

“The Race Is Not to the Swift”  
Ecclesiastes 9:7-11  
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W. Glenn Doak, Preaching

I bring you these words this morning from the little Old Testament book of Ecclesiastes which is tucked in quietly between Psalms, Proverbs and the following Song of Solomon. It has always been one of my favorite books of the 39 books of the Jewish scriptures. The author identified as Koheleth in chapter 1, verse 1 simply means to quote him, “One who speaks to the assembly or church, a preacher.”

Koheleth, his Hebrew name, I will grant at the start, has never really ranked with the great heroes of the church. He writes little about God; he knows less about faith. He does not strike the great chords of heavenly music. He had no instantaneous revelation to report, no vision in the temple, no dramatic flash on the road to Damascus. No angels bothered to speak with him. There was no pillar of cloud to lead him by day, nor pillar of fire to guide him by night. He made his own way through the desert and darkness, not quite so confidently as those who felt they were led; but he made his way through just the same. He was an honest man with ordinary faith, trying to figure out the world. Honest with himself. And, incidentally honest to God.

I like him. He records life as he himself saw it and lived it and learned it and sometimes loved it. If you read his book, you know where he stands and what he thinks. He does not hide his feelings under a cloak of holiness. He does not fill the air with gentle soothing words, meant for your comfort. You realize that he is not saying anything for the convenience of his friends; he is writing out of the conviction of his soul.

He too saw trouble in the world. He too, saw a disparity between what he thought was right and what actually was going on all around him. People who should lose ... win. People who can't lose ... do. He looked around and didn't like what he saw. But he refused to gloss over it. He was not content with what he had read about how God has a purpose and a plan for everything. If he does, what on earth or in heaven can it be?

The Preacher's answer, though falling far short of the pinnacle of Biblical faith, is genuinely his own. I suppose Isaiah does it better, to say nothing of St. Paul. In our better moments we can believe with Paul that God works all things together for good; but most of the time we belong to Koheleth, with the man who says, “I'm sorry if it is inadequate. But I can't fake answers anymore. I won't pretend to be more than I am.” He says it this way—not that it should be, not that it's right or wrong—it just is! That's all I know.” “. . .The race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, for time and chance happen to them all.”

Now I know those words probably don't play well in a community where there is an emphasis on the fast and the strong. Why do you think 95,000 people show up at the football stadium seven Saturdays in the fall? It isn't to watch a slow and weak team play is it? “The race is not always

won by the swift or the strongest!" But the coaching staff can recruit the best athletes and train them wonderfully and yet they don't always win the prize do they?

This man, who is barely worthy of canonization, may finally and presently be worth as much as all the rest. The classical cynic makes some sense. Look at the significance of what he has really said. We all know that strange things happen, that success and failure seem often interchangeable, that a whole life can depend on a single moment, that the tiny line between defeat and victory is often crossed and re-crossed a dozen times. The difference is that most of the Bible attributes the ups and downs, the sideways too, to the Will of God, part of an all-knowing plan and design.

Koheleth says, "Not so. It is plain and simple bad luck. No design, no pattern which must be followed, no possibility of prevention. It is Time with a capital "T" and chance with a capital "C". It is something which we dare not define as beyond the reach of God, but which as we know it anyway, appears to be." Koheleth says that life runs its course. There is a time to live and time to die, a time to weep and a time to laugh, a time to mourn and a time to dance, a time for war and a time for peace. A time for everything under the sun. And when the time comes, bitter as it may be, we can but acknowledge that it is here, and yearn for the day when it will pass. But he won't blame it on God.

The argument, I suppose, will never be settled. All we can hope to do is to state it again and wait for a future solution. But, for the moment look with me at life through the eyes of Koheleth. He is right this far: sometimes the race is not to the swift. That much is surely true. The fastest runner does not always win. He slips or trips and falls, or drops the baton. He tires himself out in practice when it does not matter. He reaches his peak condition long before the main event. Or he has what sporting enthusiasts call a "bad day."

You know that much is true in life as well. The best qualified do not always win the prize. They too trip and fall. They too drop the baton of existence as it is passed from one generation to the next. Along the way some careless moment, some unfair criticism, some unpopular stand disqualifies them from the race. They too have bad days. You have seen those wrecks on the heap of humanity; how they burned themselves out, how they ran hard for a short distance but never finished the race. Nothing is more pitiful than to watch a great person lose their greatness, or to watch a young man or woman with the whole wide world before them, throw it all away. It is also true at the depths of life as well. The most deserving are not always the most favored. Rain of disappointment fall on the just and the unjust alike. Too many times they seem to fall heaviest on the best. How can you make sense out of a life where great voices that should rule the world are silenced, and the murmurings of the discontented live on? Maybe that is where Koheleth makes the most sense. Grant that God could turn the tables on tragedy. Grant that strong souls can come out of it stronger still. But wouldn't it be better, this one man wants to know, if it would never come at all?

Come with me for a moment; you supply your own illustrations, as I share a few of mine, regarding how time and chance happen to us all. For example, I had a political friend who was a US Congressman. He served for eight terms. He was starting to become a national figure when Bill Clinton ran for the White House in 1992. David was thinking of his own presidential run and

at the convention in 1992 there were signs with his name on them for 2000. He said to me, “I don’t need anything it embarrasses me when I see how much people lack. I have it right where I want it.” I said, “That’s great. You have it right where you want it?” But, then he lost a race for the US Senate. He lost the race and his place. None of the pundits could figure out what happened to him. He just disappeared from the political landscape. Koheleth would say, “The race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, but time and chance happen to us all.”

Next, some time ago I read about a 17 year old Israeli girl, a high school senior named Rachel, who went to the local market in Jerusalem to buy some groceries for the family’s Sabbath eve dinner. Her mother’s grocery list was in her hand when they found her. At the same time, another high school senior, an 18 year old Palestinian girl name Ayat who lived out near Bethlehem, was on her way to the same supermarket. Maybe you remember the story? When Ayat was stopped for a security check at the supermarket entrance, the bomb that she had strapped around her waist without even telling the man she was engaged to lest he try to stop her I guess ... the bomb went off. Of course it killed her. But sadly it also killed Rachel Levy who by bad luck was accidentally there at that moment. How sad. Now ... I hope no one within the sound of my voice would want to say that God was responsible for the death of Rachel. Surely you would say it was caused by the hate and horror and separation of two different worlds. Koheleth would weep, “Time and Chance happens to them all.”

Then one of my dearest friends died. I still can’t believe he is gone. He was healthy and happy and loving, active in church and community. A great husband, good children. But then on a trip to Washington D.C. he developed severe headaches. Jokingly he told me, “I thought it was because of all the political bad air in Washington!” But then the diagnosis came back, brain tumor. Sure he had smoked for a time in his life but he gave that up fifteen years ago, he exercised every day, lived a good balance life. He had good treatment, went down to M.D. Anderson in Houston for a course of therapy. I went to see him on a vacation trip and he could barely lift his head from the pillow to shake my hand. Then he was gone at 43. Do you think God took his life? What happened? Cancer took his life. Koheleth would weep and say, “Time and Chance happen to them all.”

Which brings us to Jesus ... whoever had more right to a perfect, long and happy life than he? But what happened? He was up home in Nazareth, taking care of his mother and God said, “Time’s up, we are leaving here.” Jesus said, “to where, Lord?” “Just come. I will show you. They will be mean to you. You will suffer abuse and be rejected ... for my sake. In the end they will hang you on a cross.” So he wandered in the wilderness, the towns and cities, until it was time to walk up the Hill of Calvary: “Why Lord? Why me?” Was the cross time and chance or was it part of God’s plan? I don’t know what Koheleth would say. I know he would weep.

It’s time to go. But, we need a moment more, as we turn toward home. My professor of preaching, David Buttrick would say, “Now that you have lavishly laid out the problem ... what do you want us to do about it?”

**One, we have** to realize that life is intended to be this way: time and chance happen to us all. Life is not laid out on a computerized map, which takes us directly from one point to another. What was true with our Lord is also true with each of us. At each intersection of the road, we

need to pause in thought and prayer and say, “Lord, show me the way and send me people to direct me. Help me to endure or enjoy the surprises of life, good and bad. “For the days and decades too swiftly fly.”

**Two, we need** to keep on going anyway. If life is not worth living, what else are you going to do with it? What is hidden now will one day be made know. You can count on it. Time and change do come, but that does not mean God is gone.

**Three, you need** to be sure that you are following the one who knows the way. In strange and unfamiliar territory you need a guide. I pray that you and I will learn to follow. Christ knows the way.

So, take a moment before we go: say a prayer for yourself. Let the others wait ... this one is for you. You have your plans. But it could be that Christ is already knocking on your door. Offer a prayer something like this, “Give me peace within and joy without. Make me worthy of the one who died for me. In all the changes of time and chance in my life; still, I live in your time, I live by your power.” Amen.