



THE FIRST WORD

FROM FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH OF BONITA SPRINGS

Finding Eternity in the Heart

SERMON BY REV. DOUG PRATT ■ FEBRUARY 12, 2017

Solomon the Truth-Teller

Most of us just react to life as it comes to us. But in each generation there arise those rare individuals who aren't content with that. They have a passion and an intellectual hunger to know why, to figure out the great mysteries. And as they are our trailblazers through the wilderness, we can follow in their footsteps and discover the paths they reveal to us.

One of those trailblazing thinkers in the ancient world was none other than King Solomon. Blessed with wealth and power, political success and popular acclaim, he was nonetheless not content to just enjoy the good life. He wanted to explore its deeper meaning, utilizing the remarkable intellect God gave him—so much that he was known to be the wisest man of his generation.

Solomon wrote a profound book called “Ecclesiastes” (based on the ancient word for Proclaimer or Revealer or Truth-Teller). He sets out to reveal mysteries of life and its significance. As we come to chapter 3, this great thinker is pondering about the rhythms and seasons of life—the reality that we all have discovered. Nothing stays the same; everything is in change and flux and repeating cycles. But in the midst of this swirling variety, Solomon detects a clue that there may be something permanent and unchanging—and that there may be a hunger within each of us to find and latch onto that rock of stability. Let's read these wise words.

There is a time for everything,
and a season for every activity under the heavens:

²a time to be born and a time to die,
a time to plant and a time to uproot,
³a time to kill and a time to heal,
a time to tear down and a time to build,
⁴a time to weep and a time to laugh,
a time to mourn and a time to dance,
⁵a time to scatter stones and a time to gather them,
a time to embrace and a time to refrain
from embracing,
⁶a time to search and a time to give up,
a time to keep and a time to throw away,
⁷a time to tear and a time to mend,
a time to be silent and a time to speak,
⁸a time to love and a time to hate,
a time for war and a time for peace.

⁹What do workers gain from their toil? ¹⁰I have seen the burden God has laid on the human race. ¹¹He has made everything beautiful in its time. He has also set eternity in the human heart; yet no one can fathom what God has done from beginning to end.

Ecclesiastes 3:1-11

Finding a Path to God

How does a person who was raised in a passionately anti-Christian environment, and who has gone through the education and indoctrination process in another religion, possibly become a follower of Christ? And furthermore, how could such a person who is also shaped and impacted by the secular education process of their day and its philosophy, and who is also clearly informed by family and friends that if they were to embrace Christianity they would be defecting to the enemy of their heritage, possibly make the choice to place their trust in Jesus and proclaim it publicly? It would seem a human impossibility. But it happens.

I am fascinated and puzzled and awestruck by witnessing such a process occur in another person. Although my parents were not dedicated Christians and did not take me to church weekly nor teach me

God's Word nor model for me a life of prayer and faith, and although I was the first one in my immediate family to find his way to the Lord, yet my journey was nowhere near as daunting and challenging as others. When I did choose to place my faith in Jesus and began to share this with my family and friends, I was not met with rejection or derision, nor did I have a heavy price to pay socially. While my formal education through college was not based on a biblical worldview, I was given the freedom to think clearly, and was encouraged to read the Bible and use it as my lens for viewing the world by my mentors in the faith. So my path was a relatively easy one.

Less than two weeks ago, prominent national journalist Kirsten Powers (*USA Today* columnist and CNN commentator) personally shared her story with us at the Bonita Christian Forum. Raised in a home and an academic environment of skepticism and agnosticism, she was working in Democratic machine politics in Manhattan. As she acknowledges, the only things she knew about the Christian faith were what she read in the *New York Times*. And then a dramatic change began, and she is now an openly professing Christian—to the surprise of many of her secular friends and colleagues.

My amazement at those who have traveled a much harder road led me a few years ago to the autobiography of a young American Muslim named Nabeel Qureshi. In his best-selling book, "Seeking Allah, Finding Jesus," he describes a most arduous and courageous journey. Every barrier imaginable stood between Nabeel and finding his Savior. The path he took required that he apply his rigorous intellect to the careful study of the Quran and the Bible, the different worldviews of Islam and Christianity, and their historical reliability. A year ago he shared his story with us at the Bonita Christian Forum. His brilliance and his passion left an indelible impression on many of us.

With the same curiosity and wonder I was drawn recently to a newly-published book by a best-selling novelist and screenwriter named Andrew Klavan. Andrew has made millions with several series of critically-acclaimed mystery novels—more than two dozen in

print. Scripts he has written have been made into films by Clint Eastwood and Michael Douglas. His essays and columns have appeared in the *Wall Street Journal*, the *New York Times* and the *Los Angeles Times*. A native of New York, he currently lives with his wife in Southern California. To the shock of his readers, his Hollywood-insider friends, and literary acquaintances he released a book a few months ago entitled: "The Great Good Thing: A Secular Jew Comes to Faith in Christ."

Here's a quick summary of his story. Andrew grew up in a Long Island suburb in the '50s and '60s. His parents were proudly Jewish, but didn't really believe in God or worship Him. He was forced to go through the training and the Bar Mitzvah process because it was socially expected, but it meant nothing to Andrew. To his family, Jewishness was their tribal identity—and Christians were the hostile enemy tribe. His father was at times emotionally abusive and volatile, his mother was detached and distant, and young Andrew craved an escape from his stifling family environment. He was a gifted writer with a high IQ, and as soon as he could he fled across the continent to college at Berkeley, where he was quickly sucked into the radicalism and agnosticism of his new friends. After fits and starts in his career, his literary efforts began to take off.

Andrew gradually turned away from alcohol and promiscuity, settling down to marriage and parenthood and writing each day with prodigious output. His bank account and reputation grew dramatically. New doors in the publishing world and in Hollywood began to open to him.

But all was unsettled inside. He couldn't stop his searching for something (or Someone) to give meaning and purpose to the seeming pointlessness of human experience. He flirted with Zen for awhile, but found that he couldn't work hard enough to achieve the "total consciousness" he was supposed to find. He went into extensive Freudian psychoanalysis. He moved from city to city restlessly.

While Nabeel Qureshi's search for truth led him into a careful study of the truth claims of the Quran and the Bible, Andrew Klavan's quest took him through the great works of western literature.

He read the entire Bible—purely as literature—and was struck repeatedly by the power of the stories of Scripture, culminating in the story of Christ (the One to whom all the Bible pointed unmistakably). The more Andrew read other literature, the more he realized that the Bible was really THE Story of mankind, and all other works were just reflections or imitations of it.

After his gradual intellectual conversion to seeing the undeniable truth in the pages of Scripture, and the way it alone made sense of the human experience, Andrew then underwent an emotional and spiritual conversion. He decided for the first time in his life to try to pray. It felt good, different, peaceful and energizing at the same time. He did it the next day, and the next—even though he still wondered if Anyone was listening. But the impact inside of him was real. He found a joy and a perspective. He began to pray not just to God the Creator but to Jesus the Savior. He found that acknowledging his personal guilt and asking for forgiveness made his spirits soar.

Soon after this inner awakening, Andrew's father was diagnosed with a serious cancer and declined rapidly. Just after his father's funeral, he decided that the time had come to be baptized as a Christian. The reality of how short and uncertain human life is, confirmed by watching the dying process, convinced him that the only true comfort for the pain of this world must come from *outside* this world.

Insights from a Modern Journey to Faith

I'm grateful to Andrew Klavan for opening up the top of his brain and letting us look inside. And as I've been pondering and re-reading the critical sections of his "spiritual autobiography," I've come away with these insights.

- ♦ There are many paths to faith, many ways to travel that lead us to a relationship with Christ. Andrew's journey was not mine. And yours was probably not exactly like either mine or his. That's why, as a pastor, I don't want to apply a simplistic formula to anyone. God has His own plan to reach each of us.

- ♦ Pain and trials and sorrows can point the way to God. An inner distress can keep us from settling for anything less than what our hearts were created for: to know God and be reconnected to our Source. Some have called it the “God-shaped” hole in our soul; nothing else quite fits—not money, fame, success, or pleasure.
- ♦ All of life, including literature and art, music and drama, science and nature, history and philosophy, can point the way to the ultimate Source of meaning. The great Solomon recognized this when he wrote in our text, “He has also set eternity in the human heart.” Andrew Klavan the mystery writer is careful to plant clues within the story he crafts to lead us to the solution; in the same way God the author of creation has left clues everywhere to guide us to Himself.
- ♦ The hurts and pains of life, which come from our own physical mortality and the limitations of our imperfect bodies, and also from the friction and rubbing that occurs when flawed and sinful human beings scrape each other the wrong way, can all be healed and repaired by the power of Christ. That does not mean we forget the pain of the past. But it does mean that God’s divine healing ointment covers the wounds, allowing scabs to form while the healing takes place underneath. We are never the same after we have been hurt, but God can take away the pain and replace it with His comfort.
- ♦ When we conclude that there is a God, it changes everything about how we view our choices and actions. Andrew Klavan, after studying atheistic philosophy, concluded:

If there is no God, there is no morality. And if there is no morality, the search for pleasure and avoidance of pain are all in all. But the opposite is also true. If we concede that one thing is morally better than another, it can only be because it is closer to an Ultimate Moral Good. And if there is an Ultimate Moral Good, it cannot be just an idea. It must be a Personal Being.

This same discovery is the opening overture of the great book “Mere Christianity” by C.S. Lewis (which many of you are studying this winter). Lewis is another example of a brilliant man’s restless search to find true meaning. As a young professor at Oxford, bitter from the death of his mother in his childhood and scarred by his combat in the trenches of World War I, he had adopted atheism as his intellectual defense mechanism.

But one of his faculty colleagues, JRR Tolkien (the very man who was in the process of writing the great epic trilogy “The Lord of the Rings”) challenged him on his hypocrisy. “How can you reject Christianity when you’ve never even read the Bible?” That started Lewis on his own path that led him to the “eternity in his heart” Ecclesiastes describes, and to becoming a committed follower of Jesus.

Another British intellectual named G.K. Chesterton described his late-in-life conversion to Christ as being like a seafarer setting out from home, sailing one ocean after another, until he finally lands on what he thinks is a distant land but discovers that he has actually arrived back home. (Chesterton tells us that every spiritual journey that leads to God is ultimately just a journey home.)

This weekend a group of men are meeting in another part of our church facility, participating in a 3-day retreat called “The Great Banquet.” It’s part of a world-wide movement that began in the 1940s. Millions of people have done it. The original name in Spanish—“cursillo”—simply means a “mini-course” in the Christian life. For most of our men this weekend is a “refresher course,” a reminder of things they have known that can easily leak out of the memory due to the busyness and distractions of life. Others will be hearing things for the first time, discovering truths in scripture they had not realized before. And for still others it’s just a recharging of the spiritual batteries by spending a few days with other men who share their beliefs and values. I have a personal affinity to the retreat experience, because it was on a similar weekend decades ago that my own voyage found its way home, and for the first time I prayed to Jesus my Savior.

The Right Combination

Modern security technology has leapt light years ahead in recent decades. Today the latest devices utilize fingerprint recognition, voice recognition, or eyeball scanning. But for a long time the state-of-the-art means for securing valuables involved a combination lock. Bank vaults and personal safes and padlocks would have a rotary dial with numbers marked, and the only way to open the lock was to turn to the right numbers in the right order. When the combination was entered correctly, the wheels and notches of the internal mechanism would all align, allowing the bolt to slide freely and the door to be opened.

That's an image of the mysterious process that happens within a human being as God begins to make Himself known to us. One notch after another aligns. That's what happened with Kirsten Powers, with Nabeel Qureshi, with Andrew Klavan, with C.S. Lewis and G.K. Chesterton. It happened once for me. My prayer is that it will happen for you. ■

