

Ecclesiastes 3:1–15

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Date: 18 January 2026

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A time for war and a time for peace. What gain has the worker from his toil? I have seen the business that God has given to the children of man to be busy with.

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.

I perceive that there is nothing better for them than to be joyful and to do good as long as they live. Also, that everyone should eat and drink and take pleasure in all his toil.

This is God's gift to man. I perceive 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.

[1:52] That which is already has been. And that which is to be already has been. And God seeks what has been driven away. This is the word of the Lord.

You may be seated. In times like these. Before I approach the text, I would be remiss if I did not express my gratitude to God for family.

All my kinfolk ain't my skinfolk. So I'm grateful to God to be here with family today.

Some of you know me. Some of you don't. For those who don't, I'm your long lost uncle head. My heart is full as I think about the gap we live in called time versus eternity.

The reason my heart is full is because I literally have people who are here that I consider family. My God sisters are here and I can literally remember when they were born and how I used to hold them.

[3 : 20] And now to see their kids running around. It has me in my feelings. Then at the same time, there's a student in the Chicago course I'm preaching.

Who decided I'm going in early. I'm tired of playing with y'all

And I was remarking to someone, man, I was looking forward to seeing my brother. I honestly was. I was thinking about him the other day. And I said, well, I'm going to see Bishop Bosco in a few days.

I'm feeling some kind of way today. And Dr. Meeks told me, said, you're just going to have to wait a little while longer. So I'm feeling some kind of way today.

The pregnancies that I see evident. But the death notices that have come my way. I'm feeling some kind of way about time and eternity.

[4 : 34] Yesterday, I took my son to an art gallery. And there we met with the owner of the art gallery. Who happens to be a growing friend of mine.

And I wanted him to sort of charge up my son. And he took us and he was showing all of his art. And he showed one particular painting. It was a self-portrait.

Full of color. And actually quite good. But the painting was a double canvas. It wasn't just painted on one side.

It was painted on the other side. And on the other side, with the same dimensions, was his skull. And he hangs the canvas in such a way that it twists.

So that every time he comes in the room, he doesn't know whether he's going to see the portrait as he is. Or the portrait as he will be. I said, what's this about?

[5 : 37] He said, it makes me focus on now. Because that's all I have. And I've found, this is what he told me yesterday.

And I've found that the beauty in now is sufficient. You've heard the text read. Look back at it again with me in your Bible or in your Bible app.

It starts out by saying there's a season. There's an appointed time for everything.

There's a time for every event under heaven. It goes on into this poem, starting there in verse 2, all the way through verse 8, where he talks about a time for this.

He just has the canvas and he just keeps on twisting it. The time for this, there's a time for that. But it's all predicated on that first thing. There's a time.

[6 : 41] Wait a minute. Let me read my Bible. A time to give birth and a time to die. Everything else he's talking about has to fit within that box. So planting, uprooting, killing and healing, tearing down and building up.

All these various things that are literally the warp and woof of time. Pauline.

obsession with time has to be tempered with the reality of eternity.

We're obsessed with time even in our songs. I was thinking on the way in, all the songs that I used to hear on the radio when I was a kid, I'm dating myself as some of you are my age, so you'll resonate with this.

Turn, turn, turn, turn was a song that was written based on this Ecclesiastes passage. If I could put time in a bottle, it's a song they used to sing.

[8 : 11] A little known song of Stevie Wonder's says, do yourself a favor, educate your mind, got to get yourself together, because you ain't got much time.

I grew up singing, I need thee every hour. But somebody didn't like the song and so they wrote moment by moment.

That's a true story. Look it up. All the movies, there's movie franchises based upon our desire to manipulate and manage time, back to the future.

the Marvel sort of universe in quantum time and time machine bathtub. Now what is it? Time machine hot tub.

Thank you. Time machine hot tub. I know it's something that you bathe in. We're just obsessed with time. But the good news is that God's sovereign control, in case you're ready to go to sleep.

[9 :15] Listen, just take this down. God's sovereign control of all time ought to drive us to be faithful witnesses in these times.

God's faithful control, his sovereign control over all time ought to drive us to be faithful witnesses in these times.

Three things I believe we can garner from the text today. Three little angles. One is what God has done.

Number two is what no one can do. And number three is what everybody ought to do. Let's take a look at it. What has God done?

You see after the poem, you see this question in verse nine and ten. It says, well, what profit is there to the worker from that which he toils? That's a question that keeps on coming up in Ecclesiastes.

[10 :11] We've sort of seen iterations of it in chapter one as well as in chapter two. And we'll keep on hearing this idea that the preacher is trying to impose on us.

And that is, you need to think about what you're doing and what the end result of it will be. What's the gain?

What's the profit? What's the end result of everything that you're toiling for? And then he goes on in verse 10 to say, I have seen, and he does this a lot through Ecclesiastes.

He's going to make some personal observations. I've seen this. I've seen the task which God has given the sons of men with which to occupy themselves. But what is the task?

Look at verse 11. This is what God has done. He's made everything beautiful or appropriate in its time.

[11 :08] This time. That is, God has orchestrated everything he's created in such a way that it has beauty within a season.

And let me say it a different way. Have you ever noticed on packaging, sometimes they have best by date, and then sometimes they have expiration date?

expiration date means don't drink this after the expiration date. Best by means that the freshest quality, the best potency, the best taste will be enjoyed if you enjoy it by this date, because whatever this is, it's created to have its most effective productivity in a certain season.

Guess what? You were born like that. I hope you know you were born with an expiration date stamped on you. You can't see it, so don't look for it right now, but one day you're going to die because there's a time to be born and a time to die, right?

But there's some best by dates, too. There's some seasons that God has you in. Can I pause just for a second?

[12 :39] Because I'm contemplating the theology of aging. I am. I had a conversation with Dr. D.A. Carson about this, and he said, Ed, the older you get, the more you're going to have to stop doing the things you do well, even if you can do them better than other people, so that you can concentrate on the things you do best and do them better than you've ever done them before.

I think that's sage advice. All he's trying to say is you got a best by date. You can't just keep doing everything. Why? Because there are seasons. He's made everything appropriate, everything beautiful, everything fits together like he designed it according to the time schedule that he's laid out for it.

Everything. Wait a minute. Everything? Yes, everything. Now, for those of us who are in Christ, we know that he causes all things to work together for good.

But even this text, before we get to the New Testament, says something about God's creative power, that he's created everything with some time strictures and everything can be beautiful within its own time.

That's what he has done. He's made everything beautiful. Wait a minute. He didn't just do that. Keep reading in your Bible. It says he's put or he has set eternity in man's heart. Am I reading my Bible right?

[14:03] Look in your Bible. It's verse 11. He's also set eternity in man's heart. What does that mean? Listen carefully. Even though we're time strictured, we're eternity bred.

Listen to what I mean by that. We have to stay here in time, but he put something in us that longs for eternity.

He's made us. And now because we live in this sin-cursed world, we deteriorate. But there's something in us that's eternal to such an extent that, guess what?

When you stop metabolizing, you're going to spend eternity somewhere. You have a choice today as to where that might be.

And I want to challenge you that since God has sovereign control over everything, in times like these, you need to make sure that you're properly aligned with him. The text says he sets eternity in our hearts.

[15:04] We long for something beyond what we see. We're looking for a home that we've never visited. We're longing for music that we've never heard.

But not only that, this text indicates that he's allowed us to live with this longing, the tension between time-bound existence and eternal longings.

He's done it in a way that we can't figure it out. Look in your Bible, verse 11. He's done it so that man will not find out the work which God has done from the beginning even to the end.

In other words, you can't, listen, God has done some things that get on my nerves. Number one, he's stamped me with time, but he's put eternity in my heart, but he's done it in a way that I can't figure it out.

You can't figure out God's work from, but he's also given me something else. He's given me the gift of ordinary joys in the now.

[16:19] Look at verse 12 and 13. There's nothing better for them than to rejoice and do good in one's lifetime. Moreover, every man who eats and drinks and sees good in all his labor, it's a gift from God.

With all these other things that I've just described, don't forget that one of the gifts that he gives us is the ordinary joys that we experience right now. We live in routine strictures of time.

Yes, our hearts are designed to long for something eternal. But it's the precious potency of now. That we ought to accept as a gift.

The ordinary things, a good meal, something good to drink. Wait a minute, you are Presbyterian, so I don't. I don't know what that means for you.

Let's just say a good espresso. A good day's work where you've made a contribution and you feel like you're getting some traction in whatever that thing is that God has called you to do.

[17:26] That's a gift. You don't get no better than that. That's what Ecclesiastes says. So enjoy it for what it is. Don't make food a God.

It's just something that God gives you as a gift. Don't make drinking your ambition. Just receive it as something that God loves you enough to let you enjoy.

Don't let your work consume you. Just recognize that God, because he loves you so, has allowed you to be a partner with him and whatever his enterprise is. And part of your giftedness is his gift to you to be a gift to the rest of the world.

That's what God has done. Let me tell you what no one can do. I've already hinted at it. No one can figure him out. And here's the real bottom line of the poem as well as the prose after the poem, and that is this.

We cannot control time. We can be fascinated with time travel in our arts, in entertainment. We can talk about controlling the clock and time management and all the self-improvement books.

[18 : 35] But when you get done talking, young people, you cannot speed up time. So just be whatever age you are while you can be that age. I'm trying to help somebody right now.

Y'all ain't listening to me. Don't try to be grown. My daddy used to say, don't get big before you get big. In other words, whatever age you are, you can't speed up time.

So just be that. Wait a minute. You can't slow down time either, old people. I'm talking about me and you. Come on. Don't resist me right now. You can't slow it down.

I exercise. I'm drinking right. I, my wife got a juicer. We juicing and I'm taking this pill and that pill. But guess what? My steps are still getting shorter.

Wait a minute. My beard is still getting grayer. I'm still fighting. Now, when you're young, you fight naps.

[19 : 35] When you get old, you fight to get a nap. But there's no way you can slow, slow it down. Time just keeps on ticking.

And time just keeps on moving us into the future. We cannot relive or duplicate time. No sense in talking about the good old days.

You live in these days. These are the only days that you have. You're as old as you've ever been. But you're as young as you're ever going to be.

All you got is now. Guess what else you cannot? Listen, when I say you cannot control time, I'm trying to say that nothing stays the same and there's nothing we can do about it.

There are seasons that he's made as long as the earth remains. Genesis chapter 9. Summer and winter, seed time and harvest. Matter of fact, that's what that great hymn says.

[20 : 36] Summer and winter, spring time and harvest, sun and moon in the courses above. Join with all nature and manifold witness of thy great faithfulness, mercy and love. In other words, God has made seasons as there is nothing you can do about the season.

Botox, facelifts, be damned. Time just keeps on ticking. He's made everything beautiful in its own time.

But he's also put eternity in the man's heart so that we cannot find out what God is doing from the beginning to the end. It's a mystery. You can't figure it out.

Can I just say one last thing? Because I feel my daddy in the room and he would say, you can't hurry God. No, you just got to wait. You got to trust him.

And give him time no matter how long it takes. He's a God. You can't hurry. He'll be there. Don't you worry. He may not come when you want him.

[21 : 37] But he'll be right on time. You can't control time. There is something we can do in the now. And that's what we see there again.

If you look back again in verse 12 and 13, we can be joyful. We can develop a disposition because of what we know about God and his control.

We can develop a disposition of calm assurance that gives us a positive outlook on life regardless of what we're going through. Let me say it a different way.

This back in Ecclesiastes, they only had part of the story. Now that we know, now that we're on this side of the cross, joy is our inheritance. What that means is regardless of what's going on, the Christian can have, listen, the Christian can have a disposition of calm delight regardless of what's happening.

I'm not talking about happiness right now. I'm talking about joy. I'm talking about that inward thing that is tied into eternity that lets me, listen, smile while I'm crying.

[22 : 46] That don't even make no sense, do it? It makes me run. Ain't nobody chasing me. It makes me lift up my hands when ain't nobody around because I have, listen, the calm delight of knowing that I'm his and he's mine.

You can rejoice right now. Can I say this? You don't have to wait till you get to heaven. You can rejoice right now. How can you rejoice right now? Because God, by his grace, by the power of his Holy Spirit, the truth of his word, as we read it and as we experience it, among each other as fellow Christians, as parts of the body of Christ, we recognize that even when we gather together for worship, we did it today.

And when we gather together for worship, it's just a foretaste of what heaven is going to be like.

King says it is that time is neutral it can be used whether constructively or destructively and I'm sorry to say this morning I'm absolutely convinced that the forces of ill will in our nation the extreme rightists of our nation the people on the wrong side have used time much more effectively than the forces of goodwill and it may well be that we will have to repent in this generation not merely for the vitriolic words and the violent actions of bad people but for the appalling silence and indifference of the good people who sit around and say wait on time in other words what dr. King was saying do good while you got a chance because yes the moral arc of the universe bends toward justice but God uses his people to bend it you can be joyful you can do good as long as you live you can enjoy the simple gifts of life with gratitude that's what verse 13 lets us know let's get to the heart of the matter given what God has done and what we cannot do the question becomes what should everybody do that's what really all I wanted to get to this verse 14 look at it he says I know that everything God does will remain forever there's nothing to add to it there's nothing to take from it but God has so worked that men should fear or reverence yeah God has made everything appropriate in its own time and set eternity in our hearts we can't speed up time and we can't figure everything out but here's what everybody ought to do and that is fear and reverence God that is hold God in awe because God has done these things set us in time versus eternity he's done these things given us gifts he's done these things done it in mysterious ways so that we cannot figure him out so that we would be in awe so that we would have word fear him is not fear in the terms of dread but it's fear in the terms of recognizing here it is children there's something bigger than you this idea that God has orchestrated time in such a way so that he could rip the band-aids off our eyes so that we can actually see reality and the reality is life ain't about you this text is contra that is it's the corrective for what we see in 2nd Timothy chapter 3 when it talks about in the last days in the last time it'll be perilous why because men will be lovers of themselves if you read the rest of that text in 2nd Timothy chapter 3 and it talks about how they love money and they do this and that and all like all these other evil things that look like the first like the front pages of our newspapers today the real heart of it is is a wicked insidious self-centered narcissism that the human race has inherited and has perfected listen to what i'm saying it ain't about you i'm talking to christians now i know you thinking about your favorite narcissist i'm talking to the person sitting in your seat right now that god has done all this stuff so you can once in all figure out that life ain't about you you are not the center of the universe god did all of this so that we could have all so that we would fear him so that we could recognize that he is the center of all existence and he is what did we just sing the center of our joy

[29 : 28] it ain't about you it's about someone that's bigger than you i know you have read the latest books on time management and this and that and that but when you get done talking time's just gonna keep on ticking and you need to get over yourself i know you didn't come to hear that today but that's all i got because that's what i'm reading that that's why god did it so that we would fear we would reference we would here it is that we would acknowledge him for who he actually is in doing so we can finally figure out where we fit in time and eternity look this last little lick verse 15 it says that which has been already that which will be has already been for god seeks what is passed by that's a really strange sentence in english and it's worse in hebrew but the essence of it seems to be that god wait a minute that god has everything can in control and is working according to his appointed time and he's seeking wait a minute he's actively recovering that which has been lost wasted or has been set aside that god he just got a habit of going after lost stuff including lost time god just has a habit of taking time and doing with it what it needs god what what has god done listen i'm done when i point this out that god has done something where it says he seeks what is passed by he's done something that no one else could do that we could not do for ourselves here's the good news god has done something for us that we could not do for ourselves what did he do he bridged time and eternity for us yeah in the fullness of time god sent his son his son gave his life and his life gives us hope jesus was the master of time you remember particularly for example in the book of john he's always talking about the hour somebody tried to get him to do something he said my hour has not yet come you can't hurry god later on he says my hour has come or the hour is coming for example i think it's john chapter 4 where true worshipers will worship him in spirit and in truth in chapter 5 he talks about the hour is coming where the dead will hear his voice and they will rise triumphantly in john chapter 13 verse 1 it talks about jesus knowing that his hour had come to depart out of the world he loved those who were his until the end and now wait a minute now now now

If anyone is in Christ, we can now say, now unto him who's able to do, I can't do it, exceeding abundantly above all we ask or think according to the power that works in us, world without end.

Now because he's bridged time and eternity, we can see things like, now unto him who's able to keep you from falling and able to present you faultless before his presence with exceeding joy.

To the only wise God our Savior be glory, majesty, dominion, and power. Henceforth, wait a minute, now and forever. Because he bridged time and eternity, now, now has some meaning.

Why? Because he lives, I can face tomorrow. Because he lives, all my fear is gone. Now, because I know who holds my future, my life is worth the living, wait a minute, now, because he lives.

[34 : 07] Y'all ain't got it yet. I'm just trying to say, the fierce urgency of now means that because I'm in Christ and because of who he is and what he's done, now, my life, wait a minute, if you don't know him, now is the time.

Today is the day of salvation. Now is all you got. You might get another chance, but you'll never have a better chance than today. To get right with God.

It's the fierce urgency of now. You got to do it now. Because now is all you have. These are revolutionary times, is what Dr. King said.

These are dangerous days. But because he lives, now we can have hope.

And now, wait a minute, let me say it this way. I still ain't got you. I'm done. Listen, what separates great teams, what separates good teams and great teams from championship teams is time management.

[35 : 12] Yeah. It's how they manage the clock. At the end, I was watching some game last night and they blew it at the end. Somebody got blew out. I can't even remember.

I got mad. I really don't care. As long as the Bears beat the Packers this year, I'm good. But I noticed back when I was growing up, when I first started watching football, I noticed that championship teams, in the last two minutes, it doesn't matter how far down they are, if you can just get the ball in the right person's hands.

Back when Michael Jordan was playing, when the Bulls, somebody said amen, he said amen all Sunday. When the Bulls were good.

Didn't matter what the score was, if they could just get the ball in his hands, everything was going to be all right. Listen, I don't know what the outcome of today's game will be, but I do know the outcome of my life.

I put my life, wait a minute, not the ball, I put it all. I put it all in his hands. And since my times are in his hands, now I can rejoice.

[36 : 24] Now I can have hope. Regardless of what's going on in the paper, I know what's going on in eternity, and God has everything under control. Shall we pray?

Great God, our Father, thank you for reminding us that we are not the center. You are. Thank you for reminding us that we cannot control time, cannot manipulate eternity.

It's all in your hands. I pray if there's someone here that does not know you in a personal way, that you would draw them by your loving kindness. Now. I pray for those of us who do know you.

That you would help us. To be mindful. That you have it all in your hands. Including us. Hear our prayer, we pray in Jesus' name.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.