

West Valley
9/11/11

Life Ahead: Embrace It! Part One

Two weeks ago Shelly and I loaded up our van with most the worldly possessions of our middle son, Ryan, and drove down the highway to Northwest Nazarene University so he could begin college. Our oldest son, Sean, had already returned to NNU a week earlier to begin his junior year. This new road was a big change in Ryan's life and in our family. It's hard! I miss my boys when they are gone. I'm happy for them and proud of them, but I genuinely miss them. They are fun and engaging to be with. Granted, this change does have its positives, like being able to keep food in the house, and I like knowing that where I put my tools is where they stay. But the boys' leaving means change, and I don't like it. Our youngest son, Brenden, misses his brothers—he can't blame them when he does something wrong.

Seriously, though—think about it. We spent our boys' life preparing them for this moment. This has been our goal from the moment they were shoved into this world and smacked on their little bare behinds. We've been intent on raising them to be productive, contributing adult Christians. But when the time comes for them to leave—the very thing we've been planning for—it hurts. That's because we love our boys and we most definitely miss them. So does their dog, who lays on their beds and whines. The point is this: this is change we've anticipated and even planned for years, but *I don't like it*. Even though it's right, it isn't pleasant.

We all travel down the road of life and are confronted with steep hills, downhill runs, sharp turns and stops and starts. What we'd like to have is a nice, straight, smooth road. But the reality is that life is full of changes. You can't go far at all without hitting bumps or taking detours that seem like they go way out of our way. We cannot live this life for even a few minutes without having to deal with some kind of change. We can avoid it or we can accept it. We can deny it or we can drive it. We can complain about it or we can capture it. We can ignore it or we can embrace it. The question is not, "How can I avoid change?" The question becomes, "How can I benefit and grow from change, for my sake and the sake of others?" Change is inevitable, it's what we do with it that matters. Life is ahead. Don't run from it; embrace it!

All of life involves changes. We are in a three-part series designed to help us understand and deal with life-change, and we are going to do it from a book about change, called the Bible. If you think about it, the Bible is *all* about change, isn't it? The Bible *starts* with change. The fifth word in the Bible is a change word:

created. Change from nothingness to creation. In it are stories of change from cursed to blessed. Change from not being a people to being the people of God, of rejecting God to changing and getting back in favor with God. Change from death to life. Change from dark to light. Change from sinner to saint. Change from a broken down world to a brand new eternal world. The Bible is a book entirely about an unchanging God who always brings change, so honestly, it's going to be difficult for us to spend just three Sundays on this. Because *anytime* I preach it's about change, if I am preaching from the Bible. But here's why we are doing this: we've been talking all summer about some of the changes coming our way as a church, and it occurred to me that we haven't really talked about how to deal with change in our lives. Life is ahead—let's embrace it and get all we can out of it!

There is a famous passage in the Old Testament that talks about change. It's been quoted in poetry and was a hit song for the Birds in 1965. It's Ecclesiastes 3:1-15, and we are going to look at it today. We'll learn about the reality of life change: "For everything there is a season, a time for every activity under heaven. A time to be born and a time to die. A time to plant and a time to harvest. A time to kill and a time to heal. A time to tear down and a time to build up. A time to cry and a time to laugh. A time to grieve and a time to dance. A time to scatter stones and a time to gather stones. A time to embrace and a time to turn away. A time to search and a time to quit searching. A time to keep and a time to throw away. A time to tear and a time to mend. A time to be quiet and a time to speak. A time to love and a time to hate. A time for war and a time for peace. What do people really get for all their hard work? I have seen the burden God has placed on us all. Yet God has made everything beautiful for its own time. He has planted eternity in the human heart, but even so, people cannot see the whole scope of God's work from beginning to end. So I concluded there is nothing better than to be happy and enjoy ourselves as long as we can. And people should eat and drink and enjoy the fruits of their labor, for these are gifts from God. And I know that whatever God does is final. Nothing can be added to it or taken from it. God's purpose is that people should fear Him. What is happening now has happened before, and what will happen in the future has happened before, because God makes the same things happen over and over again." (Ecclesiastes 3:1-15, nlt)

While this is a famous passage of Scripture, and very poetic, it is often confusing to people. It sounds like it's a depressing statement about life. It sounds very fatalistic, doesn't it? Fatalism is the philosophy that all the circumstances of life have been predetermined by some unseen force and no matter what we do, we can't change them. It's a very depressing perspective on life. Fatalism resides in statements like "Que Sera, Sera, whatever will be, will be." Or, "You can't fight city hall," "There's nothing we can do about it," "why try?" Those are all

reflections of a fatalistic attitude. And that's what many people choose whenever they are faced with change of any kind in their lives.

But you don't have to dig very far below the surface of this passage to see that fatalism is only one of the attitudes on display that a person can choose; there *is* another attitude that is being demonstrated here. There are three points in this passage that I want to articulate today that will help us get a right perspective of how to deal with change in our lives. Let's start by looking at

1. The Tides of Time.

Time itself brings change; change from one second or minute or hour or day to the next. And you can't stop it. If you've figured out how to stop time, tell me because I'd really like to know how. Time keeps on rolling, in the words of that great classic rock band, Boston. And that alone is stressful (not the rock band—I mean the changing events of time is stressful).

Did you know that there is a psychological test you can take called the Holmes-Rahe Stress Analysis? Two psychiatrists, Thomas Holmes and Richard Rahe examined the medical records of over 5,000 medical patients as a way to determine whether the stress of change events might cause illnesses. They came up with a list of 43 change events, and gave them a point value. You check each one that applies to you within the last year, and then total up your score. If you have a total of 300 points or higher, you are at high risk for some kind of illness. It could be depression, or ulcers, or cancer, or headaches, or the flu—on and on. On that list is everything from the death of a spouse, which has the highest point value, to getting a parking ticket, which has the least. But what's interesting is that in between those two are numerous change events that we would consider to be positive things. Things like getting married or getting a promotion or a raise at work, getting pregnant, or even a holiday or a birthday. The point is that as the tides of time change in our lives, even the *good* changes result in stress in our lives. And the first eight verses of Ecclesiastes talks about those tides of time that bring good things and sometimes not so good things. We often have this unspoken goal that we want to always be happy; we want things to be peaceful and calm and pleasant. The reality is, that's not reality! There is a season for everything in our lives—good and bad. That's why the beginning of this passage says, "For everything there is a season, a time for every activity under heaven." So let's take a quick look at the tides of time listed in these verses. They are listed in "couplets," and it is a common Old Testament idiom or way to express the totality of something:

A time to be born and a time to die. The most momentous events and changes of human life start off the list. We typically get excited about the first, but spend much of our lives denying the second. Yet both are inevitable. Job, in the Bible,

rightly says, “You have decided the length of our lives. You know how many months we will live, and we are not given a minute longer.” (Job 14:5, nlt) Our days from birth to death literally are numbered by God.

The pain and grief of death is very hard, but it is inevitable. Our culture is terrible about accepting this. Author Steven James writes, “a commercial came on (TV) for life insurance. This guy walks onto the set all somber-looking and explains the benefits of their policy. Then he says I should sign up so my family will be taken care of “in case the unthinkable should happen.” Of course, by “the unthinkable,” he means “in case you die.” But the thing is, death isn't unthinkable; it's inevitable.” ([Sailing Between the Stars](#) (Revell, 2006), pp. 130-131)

From the moment we are born, we will experience change until the final one—and that is death. This passage and the rest of the Bible deals with this bluntly: “And just as each person is destined to die once and after that comes judgment” (Hebrews 9:27, nlt)

God knows this himself because he subjected his own Son to the tides of time: The Bible says about Jesus: “When the right time came God sent his son to be born of a woman” (Galatians 4:4, nlt).

The next three couplets deal with the creative and destructive aspects of human life; we change things by creating, healing, and building up, and we destroy things by uprooting or harvesting, destroying or killing, and tearing things down:

A time to plant and a time to harvest. A time to kill and a time to heal. A time to tear down and a time to build up.

I was fortunate to have grown up in the same town all my school years. The house my parents live in now, we moved into when I was about three. I went to Keizer Elementary school for six years, Whiteaker Middle School for two years, and then for 9-12th grade I went to McNary High School. Then I left for college, graduated and became a youth pastor, and worked in California and Colorado and Corvallis, Oregon. After several years of being away, I went back to my home town and drove the route that I always walked when going to grade school (uphill both ways, knee deep in snow). When I got to my grade school, it was gone. The entire thing! I had to check and see if I'd gone the right way. In its place was a parking lot and a grocery store. I didn't like that change, but that's progress, right? “A time to tear down and a time to build up.” The Bible acknowledges the reality of change. God uses the examples in these three couplets not as a list of specific events, but to show in general all the pursuits of mankind, both constructive and destructive, and to make the point that for all our effort, we really aren't in control. We can try to control things, but they still change. We can try to change things, but God is still in control. That's why the Bible says, “We can make our plans, but the LORD

determines our steps.” (Proverbs 16:9, nlt)

The next two couplets deal with the range of our changing emotions: *A time to cry and a time to laugh. A time to grieve and a time to dance.* The first pair refers to our private emotions (weeping and laughing) and the second two deal with our public emotions (grieving and dancing). These emotions change, and much of the time we have no control over them, depending on what is happening. Our emotions are sometimes private and sometimes public. When it comes to our public emotions, we are told in the Bible to: “Rejoice with those who rejoice, and mourn with those who mourn.” (Romans 12:15, niv) That way we can help each other. The truth is we all experience these changing emotions. I can remember when Shelly was pregnant. We would experience the entire range of human emotions in one trip to the grocery store in one aisle. She would get so excited because they had on sale the cereal we liked; she was almost giddy. We’d turn the corner and she would start crying. I’m thinking, “What in the world just happened? An aisle ago you were so happy!” She said, “They’re out of spaghetti noodles!” I don’t think I’m exaggerating, either!

But God is not manipulated by our emotions. People actually got mad at Jesus because they couldn’t manipulate his emotions. They said, “We played wedding songs, and you didn’t dance, so we played funeral songs, and you didn’t mourn.” (Matthew 11:17, nlt) *We* struggle even to control our emotions.

The next two couplets deal with the reality of change that happens in our relationships: *A time to scatter stones and a time to gather stones. A time to embrace and a time to turn away.* The phrase, “at time to scatter and gather stones” seems strange, but it refers to a couple of things, actually—one is referring to a marriage relationship where a couple draws close to each other in sexual intimacy, and then the time of physical intimacy is over. Another is that it refers to aggressiveness and then peace, like an army gathering soldiers and then the battle is over and they go their separate ways. Either way, it implies the changing times of passion in relationships.

The next two deal with the endless changes in our lives regarding our possessions: *A time to search and a time to quit searching. A time to keep and a time to throw away.* I remember moving from college to my first job. Everything I owned fit into my little Honda Civic. Then I got married and we moved, and it took a U-Haul. Then we had children and moved, and it took a moving company. I’m hoping we are on the downhill side of that mountain! What the Bible is doing here is acknowledging that as the tide of time changes, so does the amount of stuff that comes and goes with it, often which we have little control over.

The next two couplets deal again with our changing activities: *A time to tear and a*

time to mend. A time to be quiet and a time to speak. The last two pairs deal with the totality of our human experiences again, a kind of summary: *A time to love and a time to hate. A time for war and a time for peace.* Of all days, today we understand this one too well.

The point in *all* of this is that all these changes are a natural part of our human existence from beginning to end. But ultimately, we have to say to God what the writer of the Psalms said: “My future is in Your hands.” (Psalm 31:15, nlt) and in Proverbs, “We can make our plans, but the LORD determines our steps.” (Proverbs 16:9, nlt) These couplets sound fatalistic—this is overwhelming evidence of the changing tides of time in our lives and how little we control. No matter where we go, we will face changes; we will be hit with detours, stop signs, turns and twists and all kinds of inevitable changes.

To drive the point even further, the writer in Ecclesiastes then points out

2. The weariness of work.

He says, “What do people really get for all their hard work? I have seen the burden God has placed on us all.” (Ecclesiastes 3:9-10, nlt)

These two verses serve as a reminder of what the author said earlier in chapter two: “Anything I wanted, I would take. I denied myself no pleasure. I even found great pleasure in hard work, a reward for all my labors. . . . But as I looked at everything I had worked so hard to accomplish, it was all so meaningless—like chasing the wind. There was nothing really worthwhile anywhere. . . . I came to hate all my hard work here on earth, for I must leave to others everything I have earned. And who can tell whether my successors will be wise or foolish? Yet they will control everything I have gained by my skill and hard work under the sun. How meaningless! So I gave up in despair, questioning the value of all my hard work in this world. Some people work wisely with knowledge and skill, then must leave the fruit of their efforts to someone who hasn't worked for it. This, too, is meaningless, a great tragedy. So what do people get in this life for all their hard work and anxiety? Their days of labor are filled with pain and grief; even at night their minds cannot rest. It is all meaningless.” (Ecclesiastes 2:10-11, 18-23, nlt)

Again, the author isn't giving us any solutions; he's just saying that the fatalistic attitude would tell you that life is full of changes so there's nothing you can do about it, and all your hard work only makes you tired. It seems that God is a hard driving controller of life that we can't do anything about.

I remember when I worked for the Oregon State Police, I was talking with a Trooper about how God has a purpose for every person, and every single person is here to make a difference in this world. I thought for sure a police officer would

understand that—because they make a difference in this world every day they show up to work. They protect people and keep them safe, save lives, stop accidents from happening and are often the first ones on the scene when accidents do happen. But his reply was this: “You are too idealistic Mike. Here’s what life is: you work for 40 years doing something you don’t like, so that hopefully you live long enough to retire, so that you have time to finally do the things you do like.” That, my friends, is a fatalistic attitude. The point of these verses in Ecclesiastes is that life would *seem* meaningless and pointless; that we have all these changes in our lives, and even our work is just a lot of toil for no reward and no purpose. That is fatalistic.

Life would be pretty hopeless if we ended the story there. But then there is the last four verses: “Yet God has made everything beautiful for its own time. He has planted eternity in the human heart, but even so, people cannot see the whole scope of God's work from beginning to end. So I concluded there is nothing better than to be happy and enjoy ourselves as long as we can. And people should eat and drink and enjoy the fruits of their labor, for these are gifts from God. And I know that whatever God does is final. Nothing can be added to it or taken from it. God's purpose is that people should fear Him. What is happening now has happened before, and what will happen in the future has happened before, because God makes the same things happen over and over again.” (Ecclesiastes 3:11-15, nlt)

Now faith comes surging forward over the fatalistic tides of time and weariness of work. No matter what the complexities of life, it is a gift of God according to verse 13. We discover that a person is not only to simply enjoy himself but to do good in his life according to verse 12. Even though we can never understand all the work of God, according to verse 11, God’s plan is always dependable—nothing can be added to it or taken away from it, according to verse 14. We see in these verses that God is continuing his orderly action in all of the universe.

If you and I were only animals, we would be subject to the tides of time and the weariness of our work—meaningless, day in and day out, always the same, nothing we can do about it. But we are not mindless, soul-less animals. God has set eternity in *our* hearts! God has given us an awareness and an understanding of himself. He has placed his perspective within us. At our creation in the very beginning, God created us in his very own image, to be like him (Genesis 1:26). Here’s why that’s important: we are actually capable of seeing God at work in this ever-changing life!

Now with that in mind, here is something else that is interesting: in the part about God making things happen over and over again, there is a Hebrew word that is used there implies quickness, or rapidness. The word picture it would create for

the Hebrew reader, which is difficult for us to translate, is that the ever-changing events of life are like a rapidly running river; that God is the river that is rapid and fresh and running and shaping its course through this world and our lives. That means that we can either be dragged along, being pushed, shoved, dunked, and slammed against rocks, or we can jump into the boat of faith and take this exciting ride of life. One perspective is fatalistic. It is painful, frustrating, and out of control. The other is an exciting ride that takes you exactly where God wants you to go! You see, you can either choose a fatalistic attitude, or you can live in

3. The Power of Purpose!

Yes, life is ever changing. There is the time of tide and the seeming weariness of work. But, if you live your life in the Godly perspective of the purpose of God, you will find instead a life of power and meaning.

That's why the Bible says this: "And we know that God causes everything to work together for the good of those who love God and are called according to His purpose for them. For God knew His people in advance, and He chose them to become like His Son, so that His Son would be the firstborn among many brothers and sisters. And having chosen them, He called them to come to Him. And having called them, He gave them right standing with Himself. And having given them right standing, He gave them His glory. What shall we say about such wonderful things as these? If God is for us, who can ever be against us? Since He did not spare even His own Son but gave Him up for us all, won't He also give us everything else?" (Romans 8:28-32, nlt)

How do we deal with change? Either resign yourself to a fatalistic attitude and you will be dragged along by life, desperately trying to come up for air and avoid the big rocks. Or surrender yourself to God and live in the power of *his* purpose, so that God can use the changes of life to move your character and your life to the places of greatest worth, impact, and glory. That, my friend, is how you deal with change. Life is ahead; embrace change. Live as a person with purpose!

Prayer, Pastor Arden