

## CIRCUMSTANCES BEYOND OUR CONTROL, PART 2

Ecclesiastes 3:11-15 (NASB)

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### 1. FREDERICA FINDS THE FLOOR

The car pulled up to the curb of the busy Dublin street. Frederica and Gary, who were hitchhiking around Europe, stepped out and thanked the driver. The pillared St. Mary's Pro-Cathedral loomed above them, representing in architectural form the authority of the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Dublin. The weight of doctrine seemed bound up in the very stones.

It never bothered Frederica to think it odd that she, a lapsed Catholic and freshly-minted Hindu, would want to visit such a place. After all, who could visit Europe and not visit the cathedrals? Frederica felt neither the weight of Roman Church authority nor the guiding hand of church doctrine. Those were things she had erased from her conscious reality at the age of fourteen. No, the cathedral was just a neat place to tour, a piece of history, an expression of art and thought which every pluralistic mind should experience.

They crossed the narthex and entered the sanctuary, feeling the coolness of the stone all around them. They stopped at the last pew and their eyes rose up the fluted columns to the carved and paneled high dome. The feel of sanctity was in the air. What person could avoid a gut-level sense of the divine in a place like this? Frederica mentally cataloged these feelings with those she had experienced as she stood in the British museum at the feet of the gigantic Assyrian winged bull from the ancient palace of Sargon II. That's why intellectual, free-thinking Frederica liked Hinduism. It encompassed even this. Millions of gods were already in the mix, and Jesus was one of these, although a late-comer added by westerners.

Frederica and Gary divided to walk the outer walls beyond the rows of pillars, stopping to see the devotional art--paintings, carved Bible scenes, stained glass, and statues. Frederica thought back to the earnest people she had met who thought this stuff about Jesus was real. Usually, she ridiculed them behind their backs, but when it was good for a show of superiority, she did it to their faces. *Christians are weak and stupid, but at least they have some good art*, Frederica mused as she passed a painting of Christ dying on the cross.

More than once a vulnerable college student had spoken to Frederica about her new-found faith in Christ not realizing that she had just laid her head on the chopping block in the presence of the executioner. Frederica delighted to demolish the faith of these naive people: "Many cultures have myths of dying and rising gods," she would say. "Christianity is not even a particularly profound one. Jesus is a myth, and if believing in him makes you feel better, that's fine. But don't come to me with any junk about him being the only savior of the world. The world has lots of saviors, and people are free to pick the one they want--if they feel they need one. I don't."

In this frame of mind, Frederica walked the smooth stone floor to the next alcove, which contained a statue of Jesus. She examined the fine work of an unknown, dedicated sculptor. In a moment which seemed not to be a part of time at all, Frederica found herself on her knees. She knelt not before a religious statue, nor before ecclesiastical authority, nor even before the well-

told story of Jesus found in the Bible. In her inward self she sensed that she was encountering the very real person of the Lord Jesus Christ. Without there being any outward sound at all, she heard him say to her: *I am your life*.

No words could have hit harder or wrought a greater revolution in Frederica's life. She sensed, without fully knowing the consequences, that this moment marked an inward turn which would change everything for her. This Christ, whom she did not even think existed, had suddenly stationed himself among the cluttered furniture of her heart and mind. For the first time in her life she worshiped the One True God, Creator of the Universe, the only Savior of the world.

Time snapped back to normal. Frederica, got up, rubbed her knees, and tried to look like she was still browsing the religious art as before. She met up with Gary near the main altar. She looked at him, parted her lips, paused, and finally said nothing. How do you describe the intrusion of eternity? She did not tell him for a week.

## 2. BAD NEWS AND GOOD NEWS

The book of Ecclesiastes is filled with contradictions of all sorts like someone who is always saying: "I have good news, and I have bad news." Chapter three begins by telling us the bad news that we are caught in circumstances beyond our control: **"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"** (Ecc. 3:1-3). The chapter goes on to pound us with many more examples of circumstances which are beyond our control and builds to an emotional heart cry. If we are stuck like this, **"What profit is there to the worker from that in which he toils?"** (Ecc. 3:9). What good is all the work we do, all the effort of life, most of which is done dealing with things which are not of our making? Did you ever feel that way? Sometimes we just want the world to stop spinning so that we can step off--and go where? That's the point. We can't get off because there's no where to go!

Then the book of Ecclesiastes gives us the good news: **"I have seen the task which God has given the sons of men with which to occupy themselves. He has made everything appropriate in its time"** (Ecc. 3:10-11a). All the times and seasons of our lives are under the control of the Almighty God, and they fit beautifully into his great plan for all things. Life is not meaningless! Our work matters! We matter to God! This is great news indeed, especially for modern and postmodern people who are haunted by the fear that everything is really meaningless.

## 3. ETERNITY IN OUR HEARTS

The book of Ecclesiastes tells us that God has planted an inkling of eternity in our hearts so that when we are grinding away at the stuff of life we will know that we are connected to something vast, planned, and meaningful beyond our experience--beyond time itself: **"He has made everything appropriate in its time. He has also set eternity in their heart, yet so that man will not find out the work which God has done from the beginning even to the end"** (Ecc. 3:11). Because God has set eternity in our hearts, when we hear his call, like Frederica did, we say to ourselves: *I know this voice*. When God speaks our hearts want to answer.

The Frederica of my story is a real woman named Frederica Mathewes-Green and the story was an experience she had on her honeymoon in 1974. I heard her tell this story while I was studying at the C. S. Lewis Institute at Oxford University. She would be the last person to suggest that God speaks to everyone in that remarkable way. In fact, she likes to tell the story of the farmer who is trying sell a mule to a prospective buyer. The farmer does a great job explaining how excellent this mule is, and the buyer tries to lead the mule around and put him through his paces. The mule absolutely will not budge. So the farmer gets out a long two-by-four, winds up, and smacks the mule on the head. The buyer is amazed and distressed at this, so the farmer says: "Oh, yeah. First you have to get his attention."

Frederica says blessed are you if God does not have to get your attention with the same force with which he had to get hers! Ultimately, all of us encounter God simply by hearing the story of Jesus Christ. Through the good news God calls to us and the little implant of eternity in our hearts answers: *I know this voice*. A few of us need a two-by-four in the head! But then the act of the will to place our trust in Christ must come. Frederica could have chosen to reject her experience of Christ and remain a Hindu for life. We must all choose to believe at that moment of revelation or we will lose the opportunity. The devil steals the word of God out of the hearts of all who fail to accord it the worth it deserves, and the last state of that person is worse than the first. Don't miss your moment! In the middle of all we must do while stuck in our times God calls to us from eternity.

#### 4. WHAT TO DO WHILE STUCK

The book of Ecclesiastes contains wonderful practical advice about what we should be doing while we are stuck in our particular time. Verse 12 begins: "**I know that there is nothing better for them than to rejoice...**" (Ecc. 3:12a). We should seek to enjoy whatever we can and thank God for it. In every situation there is something to rejoice about. If we can find nothing in the earthly part of the situation, we can always rejoice in the fact that this earth is not our home.

Notice that this advice forces us to switch from the negative to the positive. Instead of focusing on our sadness and sorrows, God tells us to go on a hunt for the enjoyable aspects of every situation. Even if we are temporarily having trouble identifying those things, people who bump into us at that point will encounter a person on the hunt for joy. And we are far different people when we are joy-seekers than when we are stuck in neutral, moping and complaining.

The second part of the same verse tells us, while we are stuck, to seek to do good wherever we can: "**I know that there is nothing better for them than...to do good in one's lifetime...**" (Ecc. 3:12b). This tells us to get the focus off ourselves and onto the needs of others. Seeking to do good transforms every situation. It injects meaning into life for the believer.

I attended a huge Christian music and teaching festival in 1991 with my brother. I was blessed by the worship, teaching, and fellowship--with forty thousand of my closest friends! But what I remember most were opportunities I had to do good. By volunteering as an emergency medical technician I was able to reduce the cost of my ticket and get a better camp site. The medical facility for this temporary city in a farm field was staffed by one doctor, several physician's assistants, some nurses, a handful of paramedics, and some basic EMT's like myself. There was a never-ending stream of people needing assistance. The good that I was able to do is what matters most to me about that time. I always ask God when I travel for opportunities to do good for someone, ranging from giving directions to leading them to Christ. Often, those are the

most significant things about the trip. You see, the purpose of seeking to do good changes our moment in time by shifting us from being stuck to being empowered by God as servants of his kingdom.

Verse 13 tells us to appreciate what is good in our time: **"...Moreover, that every man who eats and drinks sees good in all his labor--it is the gift of God"** (Ecc. 3: 13). Even in difficult labors in difficult times there is some good to be appreciated. I think that Christians have sometimes been the worst at finding the good. It is good to be realistic about sin, but the great secret is that sometimes sinners do good things! There are pearls in oysters and jewels in the mud. An unbelieving artist may reveal something of God's glory in his or her work, as may people in any endeavor.

Evangelicals have been accused of going beyond hating sin and actually hating the world God made. We're said to be a bunch of pessimists who are hunkering down in our bunkers to wait for the return of Christ. In some ways this shoe fits us. The creation account in Genesis tells us that the world God made is "good," though fallen. The goodness has not been completely erased. But if there is any good to be found in this world, believers in Christ ought to be the first to find it and affirm it for the benefit of all.

Cambridge University is home of the Scott Polar Research Institute which is dedicated to the study of the harsh environments in the Arctic and Antarctic. It contains a museum of the history of polar exploration. On his final tragic journey Sir Robert Scott and part of his team froze to death. I was moved to read the actual diary of one member of the expedition who continued to write in his journal until his death. The journal did not say: "How sad for us! We failed our mission, we missed the pole, and now we are dying!" On the contrary, it was a man writing to his wife about how grateful he was for the privilege of accompanying Sir Robert Scott. He wrote that his wife should not grieve overmuch for him since they believed together in a God who does all things well. He wrote that his hope was set on Christ and that he was looking forward to their being reunited in the afterlife. The display in the museum pointed out that the journal was surrounded by shreds of burnt cloth where the explorer was evidently warming his fingers so that he could continue writing until the very end. If a man freezing to death in a canvas tent in sub-zero temperatures can find a reason to rejoice, if he can do some good by comforting his soon-to-be-grieving wife, and if he can appreciate that even in dire circumstances God does what is good, then surely we can do the same in much easier circumstances!

## 5. THE MOST IMPORTANT THING

The book of Ecclesiastes smacks us with the fact that we are caught in a world controlled by God's unchangeable and inscrutable workings, and then reveals the best secret of all: **"I know that everything God does will remain forever; there is nothing to add to it and there is nothing to take from it, for God has so worked that men should fear Him. That which is has been already, and that which will be has already been, for God seeks what has passed by"** (Ecc. 3:14-15). Here we have a window into how God thinks. Why has God set up a universe where humans are stuck in his workings? So that we will worship him. The word "fear" has the idea of having awe and reverence for God. This is what God is after.

Most of us react to being stuck in circumstances beyond our control by being frustrated and fighting harder to make them go our way. Dealing with God's immovability in this way will lead to anger and eventually depression because humans can never overturn the decrees of God.

Unbelievers experience God's absolute rule this way, but believers do sometimes also. I know because I have done it myself!

God gives us true wisdom here: "Don't fight, my child. All is being done according to plan. My will is best for you. You only are stuck with respect to earthly things. Actually, you have the greatest freedom of all--freedom from the law of sin and death." Our being caught like fish in the net of life should be a cause for worship. A healthy fear of the living God is a good thing.

So the next time you feel powerless, say: "Hallelujah! I am in the hands of the all-powerful God!" The next time you lack the knowledge to deal with some situation, say; "Praise the Lord! I am held in the hands of the One who knows all things!" The next time your day, or year, or life takes a turn you had not planned, do not say: "Woe is me!" Rather say: "Thank you, Lord, Maker of heaven and earth, that you have a plan for me that goes beyond my own." Can you see how this shift in perspective changes everything? Suddenly your pattern of decisions will swing into harmony with the reality of God in your life.

It is good for us to stop and appreciate the intention of God to bless us, as spoken in his words through the prophet Jeremiah: "'**For I know the plans that I have for you,' declares the LORD, 'plans for welfare and not for calamity to give you a future and a hope'**" (Jer. 29:11). Let the logic of this land on you like a ton of bricks. The circumstances of life beyond your control are under God's control, and if you are a believer, he is controlling them for your ultimate benefit! So let every experience of powerlessness drive you back to the arms of your heavenly Father to worship and adore him. Frederica found the floor--will you?

What two-by-four has God been using to get your attention? Have you even noticed? If you are not yet a believer in Christ you need to know that God has you trapped in the most frustrating circumstances imaginable. Even if you win the game of life by obtaining wealth, standing, or earthly pleasures, you are still faced with the question of eternity--an arena which is entirely beyond your control.

How do you get unstuck? Worship your heavenly Father. Receive the atonement of Christ for your sins by faith. Accept the sovereign working of God which caused your stuckness to begin with. Begin making decisions in harmony with that sovereignty. Then look for the joy of life, do the good which God has put in your heart to do, and trust that God's intention is to bless you. As the writer of Ecclesiastes wrote thousands of years ago: "**I know that there is nothing better...**"

[This message is an update of *Being There, Part 2*, originally preached in September 2002.]