and a time to die, a time to plant and a time to uproot, a time to kill and a time to heal, so on and so forth. In other words, God has ordained life and the course of history in such a way that there are times and seasons for everything.

Every single one of us has a deep obsession with control for no other reason than the fact that we are sinful creatures. By definition, sinfulness is choosing to live life according to our own times and seasons, rather than living in obedience to God according to the times and seasons that have been ordained by him. And we try to control things in either one of two ways. For some of us, we incessantly try and exercise control over our lives by finding purpose in other things or other people, and we try to create meaning for ourselves in work or other accomplishments. For others of us, we try and exercise control through willful ignorance. We acknowledge that life is too vast and complicated, and because of that we content ourselves with holding onto what little we know because it gives us a sense of stability and comfort. So, one is a more active approach while the other is more passive. However, it isn’t really an either/or. For most of us, we control our lives through both of these things.

**Control as Illusion:**

The problem with whatever way we choose to exercise control, however, is that it doesn’t take much for our feelings of being in control to be completely shattered. Remember, Qoheleth is showing us how the search for meaning and the desire to be in control are intricately related. That is, only those who think they can find meaning apart from God think they are in control; and only those who think they are in control think they can find meaning apart from God. But sooner or later, we’re forced to face the reality of this illusion.

For instance, you may try and exercise control over your life by finding meaning as an accomplished athlete. However, all it takes is one injury for you to be out of the season, or if the injury is bad enough for you to be out from the sport forever. But then what are you? To give a real-life example, a little while back, I went with a group of youth group guys to see Jeremy Lin speak at the Brooklyn Tabernacle. There Jeremy Lin shared his testimony about his ups and downs throughout his basketball career.

As most of you know, a little into his career, Lin joined the New York Knicks in 2011 as an underdog, where people didn’t see him as more than a below average, scrawny Asian kid straight out of Harvard. At the start, Lin mostly sat on the sidelines, but with the injury of their point guard, Baron Davis, Mike D’Antoni, who was the Knicks coach at the time, decided to let Lin play out of desperation. However, to his great surprise, Lin started scoring a massive amount of points, breaking the Knicks out of their season’s dry spell. Lin then quickly rose to fame as he was averaging 15 points per game, with some games being higher than 20 or 30 points.

He was at the height of his career, and all over the world people were calling it “Linsanity.” However, not long after, he started to experience injuries, the major one being when he strained his left hamstring while playing for the Brooklyn Nets. Afterwards, he never played the same again. Overnight, he went from being a decorated point guard to being a mediocre player.

He was telling us this story, and I remember admiring just how brutally honest he was. He said, “I look back on my basketball career, and I know it sucks. No one would want a career like this. I wouldn’t want it for myself.” And Lin talked about the experience of Linsanity, and how in the hype of the moment he really thought he had nowhere to go but up. And then he opened up about his time of injury, and how he turned to God in anger: “God why would you give me Linsanity just to take it away?”

As he continued to process why his career was taking a downward spiral, Lin said he realized it’s because he started to place his value more in his career than he did in God. What he initially thought was God’s punishment he started to see was actually God’s grace. And what he said after that was so powerful, and I’ll never forget it: “As I was wrestling with God, during my time away from the NBA, it was through my injury that God helped me see that he loves me not for Jeremy Lin the famous basketball player, but that God loves me for me.”

The point, though, is this: that no matter how often we think we have life figured out, the fragility of life, with all of its unexpected twists and turns, has a way of shattering whatever illusions we have of being in control. And the Preacher is showing us that behind the scenes it is God who’s working out all of these twists and turns as a means of grace so that we would stop turning to the things of this world but would turn to him.

**Control as Something to be Surrendered:**

Qoheleth understands that control is something we need to surrender to God, simply because it’s something we never had to begin with, and that once we’re honest with ourselves we’ll come to find that there is really little in life that we able to control. But what does that mean exactly, namely, to surrender control to God?   
  
First, we surrender control to God by understanding that there is a time and season for everything, which means our primary concern is not to determine the seasons we find ourselves in, but rather to understand the season that God has placed us in. “God, why have you placed me here? Is this a season of weeping, or is this a season of laughing? Is this a time to speak, or is this a time to keep silent?”

You see, although we don’t know *how* God has ordained the circumstances of our life, all we need to know is that he has. In every time and season, God has placed us there because he is trying to teach us something, and he is trying to grow us in ways we would not be able to grow on our own. But here’s the thing. As long as we refuse to relinquish control, we will miss out on what God is doing, and what he wants to accomplish in our lives. Because we get so caught up with our plans and our agendas, we risk missing out on what God is doing. Surrendering means giving up our pathetic agendas, and our puny plans, for God’s better purpose.

No matter how much we think we are in control, God has a funny way of bringing us into places, or placing us in certain situations, that we would never have imagined for ourselves. But try as we might we can’t avoid it. And maybe we, too, would start to realize that this isn’t because God is being vindictive or petty, but because God desires to pour his grace out to us. We are no more in control of our lives than we are in control of whether summer comes and goes; we are no more in control of our lives than we are in control of the leaves falling or the snow melting. And thank God. Often, we imagine hell being a place where unrepentant sinners go after they die. But the bible is clear. Hell is the moment when God leaves you to figure life out for yourself.[[5]](#footnote-5)

If we look further, in vv.9-11, this is what the Preacher writes after he’s exhausted all his resources in trying to find life’s answers: “What gain has the worker from his toil? I have seen the business that God has given to the children of man to be busy with. He has made everything beautiful in its time. Also, he has put eternity into man’s heart, yet so that he cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end.”

In other words, he’s saying surrendering control is also learning to realize that we are not entitled to answers. That just because we give God control does not mean we should expect God to give us the answers in return. In fact, what the Preacher is saying is that God has actually designed, in fact, he’s rigged, the world in such a way that we would be forced to live by faith not just by sight, so that we would learn to live a life that is not dependent on ourselves but dependent upon God. The Preacher is saying life is a mystery, and we cannot figure it out. It’s like God holds the key” to life’s greatest mysteries, but “he does not give it to you or me.” God has placed eternity into our hearts so that we would learn be satisfied in him, so that we would trust in him, even if he doesn’t give us all of the answers.

Surrendering control to God is about learning to trust in him. He may not always reveal to you why he’s called you to certain places, or why he’s surrounded you with certain people. But that’s okay. Your job is not to know everything but to trust in the one who does, to trust that whatever season he has placed you in it is according to his good purposes for your life.

**Pastoral Note:**

The Preacher began his quest looking for answers, but what he came to realize in this chapter was that he was actually looking for something else the entire time. But it wasn’t by being distracted, or by laughing at life with cynical humor, or by secluding himself in willful ignorance that he arrived at profound humility and learned to trust in God. He came to see God and his profound dependence upon him only by being real with himself, and only by being honest about the things that keep all of us awake at night.

Only after years and years of investigation did the Preacher come to see that there was a sort of vanity to the investigation itself, but it was necessary because it was the means by which God opened up his eyes to see that he is not in control. And that’s the beauty of who God is, that God takes even our vanity and can use it to humble us and to lead us to himself.

In that sense, I guess what I’m trying to say is that we have to take even our own vanity seriously, because it’s only by taking vanity seriously that we realize that vanity is just that: vanity. Which means surrendering control to God is not just something that happens, but it’s something that needs to be lived out, and that also takes time and practice. But unless we go through the process of learning to live like we are not in control, we will never truly understand what a glorious gift faith is, nor experience the profound depth of his love for us.

From a sermon he once preached, Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote this: “Those who do not know what it feels like to wrestle anxiously with the most profound questions of life, of one’s own life, and then to keep watch in anticipation and yearning until the truth is unveiled – cannot imagine how glorious is the moment when clarity emerges.”[[6]](#footnote-6) May we live like we are not in control, so that we can experience the one who is. Amen.

1. Ecclesiastes 2:13-14 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. There’s a study done at Harvard University to see how much students would remember after their studying for an exam. They found that ninety percent of students failed the exam a month after it had taken place. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Ian A. McFarland, *From Nothing: A Theology of Creation* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2014), 128. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Ecclesiastes 3:1 (ESV). In the NIV, it’s put forth as, “There is a time for everything, and a season for every activity under the heavens.” [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. McFarland, *From Nothing*, 150. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, “Waiting At The Door,” in *The Collected Sermons of Dietrich Bonhoeffer vol.1*, ed. Isabel Best (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2012), 8. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)