

## CIRCUMSTANCES BEYOND OUR CONTROL, PART 1

Ecclesiastes 3:1-11 (NASB)

David Bruce Linn, Pastor-Teacher

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### I. JIM MAKES IT

Nate's nostrils flared with the smell of burning cordite explosive as he hunched down behind the sandbags surrounding his bunker. He hefted a shell to the muzzle of the mortar and waited a moment as his partner, Jim, adjusted the aim. Rivulets of sweat, partly from the heat and partly from the stress, rolled down his body and soaked his green fatigues.

"Now!" shouted his boyish-looking partner, tapping him on the shoulder at the same time. Nate dropped the shell into the tube and the powerful "thunk" of the launch shook his torso. He plugged his ears with his fingers. A few moments passed as the shell arced through the jungle air. Then came the explosion, followed by a spray of dirt, plant matter, and a boot with part of leg still inside. Then screams of anguish.

*Screams don't have a color, Nate thought. Your race or nationality doesn't matter when your leg has been blown off. Glad his momma isn't here to see this.* Nate knew the owner of the flying body part was probably alert, grabbing what remained of his leg with an intense focus on his life in this moment of time, watching his lifeblood flow into the soft earth where it would, perhaps, nourish a plant, or be licked up by an animal.

They had found the range. "Now!" Jim shouted again. Nate dropped another shell, "thunk," and another mother's son left the world.

They heard an ominous answering "thunk" from behind some far bushes. There was a brief sickening silence. The blast of a shell exploding just beyond their u-shaped bunker blew them forward over the sandbags in a shower of dirt. Someone else had found the range. When the immediate shock of the hit passed, Nate cried out to Jim and realized he was nearly deaf, his eardrums blown in by the concussion. He put his hand to his ear and saw blood. Nate's partner didn't answer and didn't move. A trickle of blood from Jim's scalp striped his neck and soaked through his collar.

Nate knew that the next incoming shell would kill them both, so he rolled Jim up onto his shoulders as he had been trained to do and tried to stand. A stabbing, breath-stealing pain in his left leg tore the breath out of him for a moment. He steadied himself on the sandbag wall. *It's walk or die!* Nate thought as he forced himself to stand with Jim draped across his neck. Half-limping, half-dragging his bleeding leg, Nate moved off into the jungle. A second blast, a direct hit on the bunker where he had just been standing, threw him forward onto his face in the dirt and into the blackness of unconsciousness.

The next thing Nate sensed was the brightness of the sun filtering through his closed eyelids. When he opened his eyes he realized he was on his back with other wounded men at the evacuation point. Two medics were scurrying from man to man making life-or-death triage decisions and performing critical interventions--blood flow stanching with pressure dressings for

some, shattered limbs splinted and placed in traction for others, and eyelids closed manually for yet others.

Nate heard one of the medics addressing him, muffled as if through layers of cloth. "How you doin', buddy?"

"My left leg..." Nate panted. "It hurts so much I'm going to pass out..." Without a word the medic opened a single-use morphine injection, pressed it into Nate's good leg, and moved off. A flood of relief flowed through Nate's system, and as he relaxed he began to review the events which brought him to this tropical clearing with shrapnel in his body.

He remembered he and Jim talking as they set up the shelling point. "You know we're not likely to make it through this one," Jim had said. The apprehension was evident in his voice.

Nate saw a crack in Jim's armor for the first time. "Well, at least I know where I'm going. What about you?"

Jim was more serious than Nate had ever seen him. "I've been avoiding that question for years... It all seems different from inside this bunker." He looked down, embarrassed, and began kicking the dirt with the toe of his boot. "Whuddaya gotta do?" They stopped what they were doing for a moment, and Nate remembered leading Jim through a prayer of commitment to Christ. He heard no angels sing, but it was done. And then came the shelling.

Nate rolled his head to one side on the ground and saw that he was lying right next to Jim. Jim's face was puppet-like and lifeless. Nate saw the black triage tag on Jim's body fluttering in the powerful wash of the evac helicopter's rotors. No one saw his tears, and no one could hear his cracking voice over the pounding noise of the great chopper: "Thank God, Jim-- we made it!"

## II. A TIME FOR EVERY EVENT UNDER HEAVEN

The author of the book of Ecclesiastes wrote that while we all like to think we can shape our lives to suit ourselves, circumstances beyond our control largely define our experience. He made such a comprehensive list that anyone who would disagree is silenced:

**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. (Ecclesiastes 3:1-8)**

Nate and Jim had discovered that they were caught in circumstances larger than themselves. The time of their lives was a time of war, a time to kill, a time to tear down, and a time to weep. For Jim it was a time to die, and for Nate it was a time to mourn. The last idea in those soldiers' minds was that they were in control of anything. They didn't ask for their country to be at war, or to be drafted, or to be assigned to the infantry, or to be sent in-country, or to be assigned to man a mortar on enemy lines. But that was the time of their lives.

Have you ever felt that way? I remember as a student always feeling like I was caught in a riptide of academic demands which dictated my life for long periods of time. I'm sure many of us feel that way about our jobs. Ministries can have the same feeling. Yes, you volunteered, but now you are part of a ministry machine which just keeps running and you must run to keep up.

Many people struggle with being there in the present moment of their lives. There is an old proverb: "Wherever you find yourself, there you are." It's a joke, but there is a touch of reality therapy in there. Many of us spend time thinking about either the past or the future, and how we wish we could live there. God says in the book of Ecclesiastes that the times of our lives move inexorably from one phase to another. We cannot live in the past or the future, and the attempt to do so wastes the only time in which we have to live: the present.

Have you ever been living your own life and had the feeling that you were in a movie? I often feel that way at weddings, funerals, awards ceremonies, graduations, and such events. It's almost as if I have already lived the experience, taken the photos, and am looking back on it even as I am living it. This is just a small touch of the awareness that life moves in great events over most of which we have no control.

When my wife, Barbara, and I were taking maternity classes for our first child we were warned that the pain of the transition phase of labor was so excruciating that it sometimes caused mothers to think crazy thoughts. I thought this was amusing until I saw my own wife in exquisite pain, and she was honestly suggesting that she be allowed to go home, get some sleep, and start again in the morning. No, for her it was a time to give birth, for my son it was a time to be born, and for me it was a time to love. None of us was free to take a breather. The same "stuckness" is true of every person, with different specific life situations.

### III. SURVIVING OUR CIRCUMSTANCES

While this reality might seem grim, God gave us some wonderfully encouraging words in the book of Ecclesiastes. He proves that he understands our situation in verse 9: **"What profit is there to the worker from that in which he toils?"** Yes, we are stuck in circumstances beyond our control, yes we must perform our duties in those circumstances, but at least God knows the question we all have: "Is this worth it? Is there some value to this, or should I just fall apart or quit?"

We all need someone to listen to us, who will quietly listen to us spill our minds and hearts, all the while giving us feedback that they are understanding what we are saying.

Sometimes we get so frustrated that we cry out: “What’s the point?!” The Lord tells us through Ecclesiastes that he is listening from heaven. If we quiet our souls enough we may be able to hear him reply softly: “I hear you.”

And then the Lord begins explaining to us how to survive our circumstances by asserting that the tasks associated with the times of our lives are given by God himself: **"I have seen the task which God has given the sons of men with which to occupy themselves"** (Ecc. 3:10). This knowledge is the first step out of the morass of meaninglessness. If the major efforts of our lives are just thrust upon us accidentally, then they mean nothing: work, marriage, raising a family, serving our community, or religion, for example. But if God has assigned these, then we are not just all waiting for Godot like the characters in Samuel Beckett's existentialist drama.

The play *Waiting for Godot* focuses upon two men on the side of the road waiting for a third man named Godot. The two men talk about all manner of things, they do different things which amount to nothing, and they spend the entire play just waiting. Godot never comes. It's infuriating! The playwright's argument is that life is lived on the way to somewhere we never reach, saying things which do not matter, performing deeds which change nothing, and waiting for someone who never comes. It is godless, meaningless, and hopeless. Many modern and postmodern people live in precisely that way. There are times when all of us feel that way.

But God says “No!” The tasks of life are part of great movements of humanity which have been crafted by God for his purposes. Even the homeliest tasks are matters of great moment in the plan of God. We are not just all waiting for Godot!

In fact, we have a precious promise given to us in the first part of the next verse: **"He has made everything appropriate in its time"** (Ecc. 3:11a). Other translations say "he has made everything beautiful in his (or "its") time. Why is everything beautiful in its time? Because God is working all things together for good to those who love him. God is shaping history and our lives in particular in harmony with his plan. And it is not deterministic—we are not puppets. God gives the framework and guides us through it by his word and his Spirit.

The first verse of the chapter says the same thing: **"There is an appointed time for everything."** And who is doing the appointing? Who sets the times and seasons? God himself rules the circumstances of our lives: **"Your eyes have seen my unformed substance; /And in Your book were all written, /The days that were ordained for me, /When as yet there was not one of them"** (Psa. 139:16).

What a relief for Christians to know that the student grinding away at studies, the worker at his or her labors, the mother at the unending tasks of motherhood, and the minister of Christ whose job description seems to have no boundaries are doing something which God has made fitting for its time. It is part of a divine plan with our individual names on it. The large circumstances which dictate our lives are not bleakly random, but are part of a beautiful plan.

And then comes the hard part. We are not given to know God's big plan: **"...Man will not find out the work which God has done from the beginning even to the end"** (Ecc. 3:11c). When we are caring for someone at the sickbed, or suffering from illness ourselves, or fighting a losing battle with our budget, or any of a million taxing labors we might be required to do, it can seem hard and even cruel that we cannot know what the purpose of it is. It is then that we must

take our refuge in the care of God for us. The only way we may find our way through such things is to remember his care for us and submit to his plan, even if it is different from ours, and maintain our hope in him through thick and thin

#### 4. CONCLUSION

Have you ever seen a cross-country horse jumping competition? A course is devised over a fairly large piece of real estate with all sorts of obstacles for the horse to negotiate. The horse and rider must get over bushes, boxes, fences, tables, water, and anything the course creators devise. The competitors are timed as they ride the course. What raises the stakes is that the horse is not allowed to see the course or jumps in advance. The rider walks the course, memorizing the turns and obstacles. When they finally begin their timed competition, the horse has an experience very much like we have as we go through life. The horse is totally dependent upon the rider to guide him over every obstacle, never having seen it before! Horses which trust their riders have a great time, and the others balk, run wide, and fall, often injuring themselves and their masters.

Are you willing to trust God and jump when he says "jump"? He knows the obstacles you and I face perfectly. **"Humble yourselves, therefore, under the mighty hand of God, that He may exalt you at the proper time, casting all your anxiety upon Him, because He cares for you"** (1 Pet. 5:6-7). It can be easy to doubt God in the midst of weariness of body, mind, and soul, but it is precisely at those times we must remember that his ways are not our ways and he knows the exact best thing we need to do.

No, we live in our times, we perform our tasks and duties with faith and the knowledge that God seeks the ultimate good of every believer in Christ, even when we cannot see how. Maybe Nate and Jim had to go to war so Jim could make it safely home to heaven. It may be that you are in a difficult situation so that God can change your destiny, or that of someone else.

I do not know all of God's big plan, but I know he cares for you. If you have not yet received Christ, don't you want to know that God is overseeing the circumstances of your life for your good? A simple prayer to confess your sins and receive his forgiveness can make it so.

God invites you to name your anxieties—the circumstances of life which make you feel trapped: finances, parenting, work, physical restrictions, emotional issues, loneliness, and losses of every sort. Instead of quitting or freaking out because of them, pray these declarations:

1. Lord Jesus, thank you that you care for me more than anyone I have ever met;
2. Lord, thank you that I can cast all my cares upon you;
3. Lord, I believe that you will exalt me at the proper time;
4. Lord, I choose to humble myself under your mighty hand;
5. Lord, I choose to jump when you say "jump";
6. Lord, thank you that you make all the times of my life beautiful according to your plan.

Amen.

[This message is an update and expansion of *Being There, Part 1*, originally preached in August 2002.]