

“The God of Time and Eternity”

Ecclesiastes 3:9-15

One of the greatest lessons to be learned in life is how to make the most of the time we've been given. Time is the most precious resource that you've been given. It is more valuable than gold. Each of us only have an allotted amount, and none of us truly know just how much time we have left. A poem expresses this truth well:

When as a child I laughed and wept, time crept.

When as a youth I dreamed and talked, time walked.

When I became a full grown man, time ran.

And later as I older grew, time flew.

Soon I shall find while traveling on, time gone.

Stewardship of life demands that we know what time it is, and this is largely the message of this third chapter of Ecclesiastes. The word ‘time’ is mentioned on 31 separate occasions in this chapter. Though we have eternity in our hearts, we are time bound creatures. We are born with a longing for another world, we live out our days as if life will go on forever, and yet we are not beyond the reach of time. Sooner or later, it will catch up with all of us.

Here we are presented with a picture of a sovereign God who is Lord over time. He is the One who regulates all of our days, down to the very minutes and seconds that make up our life here on earth. He is the One who sees to it that from birth to death, there is a time and a season for everything under heaven. There is nothing that happens in life that is beyond His control.

The Preacher of Ecclesiastes describes the wide range of human experience in these verses, and he does so through the use of 14 couplets given in verses 1-8.

He contrasts things such birth and death, planting and harvesting, weeping and laughing.

As he works his way through the list of human experience, Solomon reaches a crescendo in verse 9 in which he asks the question, “What gain has the worker from his toil?”

“Gain” — *word that means advantage or profit; that which is received after a transaction*

He is asking the question, “What kind of return does a man get on the investment his time?” I have only got so much time, and if there is a time and season for every matter, how is it all working in my favor?

If your gaze goes no higher than the sun, then it doesn’t seem to add up. It seems like time is actually working against me. It would seem that everything is random and without ultimate meaning as each passing moment brings me only one step closer to my death.

Solomon, however, tells us something totally different.

The idea that he conveys here is this—there is a time and purpose for every season of life.

Ecclesiastes 3:1—“For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven.”

The word ‘season’ that is used here is a word that means a set time, or an appointed time. It is a word that carries the idea of predetermined purpose. He is saying, “There is an appointed time for everything, a time for every event under heaven.” He isn’t simply referring to time as that which is ticking away. Time for

the Preacher is an opportunity. It is an instrument in the hands of a sovereign God who uses it for His purposes and for the good of those who trust Him.

And no matter what time it is, our attitude can be that of the psalmist in Psalm 31:15—“My times are in Your hands.”

As the God of both time and eternity, the Bible says He has made everything beautiful in its time. And the truth that is contained in these verses can bring us great confidence.

1. What God makes is FLAWLESS (3:9-11)

“9 What gain has the worker from his toil? 10 I have seen the business that God has given to the children of man to be busy with. 11 He has made everything beautiful in its time. Also, He has put eternity into man’s heart, yet so that he cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end.”

When Solomon looked around at life and then considered how time is slipping away, it led him to ask the question that he does in verse 9. Ultimately, what gain does a man have from all of his toil?

James 4:14—“What is your life? For you are a mist that appears for a little time and then vanishes.”

With his wisdom, Solomon carefully studied the business that God has given the children of man to be busy with. It reflects his understanding of how the Lord is the sovereign architect of our lives, who has a plan for our days. He sees God as the One who determines my steps and numbers my days, the One who controls what comes my way in life.

When he looked at the business that God gives man to be busy with, what did he see? He saw a glimpse of a God who makes everything beautiful in its time, who

in His grace and mercy somehow uses the time and seasons of life for our good and His glory.

He makes everything beautiful

The word ‘beautiful’ is a visual term that ordinarily refers to something you and I can see, something we find attractive. Yet the word refers to more than simple appearance. It can also be applied to something good, right, and appropriate.

When Solomon says that God makes everything beautiful in its time, he is saying that God’s timing is always right. We can trust Him no matter the season that we currently find ourselves in.

If we would be honest, all of us can say that there have been ugly seasons in our lives, painful and hurtful seasons that we don’t want to revisit. Whether you've been the victim of abuse, or the recipient of some form of injustice and mistreatment at the hands of someone else. We would think someone has lost their mind to refer to the ‘beauty’ of cancer. Disease isn’t beautiful. It isn’t pleasant, nor is it something we welcome.

How do we grapple with the presence of pain and suffering in life? There are no pat, soft answers. God doesn’t offer us any explanations for the ugly seasons of life. But He does give us this promise in His Word—“He has made everything beautiful in its time.” That is not to say that the circumstances themselves are beautiful, but rather what God does with them in time is beautiful.

Consider how this is the case:

The circumstances of Job’s life were certainly not beautiful, but what God did with them in time was beautiful.

The circumstances in which Abraham and Sarah longed to have a child were painful and certainly not beautiful, but what God did with them in time was beautiful.

The circumstances by which Joseph was betrayed by his brothers and sold into Egyptian slavery were not beautiful, but what God did with them in time was beautiful.

The circumstances by which David took Bathsheba to be his wife were not beautiful. In fact, they were downright sinful. Yet what God did with them in time was beautiful, and Solomon himself is proof of it.

If your theology doesn't allow for human responsibility, then you will make God out to be some moral monster who is responsible for all the pain and suffering of life. But if your theology doesn't allow for divine sovereignty, then you will make Him out to be a weakling who is powerless to do anything about it.

People make choices, and sometimes those choices cause us unbearable grief. We may even be tempted to doubt God's goodness and wonder why He would allow such things to happen. But no matter the choices that people make that affect us, God has promised us that by means of His sovereign purpose He will always make things beautiful in time. (Romans 8:28)

He makes everyone curious

Verse 11 says, "He has put eternity into man's heart, yet so that he cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end." Now, what exactly does that mean?

"Eternity" — *translates the Hebrew word 'olam' which is used throughout the OT (434); forever, everlasting, ancient*

It expresses the truth that we've been made to live forever and there is a desperate longing for never-ending life. The trouble is that we are still living in a time-bound world. We have a longing for transcendence, but we can't escape the bonds of time.

Philip Graham Ryken — *“Each of us is born with a deep-seated desire, a compulsive drive to know the character, composition, and meaning of the world... and to discern its purpose and destiny. But as finite creatures living in a fallen world, there are so many things that we cannot understand.”*

In other words, we have a deep curiosity to understand the purpose behind our existence, but we can't figure it out on our own. That's what Solomon is saying here. He is describing a curiosity that is true of humanity, an interest into tomorrow, a capacity to question and search out.

This explains the reason that a child's favorite question to ask is, “Why?” Aren't you amazed at the questions your children can come up with? It is the way that God has designed us. Man is the only one of God's creatures that He has placed eternity within our hearts. He has given us an eternal itch that nothing temporal can quite scratch.

God has made us this way for a reason. The fact that you are empty on the inside without Him is meant to drive you to His mercy. We've been made for another world!

Nobody has ever said this any better than C.S. Lewis:

“If I find in myself a desire which no experience in this world can satisfy, the most probable explanation is that I was made for another world...earthly pleasures were never meant to satisfy it, but only to arouse it, to suggest the real thing.”

Elsewhere, he describes this longing as “the scent of a flower we have not found, the echo of a tune we have not heard, news from a country we have never yet visited.”

Listen—God has put the beauty of eternity so that we will recognize our deep sense of need for Him. The deepest longings of our hearts will never truly be satisfied until we come to know God through personal faith in Jesus Christ. This truth is expressed in:

John 3:16—“For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believes in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life.”

Not only does the Preacher tell us that what God makes is flawless, but notice a second thing:

2. What God gives is MATCHLESS (3:12-13)

“12 I perceived that there is nothing better for them than to be joyful and to do good as long as they live; 13 also that everyone should eat and drink and take pleasure in all his toil—this is God’s gift to man.”

What God gives is matchless, which is to say that nothing can begin to compare with it. He is a gracious God who delights in giving gifts to His children. A gift is something that is given, not earned. It is a token expression of one’s love for another. What ‘gifts’ does God bestow?

He gives us an attitude of rejoicing

When Solomon considered the beauty of God’s timing and the way that He draws us to Himself by placing eternity in our hearts, he began to see things more clearly. Life came into better focus. Notice how he says ‘I perceived.’

“Perceived” — *to properly ascertain by seeing; to know and be instructed*

The first thing that he perceived is that we ought to rejoice in life. Our hearts ought to be filled with joy and gratitude when we consider how life is a gift from God. Even though there are seasons of struggle and times of pain, with each breath that I take I ought to say, “Thank You, Lord!”

The only one who can truly rejoice in life is the believer. In Christ, we have a joy that transcends life’s circumstances. We have reason to rejoice!

John 15:11 — **“These things I have spoken to you, that My joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full.”**

Philippians 4:4 — **“Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice.”**

No matter the circumstances in life, God gives you and me the ability to rejoice. In everything, we can give thanks. I heard about a man who had a business, and he lived with the heavy burden of it for years. Finally, one day he came to the point where he felt like he had enough. He heard his pastor talking about the value of casting our burdens upon the Lord. As the man left church, he decided that he had been worried and fatigued about his business long enough. By the time he got home, he had committed his business to God. Well, that very night he received an emergency call—the place of his business had caught fire. He calmly drove down and watched the place go up in flames. One of his associates said, “I can’t imagine how you must feel!” To which he replied, “I know. But it is no problem. Just this morning I gave this place to God, and if He wants to burn it up, it’s His business.”

Nothing can take our joy away. We have to give it away.

He gives us an ability to do good

In addition to giving us an attitude of rejoicing, notice also that Solomon says God gives us an ability to good as long as we live. While we are living and breathing, God gives you and me an ability to do good to others, to serve others, to love and bless others. Yet we only have opportunity to do so while we live, so make it count.

Charles Swindoll—*“So much today is a two-way exchange rather than a one-way expression. I do good because you're going to do good back to me. I treat you nice, and in return I expect you to treat me nice. Reciprocity brings us pleasure.”*

Yet the Bible says that we have been given the ability to do good to others, and this is whether or not they do good to me in return. We're often always looking for a more opportune time, a more convenient time to give...to serve...to do good. But is there truly ever an opportune time? Don't wait until it is too late. Do good now!

He gives us an appreciation for the mundane

Solomon says that everyone should eat and drink and take pleasure in his toil, for this is the gift of God. In other words, God's gift to me includes an appreciation for the mundane in life, for the ordinary and everyday.

Susan Ertz—*“Millions long for immortality but don't know what to do with themselves on a rainy Sunday afternoon.”*

Part of our problem in life is that our eyes are always scanning the horizon for the next big thing. We are never satisfied with what we have because it is never quite enough. Yet studies have shown that contentment levels decrease on average where there is an increase in stuff.

Proverbs 30:8-9—“Give me neither poverty nor riches; feed me with the food that is needful for me, lest I be full and deny You and say, ‘Who is the Lord?’ or lest I be poor and steal and profane the name of my God.”

God gives me an appreciation for the mundane in life, and He makes me content. Are you content? Are you happy with the simple things in life, or do you have to always have the next big thing, the latest and greatest?

He gives us an apprehension of our labor

Solomon says that God’s gift includes taking pleasure in all our toil. He infuses my work with meaning and purpose. I should take whatever time I have been given and use it joyfully in the service of the Lord. It is God’s gift to me. That’s what Solomon is saying in these verses.

3. What God does is ENDLESS (3:14-15)

“14 I perceived that whatever God does endures forever; nothing can be added to it, nor anything taken from it. God has done it, so that people fear before Him. 15 That which is, already has been; that which is to be, already has been; and God seeks what has been driven away.”

All that God does in time is good and is filled with purpose, and it will always endure. Notice:

The permanence of what He does

Whatever He does will endure forever, and nothing can be added to it, nor can anything be subtracted from it.

The purpose of what He does

God does it so that people ‘fear before Him.’ That doesn’t mean He wants to frighten people into submission. To fear the Lord means to love and worship Him, to willfully bow before Him as God. It is the fear of the Lord that is the beginning of wisdom!

Chapter 12 will reveal that this is the point of the whole book of Ecclesiastes. Fearing God and keeping His commands—this is man’s all. God works in the time and seasons of our lives in such a way so that we will love and fear Him.

The patience of what He does

Verse 15 says that He does this over and over again, seeking what has been driven away. That simply means that He is patient in the way that He deals with humanity. Ever so tenderly, the same God who keeps the cosmos is providentially working through the time and circumstances of my life to draw me unto Himself.

Things beyond our control should not cause us to sink into despair. Instead, we must place all of our hope in Christ who is indeed Lord of both time and eternity.

John 10:28—“I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of My hand.”

Whenever you feel the tension of living somewhere in between time and eternity, remember that eternal life in Christ is ours! Remember that what you do in life with your time matters. Your life and labor is not in vain. The God who is arranging the circumstances of our lives makes everything beautiful in its time.