

**ETERNAL MEMORY  
LENTEN DEVOTIONAL  
APRIL 1, 2025**

All things are wearisome;  
more than one can express;  
the eye is not satisfied with seeing,  
or the ear filled with hearing.  
What has been is what will be,  
and what has been done is what will be done;  
there is nothing new under the sun.  
Is there a thing of which it is said,  
'See, this is new'?  
It has already been,  
in the ages before us.  
The people of long ago are not remembered,  
nor will there be any remembrance  
of people yet to come  
by those who come after them.

1.8-11

What gain have the workers from their toil? I have seen the business that God has given to everyone to be busy with. He has made everything suitable for its time; moreover, he has put a sense of past and future into their minds, yet they cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end.

3.9-11

This is an evil in all that happens under the sun, that the same fate comes to everyone. Moreover, the hearts of all are full of evil; madness is in their hearts while they live, and after that they go to the dead. But whoever is joined with all the living has hope, for a living dog is better than a dead lion. The living know that they will die, but the dead know nothing; they have no more reward, and even the memory of them is lost. Their love and their hate and their envy have already perished; never again will they have any share in all that happens under the sun.

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### 9.3-6

Whenever I read the book of Ecclesiastes, I get a sense the writer was having a terrible day. *Better a living dog than a dead lion.* Those are not the words of someone whose glass is half-full. And yet, in no other book in the bible is there a more persistent call for joy, a tenacious demand to rejoice and be glad than Ecclesiastes. It is without a doubt the most encouraging book in terms of food and wine and gladness.

The sense of living in the present, to shake off dread of the future or the weight of the past, runs through the many aphorisms. Yet, beneath and behind the calls to enjoy your few and futile days is a limit, a recognition of a boundary. *They cannot find out what God has done from the beginning.*

The confession of oblivion, *the memory of them is lost*, should not be confused with the boundary of knowledge, nor the persistence of memory in terms of history. It is most clear in the line *he has put a sense of past and future into their minds*. It is this "sense" which is most important for our consideration.

*What has been is what will be. There is nothing new under the sun.* We could read these lines and conclude the whole attempt to memorialize, to construct the monument, to gather and curate the collection is futile. Why bring up the past if it will just occur again; why construct the colossus if such an effort simply affirms what we already know? *Life is futile and then you die* is not a good theme for a plaza with gilded horses or goddesses leading us to victory.

Yet, what if, this is key to monuments and the memorials? What if this pragmatic call for joy in spite of the cruelty of fate is the cure of the museum? The monument replete with granite base and towering bronze statue must always be measured by the limitation of life, the folly of our few days under the sun. It is as if the writer of Ecclesiastes is saying, to be engraved is to live, to lose is to save, to be last is to be first. Don't build the monument to defy this; build it to recognize it.

Near the end of his collection of sayings, the "Preacher" says, "Of making many books there is no end, and much study is a weariness of the flesh." This long theme of Ecclesiastes, the pursuit of knowledge, finds a neat summation here. In the same way, each group of adages where the "Preacher" is lamenting the limit of knowledge finds a foil in the call to enjoy, to simply allow desire its due. Using the metaphor of Plato we could suggest the "horses" are ever wild and wily. Yet, if we extend the claims to memory, not the memory of the dead, but the memory which ever persists in us, the sense of past and future, this sense is the place of memory, eternal memory that.

We cannot according to the Preacher *find out what God was doing from the beginning to the end*, but there is ever a sense of beginning and end. What we do comes to an end, there is fate and there is fortune. In both there is a sense of change even if the change is a recurrence. There is a time for everything under heaven. It is this "timeliness" which we can call eternal memory, the sense of coming and going. If we make the memorial not to please the dead (the Preacher does not believe such is possible), but if we make the memorial to mark the loss, to remember the fate and fortune of those who came before us, it is a satisfaction of our debts.

Forgive us our debts; as we forgive our debtors.

In the names engraved on the Vietnam Veterans Memorial one can read pure tragedy. These ones were lost. Yet, you can also read in their names to brevity of life, the futility of trying to understand, the lack of definition (it cannot even be called a "war"). The "wall" in essence serves a place to gather, to remember, but it also provides a barrier, a limit, a recognition that we cannot escape our toil.

The memorial, the monument, the museum can be seen as folly and some are certainly foolish. Yet, they can also be seen as the markers or boundaries of our life. Like the headstones with the dates. We may never know or be able to remember the endless lives buried and engraved. But we can see the date. Birth and death and remember "from dust you came and to dust you return."