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# Women of Witness

TIPS TO BETTER YOUR RELATIONSHIP WITH OTHERS

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## When Life Doesn't Make Sense

By Joshua Bremerman

What do we do when life just doesn't make sense? Illness strikes. A job is lost. Friendships fade. Uncertainty looms. Whether the gray-haired saint facing cancer or the college student burdened by the pressures of the future, crisis and suffering have a way of shaking even the most confident Christian.

We may *know* that God is in control of all things at all times in all places, yet we often *feel* frustrated because we don't understand what he is up to. So what do we do when life doesn't make sense?

The Preacher in Ecclesiastes asked a similar question. Often, when someone mentions Ecclesiastes, we can think, "Whoa — he was a downer." In reality, though, Ecclesiastes does not push the depressed over the edge, but rather gives the frustrated a foothold of joy in our puzzling world. The Preacher declares a simple message of hope for the struggling: *enjoy life by fearing God even when you cannot understand his works and ways.*

**God Weaves All Things Together.** When we do not understand *why* life is the way it is, the Preacher would have us be certain that God orchestrates all its changing seasons.

Everything has its time: "A time to be born, and a time to die" (Ecclesiastes 3:2). The Preacher poetically introduces his subject by using birth and death to encapsulate *all things in life*. All things — the good, the bad, and the somewhere in between — occur according to an appointed time. In his words, "For *everything* there is a season, and a time for *every matter* under heaven" (Ecclesiastes 3:1). Who appoints this timing? The Preacher does not leave us wondering for long: "[God] has made *everything* beautiful in its time" (Ecclesiastes 3:11).

Just as beauty befits a lover (Song of Solomon 1:8, 15; 2:10), so God works all things together in a fitting, beautiful way according to his will. He is the artist; all of life is his mosaic. He is the great weaver who threads all things together to form an exquisite tapestry. Perhaps we know what passage Paul meditated on as he wrote, "We know that for those who love God all things work together for good" (Romans 8:28).

**Mystery from Beginning to End.** Yet even with confidence in the sovereign rule of God over all things at all times in all places, the Preacher recognizes his own inability to understand. He writes, "Also, [God] has put eternity into man's heart, *yet so that he cannot find out* what God has done from the beginning to the end" (Ecclesiastes 3:11).

In context, “eternity” parallels “what God has done from the beginning to the end.” Humanity has a God-given desire to comprehend “what God has done from the beginning to the end,” but God placed this desire in our hearts in such a way that we “cannot find out” what he has done. As Gregory of Nyssa (335–395) writes, “For all eternity he put in men’s hearts the fact that they might never discover what God has done from the beginning right to the end” (*Homilies on Ecclesiastes*, 79).

Naturally, as we arrive at the intersection of our finiteness and God’s infinity, we leave frustrated. The Preacher writes, “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” (Ecclesiastes 3:9–10). His question implies a negative answer: none. The worker has no gain from his toil.

What toil? In general, the activities noted in Ecclesiastes 3:2–8 constitute our toil through life, but Ecclesiastes 8:17 also reveals a specific piece of our struggle: “Then I saw all the work of God, that man cannot find out the work that is done under the sun. *However much man may toil in seeking, he will not find it out.*” No matter how hard we try, we cannot make sense of God’s works and ways.

“God’s works and ways make sense — beautiful, wise, and fitting sense — just not always to us.”

At the very least, we should consider reframing the original question. Instead of asking, “What do we do when life doesn’t make sense?” we might ask, “What do we do when life doesn’t make sense *to us*?” God works all things together according to his wisdom, but we do not have the capacity to understand all he does. God’s works and ways make sense — beautiful, wise, and fitting sense — just not always *to us*. Isaiah would not be surprised by this conclusion: “My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, declares the Lord” (Isaiah 55:8).

**Fear Before Him.** So what do we do when life doesn’t make sense to us?

The Preacher does not leave us alone to suffer in nihilistic resignation: “I perceived that whatever God does endures forever; nothing can be added to it, nor anything taken from it. *God has done it, so that people fear before him*” (Ecclesiastes 3:14).

God is not merely playing with his creation because he wants to have some fun at our expense. He has not created a world with no meaning, leaving humans to wander through life without hope of understanding. Instead, God designed us to desire infinite knowledge *so that we would fear him*.

To fear God means to remember who God is and to remember who we are in relationship (and outside of relationship) with him. We remind ourselves of God’s sovereign control of all things in life, humbly accepting our own inability to always understand his ways. At the same time, we can do so with joy because we know that God works all things together beautifully for our good.

Like Job in the face of great calamity, we ask, “Shall we receive good from God, and shall we not receive evil?” (Job 2:10). We look uncertainty and tragedy in the eye, as painful as it may be, and by his grace declare, “Blessed be the name of the Lord” (Job 1:21).

**Embrace the Life You Can See.** We do not stop at fear, though. Rightly fearing God starts the process, but God wants more. The Preacher writes, “I perceived that there is nothing better for them than *to be joyful* and to do good as long as they live; also that *everyone should eat and drink and take pleasure in all his toil* — this is God’s *gift* to man” (Ecclesiastes 3:12–13). Don’t read the Preacher’s words as some sort of *carpe diem* motto that urges us to make the most of life while we can. Even when we cannot understand God’s work or ways, he wants us to enjoy life — every season of it — within the context of a holy fear.

In his book *Things of Earth*, Joe Rigney urges Christians to “embrace your creatureliness. Don’t seek to *be* God. Instead, embrace the glorious limitations and boundaries that God has placed on you as a character in his story” (234). Rigney’s exhortation hits at the core of Ecclesiastes 3: rightly fearing God and enjoying his world. To fear God rightly is to remember our humanity. When we can’t see around the dark corner of life yet to come, no matter how much we want to, we remember our humanity. We remember that God is God, and we are not. He controls all things at all times at all places, and he is good.

“God is God, and we are not. He controls all things at all times at all places, and he is good.” So, we ask God for the grace to embrace the life we can see — the life he has given to us — and to enjoy it fully. Breathe deeply the cool air of a fall morning as you walk the dog. Slowly sip hot chocolate with your children. Work hard at the temp job as you await a permanent position. Let your hand linger with your ailing loved one. Even when we do not understand God’s works and ways, we can delight in his good gifts to us. We can find a unique pleasure in our toil as we throw ourselves upon our rock, Jesus Christ, through the storms of life.

Jason DeRouchie ably summarizes the tension between finitude, infinity, frustration, and joy: “This is the goal of Ecclesiastes: that believers feeling the weight of the curse and the burden of life’s enigmas would turn their eyes toward God, resting in his purposes and delighting whenever possible in his beautiful, disfigured world” (“Shepherding Wind and One Wise Shepherd,” 15).

**Do Good Like God.** After inviting us to enjoy the life God has given, the Preacher adds one more dimension to our well-being: “There is nothing better for them than to be joyful *and to do good* as long as they live” (Ecclesiastes 3:12). When we embrace our finiteness and enjoy God and his gifts to us, we ultimately live *like* God by doing good to others. We soak up the joy of the life he has given to us, and then we channel that joy to others.

So, what do we do when life doesn’t make sense to us? We face all things — the good, the bad, and the somewhere in between — with confidence because we know our God is weaving all things together for good, even when we cannot see past our current circumstances. We walk hand in hand with our Savior on the path of life, enjoying all his gifts, big and small. And then we do good to others by inviting them to do the same.

<https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/when-life-doesnt-make-sense>