Will You Live
"Under the Sun" or "Under Heaven"

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(Illustration) Billy attended the Los Angeles Victory Baptist Church, where his mother played the organ. At age three, he was playing the piano, and as a teenager, he directed the 100-voice church choir. When Billy was 10, he accompanied the renowned singer, Mahalia Jackson. Amazingly enough, a Hollywood producer attended that service and heard Billy's talents. Soon afterward, he cast the 10-year-old in the motion picture, *St. Louis Blues*. His mastery of the piano and organ brought him the title "keyboard deity." In the 1960's, he was a regular on ABC television and, during his career, worked with Little Richard, Ray Charles, Aretha Franklin, Sammy Davis Jr., Gladys Knight, and the Beatles. Some of you have figured out that "Billy" is actually the famous Billy Preston, who sang or wrote a host of Top Ten pop songs. Perhaps his most popular song was entitled, *Will it go Round in Circles?* Here are the lyrics: "I got a song ain't got no melody. I'm gonna sing it to my friends . . Will it go round in circles? Will it fly high like a bird up in the sky?" Second verse: "I've got a story, ain't got no moral. Let the bad guy win every once in a while." Third verse: "I got a dance, ain't got no steps. I'm gonna let the music move me around." Again, he concluded each stanza with the refrain, "Will it go 'round in circles?"

Have those lyrics ever described your life? Did you ever feel like life was spinning you in circles and you simply couldn't make sense out of anything? Maybe Billy Preston got his inspiration to write that song from Solomon, because the book of Ecclesiastes also speaks of the circuitous spinning of life. In fact, Solomon, inspired by the Holy Spirit to write Scripture, actually makes some shocking statements about life. Let's read our text, and you'll see what I mean.

Ecclesiastes 1:1–8

Did you ever read Ecclesiastes and wonder how Solomon, of all people, could speak as he did? For years, I read Ecclesiastes and wondered how someone anointed by God could write words that contradicted other parts of Scripture. We understand that Billy Preston could say, 'life goes around in circles,' but Solomon? How could this divinely anointed Sage allege that life is empty and meaningless? It seems like Solomon takes his intellectualism and, with an air of cynicism, pokes holes in the great doctrines of the Faith.

That's why the skeptics and atheists love Ecclesiastes. They take passages that "seem" to deny the afterlife and that "seem" to promote the futility of life and use them to say they contradict our Christian beliefs. Let me show you what I mean:

> **Solomon opens Ecclesiastes by saying life is utterly futile.** In chapter one, he writes: *"vanity, vanity . . . all is vanity."* Vanity is "something that is empty and meaningless." And Solomon uses the word *vanity* thirty-three times in Ecclesiastes. That's what he meant in chapter 2:17 when he said: *"life is a [nothing but] chasing after the wind"* and then in chapter 3:19 he said: *"life has no meaning."* Those are strong indictments!
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> **But he not only said life was vain, but he also described it as a cycle of events that rambled without reason.** Look again at verse five: *"the sun rises and sets, then it hastens to its place and rises again. (6) [The wind] blows to the south, then the north . . . and along its circular course it returns"* — it's nothing but a futile repetition of events that never lead anywhere.
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> **He not only described life as rambling without reason, but he also asserted that man's destiny is no different than an animal's destiny**. Now that's an outright denial of the resurrection! Listen to his words in 3:20: *"[Man and beast] . . . all go to the same place."*

Those aren't statements you expect to hear from someone chosen by God to write Scripture! You even wonder how the Jewish scholars ever canonized Ecclesiastes as part of Holy Writ. Yet, once you closely investigate it, you discover it should, unquestionably, be included in the Bible. God had a divine purpose for inspiring Solomon to write these strange sayings and that's what I want us to examine.

Solomon's Purpose for Writing Ecclesiastes

As we seek this answer, we should remember something about Solomon. Besides Christ, Solomon was the world's wisest and most intellectual man. Listen to how 1 Kings 4:30 describes Solomon: *"God gave Solomon wisdom and very great insight, and a breadth of understanding as measureless as the sand on the seashore. (30) Solomon's wisdom was greater than the wisdom of all the men of the East and greater than all the wisdom of Egypt" [NIV].*

If you were the world's smartest and wisest man, what would you do with all that knowledge on behalf of mankind? With all that genius, what one question, which flows deeply within the hearts of men, would you seek to answer? This is what Solomon did! Solomon used the insight of a psychologist, the scrutiny of a scientist, and the logic of a philosopher to answer that one universal question that people ask: **What is the meaning of life?** And it makes perfect sense how he answered the question.

In the opening chapters of Ecclesiastes, Solomon disclosed the three primary ways people seek meaning in life. And he divulged this information by giving his personal testimony. He showed himself trying to find meaning in life by: (1) immersing himself in learning, (2) engaging in personal pleasure, and (3) by pursuing a career. Notice how he disclosed it:

First, he immersed himself in learning. In Ecclesiastes 2:17, Solomon said, *"I **set my mind to know wisdom**."* That's interesting because Solomon was wiser than the wizards of Egypt and more brilliant than the sages of the East, yet his soul remained void of contentment. That grand deposit of genius wasn't enough—he had to have more! So he explored the sciences and plumbed the depths of intellectualism.

Do you know what his conclusion was? He found that wisdom brought sorrow and knowledge brought grief (1:18). Instead of being invigorated by academia it drained him of true repose and even choked him with despondency. Ultimately, there was no real meaning to life through scientific or philosophic approaches.

With wisdom failing him, he became ego-centric and sought meaning by pursuing pleasure. The Bible says he amassed wealth beyond all the kings of his day. Along with capital he acquired lands, and constructed vineyards and gardens. Then, perhaps Solomon's most noted pleasure-seeking diversion was his sensuality. He amused himself with a huge harem.

What was his conclusion to these endeavors: *"I considered all my activities which my hands had done and the labor which I had exerted, and behold all was vanity and striving after wind and there was no profit under the sun" (2:11).*

So with wisdom and pleasure failing, he relentlessly pursued a career. He devised irrigation systems and masterminded architectural projects that were unparalleled in that day. He even built the magnificent Temple that was laden with gold and silver.

> But he discovered, like any workaholic, that when life ends, you leave your projects to another generation. You can't stay around to enjoy your labors forever. And how did he characterize his career pursuits? He did so with four words: *"This too is vanity" (15)*.

So what's the answer when you find that nothing on earth supplies the true meaning of life? What's the answer when life "goes round in circles" and nothing makes sense? Solomon offers several answers in Ecclesiastes that I want to consider.

(Transition) One suggestion he makes is that we live with a *proper perspective of life*. Fulfillment comes when we adopt the proper mindset.

Living with the Proper Perspective of Life

(Illustration) Sometime back a letter circulated on the Internet that purportedly came from a college student to her parents. It's a satire that helps us understand how *perspective* can transform an entire situation. Here's what she wrote:

Dear Mom and Dad,

> Sorry for not calling or writing lately. Unfortunately, my mobile phone and computer were destroyed by the dorm fire set by the demonstrators on campus. However, I've been discharged from the hospital, and the doctor says I should regain my eyesight within two weeks. A wonderful young paramedic, William, rescued me from the fire and has provided me with a room in his small apartment. He comes from a good family from Los Vegas. I know you'll be delighted to hear we are planning to be married over the Christmas holidays. Hope you can fly to Nevada for the wedding. We hope to have a child quickly because William has decided to rejoin the Navy and will be leaving for sea shortly thereafter. You've always wanted to be grandparents, and I'm certain you'll make great ones! —Love, Jill.
>
> **P.S.** Please disregard this practice in English Composition. There was no dorm fire, I'm not engaged, and I don't even have a boyfriend. However, I did get a D in Spanish and an F in Chemistry. I only wanted to present this information in proper perspective.

I wish I had possessed that communication skill with my parents when I attended college! Anyway, *perspective* is important to understanding life. That's why Solomon wrote Ecclesiastes in an enigmatic fashion. He scripted his words in a way that required us to decipher his message. Let's examine this technique Solomon employed.

(Transition) In order to understand how to live with the right perspective, we have to give special attention to two expressions Solomon uses. The expressions are *"under the sun"* and *"under heaven."* Each phrase represents a distinct perspective people use to view life. Let's look at the expression**, *"under the sun."*** It's repeated twenty-seven times:

Life "Under the Sun"

> Ecclesiastes 1:14 says: *"I have seen all the works that are done **under the sun**; and, behold, all [is] vanity"* [empty and meaningless].
>
> Ecclesiastes 2:17 that says: *"I hated life; because the work done **under the sun** is grievous . . . and vexation of spirit."*
>
> He said in Ecclesiastes 4:3 that the person never born is better off than men living ***"under the sun."***

How can Solomon make such statements? How can he say: *'life is vain and life has no meaning"* . . . and that life is empty and futile? There's something you have to remember; he's talking about life *"under the sun."*

(Definition) Whenever you read that statement *"under the sun"* it's a code-phrase that carries a cryptic meaning. **Life *"under the sun"* describes life apart from God.** It describes the attempt to find happiness and meaning without God in your heart. And when you understand this code language it deciphers Solomon's difficult statements.

> It makes sense when Solomon says: *"I have seen all the works that are done **under the sun**; and, behold, all [is] vanity* (1:14). When we work without God motivating us to work and working for His glory, we understand that all our labors are vain and without heavenly worth.

It makes sense when Solomon says: *"I hated life; because the work done* ***under the sun [that is, "without God"]*** *is grievous . . . and vexing."* No amount of labor or toil can bring you peace when it's done without God in your life.

It makes sense when Solomon says that the person never born is better off than men who live ***"under the sun."*** A person who refuses to let God in their life is restless and without true contentment.

When you understand Solomon's code language, you realize he isn't actually saying life is meaningless. He uses the phrase ***"under the sun"*** to assert that anyone living without God is "going around in circles." And that's what all Scripture testifies. Nothing in life brings satisfaction when it's devoid of God.

(Transition) And there's a good verse Solomon uses to illustrate this. Ecclesiastes 1:8 says: *"The eye is not satisfied with seeing, nor is the ear filled with hearing."* What do those two statements mean?

Human Desire is Never Satisfied

1. First, Solomon says, *"The eye is not satisfied with seeing."* Has anyone here seen so much that they're ready to have their eyes gouged out?

(Illustration) I want to illustrate this passage by referring to my beloved dad. For twenty years, my dad was a globetrotter, traveling to nearly every continent of the world. He was not just a mission director; he loved to explore new lands and learn about foreign cultures. He retired at age 75, but even in his 80s, he can hear about some beautiful place, thousands of miles away, and then tell me: "I sure would like to travel to that place and see that land." You see, despite his *youthfulness*, his "eye has not been satisfied with seeing." And even today, he loves watching the National Geographic channel, trying to see something more!

And he's not the only one who made this way. That's why people peer through telescopes and study the rings around Saturn. And as mesmerizing as those rings are we want to see beyond Saturn. We delight in seeing another luminous planet or star or even a galaxy that's billions of light-years away. Why? Because it's just as Solomon said: *"the eye is never satisfied with seeing"!*

2. Then Solomon said, *"Neither is the ear satisfied with hearing."* I've never heard anybody say: "I've heard enough. I'm ready for deafness—No more voices of loved ones; no more music; no more News." No! Our ears are always willing to hear more.

And there's a reason our eyes never tire of seeing and our ears never weary of hearing. **God created us that way!** He didn't want anything *"under the sun"*—anything apart from Him—to satisfy our hearts. That's why "enough" is never enough, and our earthly desires never satisfy. Only God can content the soul!

(Illustration) I heard the story of a young Wall Street entrepreneur who made a six-figure salary. He lived in Manhattan's swanky Upper East Side and enjoyed the luxury of being chauffeured to his New York office. Despite his opulent lifestyle, he wrote this:

> I've always felt that there must be something I could do of real tangible benefit. Trading futures markets does not have any real tangible benefit, in my opinion. I mean, it serves a purpose for the economy, but I don't think of myself as really doing a lot for society. I'm really doing it more for myself. I feel that there is a lack of purpose in my being. I don't understand why I'm here, and I don't really try to understand why I'm here because it would probably be futile. (Adapted from a message by Pastor Melvin Newland.)

Doesn't that young man sound like Solomon? That's how Solomon said we would feel if we tried to find meaning apart from God and lived *"under the sun."*

> Those who live *"under the sun"* get dismayed with the simple cycles of life, even when they have plenty!
>
> They get vexed by the endless repetition of rising early and working late, rushing home, and dealing with the family.
>
> The housewife can become disillusioned by the monotony of cleaning the house, changing diapers, washing clothes, preparing meals, and shuttling kids.

That's because life has no meaning when we live it apart from God—*"under the sun."* Again, Solomon's code-phrase makes sense. Life is like jumping through hoops. You grow up, go to school, get married, find a job, have kids, grow old, and then die. This is how

people living *"under the sun"* experience life. But there is another way to live. And Solomon employs a different code-phrase to show us how. Turn to Ecclesiastes 3.

(Transition) Instead of living *"under the sun,"* without God, we can live ***"under heaven."*** And it makes all the difference whether you live *"under heaven"* or *"under the sun."* Look how Solomon illustrates this.

"Life Under Heaven"

> *There is an appointed time for everything.*
> *And there is a time for every event* ***under heaven****—*
>
> *A time to give birth and a time to die;*
> *A time to plant and a time to uproot what is planted.*
>
> *A time to kill and a time to heal;*
> *A time to tear down and a time to build up.*
>
> *A time to weep and a time to laugh;*
> *A time to mourn and a time to dance.*
>
> *A time to throw stones and a time to gather stones;*
> *A time to embrace and a time to shun embracing.*
>
> *A time to search and a time to give up as lost;*
> *A time to keep and a time to throw away.*
>
> *A time to tear apart and a time to sew together;*
> *A time to be silent and a time to speak.*
>
> *A time to love and a time to hate;*
> *A time for war and a time for peace.*

Do you see what's happening? Christians experience the same cycle of events as non-Christians. They face setbacks, deal with stress, and suffer loss just like sinners. Christian moms have to change just as many diapers as any other mom. But the difference involves *perspective*. Life makes sense when it's viewed from a higher perspective—*"under heaven."*

Here's what living under the perspective of heaven means. It means that despite life's pain and perplexity, God has somehow interwoven divine order into it. We may not understand that divine order, but we know God is sovereign, completely wise, and has a master plan that works every event for His glory and our good.

I can't tell you how important it is that we understand this. When it comes to dealing with life's ambiguity, there may be nothing more important to understand than that God can take the most perplexing situations and restructure them for His glory. Romans 8:28 says: *"God works all things together for the good to them that love God."* When we understand this, it will calm us more than a bottle of sedatives or a dozen visits to the Psychiatrist.

(Transition) That brings us to the crux of today's message. How do we adopt that mindset to live *"under heaven"*? How can we trust that God is somehow mastering our lives from above and ordering *"all things to work for our good"?*

How to Live "Under Heaven"

There's a unique verse Solomon uses to answer this. Turn to Ecclesiastes 3:11. I'll warn you that at first glance, this verse doesn't seem to explain how to live *"under heaven."* It's not one of those self-interpreting Scriptures. You have to dig deeply to unearth Solomon's point.

Ecclesiastes 3:11 says: God *"has made everything appropriate in its time. He has also set eternity in the heart, yet so that man will not find out the work which God has done from the beginning even to the end" (NASB)*. Remember, this wasn't a self-interpreting verse. It's best understood when it's divided into three sections:

1. The first portion of that verse says, **"God *has made everything appropriate [beautiful] in its time."*** You know what my first reaction to that statement is? It's to disagree with it! There are some events that don't ever seem appropriate or beautiful. Sometimes life presents such cruelty that we can't imagine anything appropriate emerging from it.

> When I see babies born with diseases and die before they reach ten years of age, I have to be honest; I don't see anything beautiful about that.
>
> When I see horrific wrecks or national disasters or severe famines, I find it difficult to see beauty in these things.

It's hard to see beauty in murder and assaulting innocent people.

But if we make the choice to live *"under heaven"* and believe what Solomon said, the day will come when we will see that God makes ***"all things appropriate and beautiful in its time."*** The 'timing' may not be according to our schedule, but the promise remains: God will beautify all our circumstances and work them for our good. At some point—whether it's a month, a year, or a decade from now; or perhaps even when we reach heaven—we will eventually see how God *"made all things appropriate."*

Here is what God wants us to understand: God pledges to get **actively involved** on our behalf and order *"all things for our good."* That means we can know that regardless of how unfair or painful life gets, God is not inactive or AWOL. He is personally involved, and His wisdom, which is beyond our understanding, is vigorously working for our good.

God steps into every part of life—our successes, failures, the "good, bad, and ugly", and somehow ***"makes everything appropriate."***

He takes our times and seasons, weeping and laughing, dancing and mourning, gains and losses, and even on the international level, He takes war and peace and ultimately commands them to be appropriate and purposeful.

God is not merely capable of making all things beautiful; He does it! **He *"makes everything appropriate."***

This is what God does for those who follow Christ and "live under heaven." He works in our behalf and provides us with the confidence that He's working for our good.

2. But look at the second portion of Ecclesiastes 3:11. In order to live *"under heaven,"* we need to acknowledge that **God *"has also set eternity in the heart."***

I love that statement: **God *"has also set eternity in the heart."*** Not the mind; the heart. God has lassoed the boundless sphere of eternity and situated it into our innermost being, the deepest part of our life—the heart, and we literally pulsate with the consciousness of the hereafter.

When God says He ***"has set eternity in the heart,"*** He assures us that life is more than riddles, circles, and cycles. The hope of eternity insists that beyond the mayhem and confusion of this world, eternal purposes exist. One day God will recompense every loss, answer every question, heal every hurt, and comfort every insult. This is why God created eternity. It's the place where wrongs are righted forever. And your heart throbs with this eternal hope.

Notice what else this means. And it's the very reason I'm convinced there are no true atheists. Since God "has set eternity in the heart," it means no honest soul can deny that "something" exists beyond the bounds of this terrestrial sphere. Every self-professing atheist knows he's testifying against himself when he says, "There is no God! There is no afterlife!" because God placed the knowledge of eternity within the deepest recesses of all people.

3. Then there's the third section of Ecclesiastes 3:11. Yes, God sovereignly rules, and yes, eternity is in our hearts, but then Solomon says: ***"man will not find out the work which God has done from the beginning even to the end."***

At first glance, that sounds like an insult. Solomon says we can't figure out God's work. But it's the truth! "The ways of God are past finding out." But the question remains: "How does this statement show us how to live *'under heaven'* when it says we can't decipher or 'find out the work which God has done from the beginning to the end" Solomon is doing more than exposing our inability to figure out God's ways.

It's alright that we aren't omniscient and can't interpret His activity. Living *"under heaven"* doesn't mean we're filled with infinite knowledge and have instant answers. The Apostle Paul said we *"know in part."* But can you hear Solomon's cryptic implication in this statement? Even though we can't figure out the entirety of God's work, He promises this: God is working. He's moving on our behalf. And Solomon's silent suggestion is this: "Trust God, because God's designs are higher than ours. You can trust God regardless of life's ambiguity." And that's how Ecclesiastes 3:11 teaches us to live *"under heaven."*

Conclusion

(Illustration) Let me return to how I opened this message. It's ironic that someone like Billy Preston could write the song, "Will it go Round in Circles," because he was an incredibly talented individual who was raised in church. But his life didn't come without problems. In

his 50s, he battled kidney failure, underwent dialysis, and eventually received a kidney transplant. In 1992, he began a five-year probation sentence for "assault with a deadly weapon" and cocaine possession. In 1997, he began a three-year prison sentence. While there, he confessed to participating in an insurance scam.

Solomon warned us that life could leave us confused, empty, and hurting. And that's why he closed Ecclesiastes with a sober warning. I want to read the last two verses he penned. *"The conclusion, when all has been heard, is: fear God and keep His commandments, because this applies to every person. (14) For God will bring every act to judgment, everything which is hidden, whether it is good or bad."*

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