

Introduction

David Franko relates a popular Jewish folktale called "**Solomon's Ring.**" It goes like this. One day, King Solomon commanded his most trusted minister, Benaiah Ben Yehoyada to find and bring him a ring that had magical powers. "**If a happy person looks at it, he becomes sad,**" Solomon told him, "**And if a sad person looks at it, he becomes happy.**" Solomon knew no such ring existed, but commanded what he did to give his minister a taste of humility. Six months later, however, Benaiah returned with a ring he had purchased from an old merchant. This ring, he told the king, did just as he said. It made a happy person who looked at it sad and a sad person who looked at it happy. Skeptical, Solomon took the ring, but realized when he saw the words inscribed on it that it did just that. Those words were, "**This too shall pass**" and that's what I'm going to preach about today.

The Proposition

Ecclesiastes 3:1-8 is one of the most pleasingly descriptive passages in the Bible. It describes the different rhythms that occur in our lives and a variety of actions and moods they prompt. There is a gentle ebb and flow here that carries us from one action or experience to another that is its opposite and then back again. So, a domestic relations client of mine married – joy. Her husband then divorced her for another woman – sorrow. She then remarried, a better man – joy again. That illustrates verses 1-8 and two propositions or truths they imply.

One is that we dance to many tunes not of our own making. Many people think they're the masters of their own destinies. They think they're in control of their lives and how they will go. That is partially true, but not wholly true. There are other masters of their destinies: time and a host of outside factors and forces they can't manage or run. Those factors and forces can move them to one kind of action or experience now and to its opposite later.

A devoted Christian I knew graduated first in her high school class one week. It was a time to dance or celebrate, verse 4. A drunk driver crashed into her car the next week, putting her in a permanent coma. It was a time to mourn. We do dance to many tunes not of our own making.

Verses 1-8 imply a second proposition, which I'm focusing on today. It's that nothing we do or experience in earthly life is permanent. Everything we do or experience is transient or temporary instead. That's a fact whether it's problem or opportunity, sickness or health, success or failure, heartache or joy. It shall pass. It comes and goes. It begins and it ends. There is only one exception to that, friendship with Jesus.

We all know it firsthand. I began playing organized baseball in 1959. I quit playing it in 1974. I began raising my sons in 1977. I quit raising them in 1996. In 2013, my wife had cancer. In 2016, as far as we know, she doesn't. You get the point. Sooner or later, in one way or another, every action and experience of ours shall pass.

That's the truth and its implications are life-defining. Abraham Lincoln identified those implications in an 1859 speech to the Wisconsin Agricultural Society. He explained the proposition that this too shall pass. He then declared, "**How chastening in the hour of pride! How consoling in the depths of affliction.**" Those are the implications, both of which we need to understand and live out.

The Proposition Chastens

First, that this too shall pass is chastening in the hour of pride. The hour of pride refers to the time of prosperity and/or success. We're young, good looking, and healthy, graduate summa cum laude, acquire a six-figure a year job, expand our business, get a promotion and raise at work, win an election, marry the person of our dreams, and on it goes.

Let me quickly say there isn't anything wrong with pursuing and achieving any of those things. But they are dangerous. Chuck Swindoll explains how they are in his book *Come before Winter*: "**Precious few are those who can keep their moral, spiritual, and financial**

equilibrium while balancing on the elevated tightrope of luxury and success. It's ironic that most of us can handle a sudden demotion much better than a sizable promotion." Swindoll rightly recognized the danger of prosperity and success. Few professing Christians remain spiritually, morally, and economically faithful to God in the midst of it. Two texts explain the dynamics of why they don't.

One is Psalm 30:6, which records King David's own personal testimony, **"Now as for me, I said in my prosperity, 'I will never be moved.'"** He thought what many prosperous or successful people think. They'll never be moved. Their prosperity or success is written in stone. It's permanent. They're prosperous or successful now and always will be.

Deuteronomy 8:11-14 identifies the posture to which that point of view leads: **"Beware that when your herds and your flocks multiply, and your silver and gold multiply, and all that you have multiplies, then your heart will become proud."** That warning reflects human nature. Prosperity or success routinely induces people to think more highly of themselves than they ought to think. They become proud.

Those two texts together are a caveat. They warn us that good circumstances and careless outlook are seldom far apart. Pride is a common traveling companion of prosperity and success.

But prosperity and success shall pass. We need to grasp that they're written in sand not stone. They have life spans. They come and sooner or later, in one way or another, they will go.

Consider the dramatic case of Lee Atwater. Atwater was the epitome of success. He was young, good looking, healthy (an avid runner), an accomplished rhythm and blues player, a dynamic speaker, manager of George Bush's winning 1988 presidential campaign, and, his lifelong dream, Chairman of the Republican National Committee.

Remember what I said. Good circumstances and careless outlook are seldom far apart. As Atwater himself wrote in a February 1991 Life Magazine article, **"I was one cocky guy."** He was so cocky and ruthless in fact that he was called **"the bad boy of Republican politics."**

But it all passed. In 1990, while speaking at a campaign rally, he collapsed and was soon diagnosed with an inoperable malignant brain tumor. Within several months, swollen beyond recognition, he lost his health, looks, ability to play the guitar, and the one thing he valued most of all – the chairmanship of the Republican Party.

And it humbled him. Atwater became a different man. In the Life Magazine article, he admitted how wrong he had been. He became a Christian and apologized individually to the many he had hurt. Shortly before he died, he attended a party his friends threw to honor him. Confined to a wheel chair and almost too weak to speak, he softly uttered the last words that he'd ever say in public, **"I love Christ."**

Atwater's experience is instructive and we need to learn from it. This too, prosperity and success, shall pass, which is challenging, humbling, in the hour of pride.

The Proposition Consoles

But it's consoling in the depths of affliction. We all know what affliction is by experience: unemployment, financial difficulties, a physically or psychologically ill child, a colicky baby, cancer, arthritis, a law suit, a life-disturbing neighbor, an unfair teacher, and so on.

The problem with afflictions like those is that they seem like they're never going to end when we're in the middle of them. They seem like they're going to last forever. That's how we usually feel at least. Some years ago, a mother talked with me about her chronically depressed adult son. He had just tried to kill himself for the third time. Sitting outside the psychiatric ward, she cried out, **"There's just no light at the end of this tunnel."** We've all felt that way haven't we, like there's no light at the end of the tunnel – that the darkness will last forever.

But it won't. In 2 Corinthians 4:17, Paul calls all earthly affliction **"momentary"** and in 1 Peter 5:10, Peter says that our earthly suffering is **"for a little while."** Those verses remind me of a story that author Barbara Johnson told. A woman with serious problems told her what her

favorite saying in the Bible was, **“And it came to pass.”** Barbara looked at her quizzically not knowing what she was talking about. So, she explained: **“Just think, all of this I’m going through could have come to stay.”** She did misinterpret the meaning of the saying but what she concluded from it is true. The afflictions that we go through come to pass not to stay.

A little exercise fleshes out that reality for us. Thoughtfully make a list of the 10 worst afflictions in the entirety of your life. Then make a second list of those that have passed. I’d make two observations.

One is that if you’re a typical person, most of the afflictions on the first list are also on the second. My wife’s post operative infection and then chemotherapy treatments are #1 and #2 on my first list. They were hideous. They’re also on my second list. They’ve passed.

Another observation is that the afflictions on your first list that aren’t on the second eventually will be. One on my first list, for instance – my separation from my mother who died – isn’t on my second list. But it will be – when I die. I’ll be reunited with her. It shall pass.

There’s no doubting it. Our afflictions come to pass not to stay. That’s a fact and it’s consoling, heartening, in the moment of affliction.

Now let me sum up the proposition we’ve learned in verses 1-8. This too shall pass no matter what the **“this”** is. That it will is chastening in the hour of pride. It humbles us. And it is consoling in the depths of affliction. It heartens us.

But it does only if we do two things. First, believe that this too, whatever the **“this”** is, shall pass. We believe it by understanding it and we understand it by reflecting on realities that reflect the temporal nature of things. Second, we perceive, interpret, and experience everything as if that’s true. We don’t obsess with it, but we do keep it enough before us that it conditions how we think, feel, will, and act. We make it a backdrop of our minds.

The Exception

Now

Conclusion

The story is told of a Persian monarch who charged his wise men with a task. Bring him a sentence that is always true at all times and in all situations, good or bad. He'd have their heads if it wasn't. The wise men consulted with each other through the night and the next day presented the king the sentence. You can guess what it was, **"This too shall pass."**