

Who is in control?

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[0 : 0 0] In the morning, the alarm tells us it's time to get up. At night, the clock tells us it's time to go to bed. And in between, we try to make the most of the time that we have. We are obsessed by time.

So we speak about not having enough hours in the day, about wasting time, about the race against time, about making up for lost time, about living on borrowed time. We say time is money.

Time is of the essence. Time flies when you're having fun. Time waits for no one. Time is a great healer. So we don't want to waste time.

We want our coffee as quickly as possible. We want our Wi-Fi as fast as possible. And we want to wait for an appointment to be as short as possible. Why? Because time is running out.

And when it goes, we don't get it back again. So how should we make the best use of the time that we've got to live our lives? Well, our Bible reading from Ecclesiastes chapter 3 helps us.

[1 : 0 1] Because the teacher of Ecclesiastes we've seen already wants to show us that life doesn't make sense without God. And so here in chapter 3, he wants to teach us that God is in control of all of life.

Therefore, we make the best use of our time as we relate to the God who made us. And so whether you call yourself a Christian or not, what we get here is a realistic perspective on life.

The teacher describes life in beautiful poetic form. And then he sets it within the bigger picture of God's story. Because we can only make sense of our life within the context of God's control of all eternity.

And so today we're going to think about time and eternity and death. So we'll look at this chapter under three headings. The first, the tapestry of time. Verse 1 to 8.

The second, the enigma of eternity. Verse 9 to 15. And the third, the despair of death. Verse 16 to 22. The tapestry of time, the enigma of eternity, and the despair of death.

[2 : 0 7] First, the tapestry of time. We see this in verse 1 to verse 8. And so we read, There is a time for everything and a season for every activity under the heavens.

That's how the teacher begins. And then what he does is he goes on to outline the seasons of life in poetic form. And so how should we read what he's saying? Well, it depends on your perspective on life.

Because if you view life without any reference to God, that would be the under the sun perspective the teachers already mentioned. And when we find throughout the book of Ecclesiastes, if you view life without reference to God, then this poem could sound just like another example of meaninglessness.

We could read it like a prison sentence where life is as if you're in a prison. You're stuck in a cell and the only escape is death.

Where life is just random and chance. But if that's the case, then there's little reason for joy and hope. And yet that is the atheistic, secular, humanist view of life.

[3 : 14] And it's a perspective on life the teacher has already alluded to. And that's probably why these famous words from Ecclesiastes chapter 3 are a popular reading at funerals, even humanist funerals.

I once went to a humanist funeral. And the celebrant, having already dismissed God, then read these words without even acknowledging that they were from God's word in the Bible.

And it's because they fit with the secular humanist worldview. In other words, if you rip this poem out of its context in Ecclesiastes, you can make it fit with a view of life and a view of the world without God.

And yet there's a better way to see it and to read it. And that is to read it as a glorious celebration of life. And life as a beautiful gift from God.

And so, yes, we live life with some control. But God is the main author who has ultimate control. And so life makes best sense in relation to the God who made us.

[4 : 24] And that's what the teacher goes on to explain. And so we should see these words as encompassing the entire experience of life that God gives to us. The teacher uses a literary technique of expressing polar opposites as a way of embracing everything in between.

And this totality is implied by the structure. Because the list of opposites is made up of 28 items in 14 pairs. And so it's a list made up of multiples of seven.

And seven is the number that symbolizes completion or perfection in the Bible. And so verse 2 to 8 form this rich celebration of the times and the rhythms and the seasons of life given to us by God.

But as is often the case with poetry, it's not always clear whether the words should be taken literally or metaphorically. And so let's go through them. We have a time to be born and a time to die.

And yet we can't control either. The time of our conception and the time of our birth was outwith the control of our parents. And then one day we will die.

[5 : 37] It will be too soon for some and others may feel like they're waiting. We read there is a time to plant and a time to uproot. A reference to agriculture and harvest.

But probably wider too. There is a time to kill and a time to heal. A time to tear down and a time to build. So there's a time for starting new things.

But there's also a time for ending things as well. There's a time to weep and a time to laugh. A time to mourn and a time to dance.

Both remind us that life will contain sorrows as well as joys. There's a time to scatter stones and a time to gather them. Possibly a reference to clearing and then building.

There's a time to embrace and a time to refrain from embracing. So feelings will come and then go. There's a time to search and a time to give up.

[6 : 39] A time to keep and a time to throw away. A time to tear and a time to mend. These lines have some reference to possessions. And there is a time to be silent and a time to speak.

So there are times when some things would have been better left unsaid. And times when we should have spoken up. There's a time to love and a time to hate.

That reminds us of relationships on a personal level. There's a time for war and a time for peace. And that reminds us of relationships on an international level. And that is life.

No matter who we are. Life is a rich tapestry. It has a regular rhythm. But it's also full of mystery. And so the poem highlights just how little we are in control.

Because life isn't like the food buffet in a restaurant. Where you can take your plate and you can pile up all the good food that you enjoy. And just leave everything you don't like.

[7 : 42] And then you can go back again and again and again to stack up on all your favourites. But life just isn't like that. For example, when someone is born, it is a cause for celebration.

But not when somebody dies. And we'd much rather laugh than weep. A time to mourn? No thank you. A time to dance? Absolutely.

And we want love instead of hate. And we would always choose peace over war. But we don't get to write the script. There's so much that is outwith our control.

And this has been made so clear to us recently with the coronavirus. And so how are we supposed to cope with life? Well, the teacher goes on to explain the perspective that we've got to get.

We need to see the big picture that includes God and his control of time and eternity. Because when we acknowledge God as our creator and the controller of our lives, we will discover meaning and purpose no matter what happens.

[8 : 51] And so that's the tapestry of time. That's our first point. Second point is the enigma of eternity. Verse 9 to 15. Because here the teacher helps us make sense of time with reference to eternity.

He wants to show us that there's no gain if you ignore God. And so we read, what do workers gain from their toil? He's saying, if this is all there is to life, what's to be gained from it?

And that's why he wants us to look at the far bigger picture by reflecting on eternity. So what he does is he gets out his wide angle lens to see past this life, to focus on eternity and bring God into view.

And so we read, I have seen the burden God has laid on the human race. So God has made this life this way because he is in control. And he wants us to be dissatisfied with life if we try and do it without him.

Because he has hardwired us to long for more. And that's why the teacher goes further and deeper by exposing us to eternity. Because we are limited.

[10 : 05] But when we see from God's perspective or when we grasp reality, then we'll be better able to understand. And so he goes on. He 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. And so God created a world of beauty.

But we don't see the huge tapestry that he's weaving. And God has set eternity in the human heart. And that's why there's a sense within every human being that there is more to this life.

There must be. And so while we are bound inside time, there's a longing for something outside time to give us meaning. And the teacher is saying, God has put this impulse within us.

Because we're made for more than just what this life offers. Our true home was never meant to be this world with all of its experiences. And yes, of course, this life is amazing.

[11 : 14] There are great times of joy and beauty and wonder. But all of this is just a tiny foretaste of our true home in heaven. And so when we enjoy these experiences, our eternal home is breaking into our present time as a taste of far more and far better to come.

And yet we can't fathom what God does. We're unable to grasp all of it right now. It's like God blocks it off from us for the time being.

And so it's no surprise that we will be perennially frustrated if we turn away from God. And of course, many people might try to shut God out, but we just can't escape him.

We can't rewire the way that he has hardwired us as human beings. And so our limitations of understanding and our inability to figure life out by ourselves has been designed this way by God.

But it isn't just revealed in the Bible to us. It's everywhere. It is sung about in popular music. And it is written about in classic literature.

[12 : 26] And so you'll hear Mumford and Sons singing about an empty heart, growing fears, a lack of fulfillment, stumbling ignorance, and of finding a hole within the fragile substance of my soul.

They are singing about the reality of life outlined for us in Ecclesiastes. But if you're not into Mumford and Sons, then what about Shakespeare?

Remember Macbeth when he hears about his wife's death. Tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow creeps in this petty pace from day to day to the last syllable of recorded time and all our yesterdays have lighted fools the way to dusty death.

Out, out, brief candle. Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player that struts and frets his hour upon the stage and then is heard no more.

It is a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing. You see, the reason the teacher forces us to explore eternity is not to leave us in despair, but to give us hope.

[13 : 41] So listen to what he says. I know that there is nothing better for people than to be happy and to do good while they live, that each of them may eat and drink and find satisfaction in all their toil.

This is the gift of God. I know that everything God does will endure forever. Nothing can be added to it and nothing taken from it. God does it so that people will fear him.

So God has done all this so that we'll fear him. This doesn't mean cowering before him. The fear of the Lord describes a relationship with God where we relate to him as we should.

And so God has placed us within time and he has put eternity in our hearts in order to drive us to himself so that we view this life as a gift from him.

It's for us to enjoy and so we can eat and we can drink and we can find satisfaction in life as well as embrace whatever he gives us in the different times and seasons.

[14 : 45] It's the only way to respond to the fact that our time is in God's hands because we can't change anything he does or even understand what he is doing.

And so we should stop worrying and live in the moment God has given us. Carpe diem sees the day because everything is under his loving control past, present and future.

The teacher says whatever is has already been and what will be has been before and God will call the past to account. So God has ordered life this way so that we will humble ourselves before him.

And so we will always have this gnawing dissatisfaction with life until we relate to God as we should by fearing him. Because we were made for eternity not just for time.

And so God has an eternal purpose a bigger picture that he is working towards. And that's why eternity is an enigma if we fail to see how our loving creator God has set everything up and controls all things.

[15 : 59] That's the enigma of eternity. First, the tapestry of time. Second, the enigma of eternity. And third, the despair of death in verse 16 to 22.

The teacher doesn't leave this discussion without mentioning death. Because while we live in time and we were made for eternity we still all die.

Death is a consequence of our fallen human nature. Death entered the world when our first parents Adam and Eve rebelled against God. Not only that this fallen world is full of evil and wickedness.

And that's what concerns the teacher as he looks around. Listen to what he says. And then I saw something else under the sun. In the place of judgment wickedness was there.

In the place of justice wickedness was there. Wickedness and injustice are the most painful things and aspects in this world.

[17 : 02] And that's why we need God's eternal perspective because it is our only hope. Because when it comes to wickedness there's no hope for justice without God.

If this life is all there is and there is no God then there is no answer to all of the injustices of human history. But the teacher wants us to see that because there is a God then we do have assurance that there will be ultimate justice.

So he says I said to myself God will bring into judgment both the righteous and the wicked for there will be a time for every activity a time to judge every deed.

He's saying God will judge everyone and he takes comfort in this fact and so should we because it's a good thing. God will judge in his perfect time.

He will call the past to account. Now perhaps you've seen the cult movie Back to the Future. It's about a travel through time in a really cool car.

[18 : 08] But God doesn't need to time travel through all of history for him to be able to judge rightly and to judge every deed. God is able to see all time before him and so his judgment will be right.

We can be sure of that. The judgment will come. It is a fixed reality in life along with death. And so the teacher then says about death I also said to myself as for humans God tests them so that they may see that they are like the animals.

Surely the fate of human beings is like that of the animals. The same fate awaits them both. As one dies so dies the other. All have the same breath.

Humans have no advantage over animals. Everything is meaningless. All go to the same place. All come from dust and to dust all return.

Who knows if the human spirit rises upward and if the spirit of the animal goes down into the earth. death. What he is saying is that man like the animals will die.

[19 : 21] Not that we are the same as animals but we have no advantage over animals when it comes to death. And so he is addressing the issue of what happens when you die.

And he doesn't give an answer but he does raise the question of whether the destination of the spirit of humans and animals might be different. He is not stating anything with certainty but he does conclude by saying So I saw that there is nothing better for a person than to enjoy their work because that is their lot for who can bring them to see what will happen after them.

So he is saying the best thing you can do is to enjoy your work in this life. But he leaves us asking is there any hope for life after death? And it's a question every human being asks.

And the teacher points us so far but it's a question that finds its ultimate answer in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Because Christianity helps us make best sense of our human existence including the reality of death.

The philosopher Peter Kreeft in his book Love is Stronger Than Death tells a story showing how a secular position on death is untenable.

[20 : 45] He shares how a relative of his neighbour died suddenly and unexpectedly at the age of three and the neighbour's son, about seven at the time asked his mother where is my cousin now?

She didn't believe in any form of life after death and so she answered her son your cousin has gone back to the earth where we all came from.

All of nature is a cycle. Death is a natural part of that cycle. When you see the earth put forth new flowers next spring you can know that your cousin's life is fertilising those flowers.

But instead of being comforted the boy screamed I don't want him to be fertiliser and ran off. And Kreeft argues that the mother had let the secular position suppress the natural human intuition that death is not natural for us.

You see the teacher says that God has set eternity in the human heart and that's why death isn't natural. It is an intruder that came because of sin.

[21 : 54] It's not supposed to be part of the world that God has made and that's why death is so painful because we were created by God to last for eternity.

And so God has given each of us a life and time. It's his gift to us. We are not in control of our times nor do we understand them but the great comfort is that we can cast ourselves upon the God who holds our times in his hands and know that he will see us through death and through judgment.

How? Well because the eternal son of God has entered into our world of time and space. Galatians chapter 4 says this but when the set time had fully come God sent his son born of a woman born under the law to redeem those under the law that we might receive adoption to sonship.

So Jesus was born as a human in order to die for our sin on a cross so that we could enter into a relationship with God and so we can be forgiven for how we have misused the time that God has given us because we have lived it for ourselves and we have paid no attention to him.

Jesus died to forgive all our sins and he rose to give us eternal life and so we must seize the day while we still have time by responding to Jesus.

[23 : 31] The apostle Paul said now is the time of God's favour now is the day of salvation and so the creator of the universe the Lord of history the author of time and the one who controls our lives calls us to go to Jesus Christ for salvation and so we must because when the teacher of Ecclesiastes tells us there is a time for everything that includes a time to respond to God.

Now perhaps you have never done that maybe by thinking now is not the right time or I will get round to it sometime but there's a danger that your time runs out.

You know one of the most useful functions on any alarm is the snooze button. Hitting the snooze button gives us those extra few minutes in bed and we can hit it again and again and again but sadly this is what some people do with Jesus Christ because you can fail to wake up to making the most important decision of your life a decision that echoes throughout eternity because there is an urgency in responding to Jesus Christ so please don't delay put your faith and trust in him and if we do follow Jesus and we would call ourselves a Christian then we must use our time well.

We must not waste the opportunities that God gives to us whether personally or as a church. We can't live like passengers on a cruise ship just concerned for a life of comfort.

We need to be more like the crew of a lifeboat trying our best to point people to the one who can save them before it's too late. Let's pray.

[25 : 24] Eternal God we thank you for life a precious gift from you. So in every time and season and rhythm of life help us to remember you.

We thank you for eternal life another gift through the death and resurrection of Jesus and you have set eternity in our hearts and so we will only find our deepest longings in life met when we relate to you through faith in Jesus and so teach us to number our days that we may gain a heart of wisdom in Jesus name we pray Amen went weray amen to an earth we come to me And we värld alone I think weARRAUND and you going toise or another