Time

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Date: 15 September 2019

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[0:00] Now the serpent was more crafty than any other beast of the field that the Lord God had made. He said to the woman, Did God actually say, You shall not eat of any tree in the garden?

And the woman said to the serpent, We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden, but God said, You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree that is in the midst of the garden, neither shall you touch it, lest you die.
But the serpent said to the woman, You will not surely die, for God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.
So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired, to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate.
And she also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate. Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked, and they sewed fig leaves together and made themselves loincloths.
[1:13] And they heard the sound of the Lord God walking in the garden in the cool of the day. And the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the Lord God among the trees of the garden.

But the Lord God called to the man and said to him, Where are you? And he said, I heard the sound of you in the garden, and I was afraid because I was naked and I hid myself.
He said, Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten of the tree of which I commanded you not to eat? The man said, The woman whom you gave me, she gave me the fruit of the tree, and I ate.
Then the Lord God said to the woman, What is this that you have done? The woman said, The serpent deceived me, and I ate. The Lord God said to the serpent, Because you have done this, cursed are you above all livestock, and above all beasts of the field.
On your belly you shall go, and dust you shall eat all the days of your life. I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring.
[2:31] He shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel. To the woman he said, I will surely multiply your pain in childbearing.

In pain you shall bring forth children. Your desire shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you. And to Adam he said, Because you have listened to the voice of your wife, and have eaten of the tree of which I commanded you, you shall not eat of it.
Cursed is the ground because of you. In pain you shall eat of it all the days of your life. Thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you, and you shall eat the plants of the field.
By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread, till you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken. For you are dust, and to dust you shall return. The man called his wife's name Eve, because she was the mother of all living.
And the Lord God made for Adam, and for his wife, garments of skins, and clothed them. Then the Lord God said, Behold, the man has become like one of us in knowing good and evil.
[3:47] Now, lest he reach out his hand, and take also of the tree of life, and eat, and live forever. Therefore, the Lord God sent him out from the garden of Eden, to work the ground from which he was taken.

He drove out the man, and at the east of the garden of Eden, he placed the cherubim, and a flaming sword, that turned every way, to guard the way to the tree of life.
For everything, there is a season, and a time, for every matter, under heaven. A time to be born, and a time to die. A time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is planted.

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A time to kill, and a time to heal. A time to break, dine, and a time to build up. A time to weep, and a time to laugh. A time to mourn, and a time to dance.
A time to cast away stones, and a time to gather stones together. A time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing. A time to seek, and a time to lose.
[4:48] A time to keep, and a time to cast away. A time to tear, and a time to sow. A time to keep silence, and a time to speak. A time to love, and a time to hit.

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 perceived 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. That is God's gift to man. 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. That which is already has been. That which is to be already has been. And God seeks what has been driven away. Moreover, I saw under the sun that in the place of justice even there was wickedness.
And in the place of righteousness even there was wickedness. I said in my heart, God will judge the righteous and the wicked. For there is a time for every matter and for every work. I said in my heart with regard to the children of man that God is testing them that they may see that they themselves are but beasts. For what happens to the children of man and what happens to the beast is the same.
As one dies, so dies the other. They all have the same breath and man has no advantage over the beasts for all is vanity. All go to one place. All are from dust and to dust all return. Who knows whether the spirit of man goes upward and the spirit of the beast goes down into the earth. So I saw that there's nothing better than a man should rejoice in his work. For that is his lot. Who can bring him to see what will be after him?
[7:16] Well, Ecclesiastes chapter 3 verses 1 to 8 are probably the best known words in the book. Immortalized by the birds in 1965 whose hit single, Turn, Turn, Turn. We're playing it actually. So if you were here before the magic hour of 10.30 this morning you'd have heard the birds singing and it reached the top of the charts. Or so I am told. Many people have commented on the beauty of these verses. After all the whole of life is here in verses 2 to 8. So birth and death, weeping and laughter, silence, speaking, war and peace.

Not so much giving us instructions as to how we should spend our lives but simply saying to us, this is how we will spend our lives. This is life. But I guess the question is, how does the poem make you feel?
At one level it's a beautiful poem, isn't it? Lots of people have commented on that. But notice the punchline is not, isn't life beautiful? Rather, the punchline is verse 9.
What gain has the worker from his toil? I've seen the busyness or literally the burden that God has given to the children of man to be busy with. Time is elusive. It's hard to pin down.
There's no obvious order or sequence, is there, in verses 2 to 8. Life is full of loose ends. It's full of twists and turns. Things we don't understand. Things we have no control over. Things that just happen to us. Things that just appear out of nowhere. And we think to ourselves, where on earth did that come from? In other words, every day and every week we decide how we're going to use our time.
[9:13] And yet, of course, the seasons of life are completely out of our hands. I'd like this coming week, please, to be a week of laughter, because I'm fairly busy and I've got a lot going on. But the following week is looking a little bit easier, so I can have some sorrow on Thursday morning. I've decided that November is going to be a time when I'm going to experience some success in my life. Because there hasn't been much success in the last couple of months. Life just doesn't work like that, does it? As some of us, I guess this morning, will be only too aware. Your diary tells you what you're going to do next week, but who knows whether it's going to be a week of weeping or a week of laughter, sadness or joy. Or the next few months. Who knows what time has in store for you.

There's so often, isn't there, the sense with time that things could quickly go into reverse. Perhaps you could lose that job or that promotion which you think is in your grasp just vanishes, it goes through your fingers. Or perhaps that relationship comes to nothing.

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But we're not in charge. The times and the seasons of life are so very obviously not in our control. I guess the big question then to ask is why? Why is it that God has arranged life like this? Well, the chapter tells us there are two reasons. And I put them on the outline on the back of the service sheet.
The first is so that we have a right fear view of God. The second is so that we have a right dust view of ourselves.
[11:11] Firstly, so that we have a right fear view of God. Have a look at verse 14. God has done it so that people fear before him.

To fear God is to have a big view of God. It is to have a right view of God. Not a frightened view of God, or as one writer puts it, not a cosmic bully view of God.
But a right regard for God. A right sense of awe for who he is. After all, Ecclesiastes is part of the collection of Bible books known as Wisdom Literature, together with Psalms and Proverbs and Job. Where we're told that the fear of God, the fear of the Lord, is the beginning of wisdom. In other words, if I want to live wisely in God's world, it begins with a right regard for who God is.
The God who, look at verse 11, the God who has made everything beautiful in its time. There is an overall masterpiece towards which God is working, both in our individual lives and in our world as a whole.
[12:30] We simply experience, don't we, time and life as it hits us, as we experience all the different feelings and seasons of life in verses 2 to 8.

But God is the one who plans and sets those times. Yes, verse 11, it's true. God has put eternity into man's heart. We're not like animals.
We do ask the big questions of life. We have a cat. A fairly new arrival. I don't think he asks big questions.
As far as I can work out, his main questions that he asks in life are, when am I going to get my food? Is this person going to be friendly and give me some attention?
And what's happening on my patch? Is someone invading my territory? They're not the kind of big questions of life. He doesn't have eternity in his heart.
[13:28] He's simply thinking now. And yet, of course, as soon as we ask the big questions of life, we're aware of our limitations. Verse 11.

He cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end. We are so very unlike God as he plans and looks at his world.
Verses 14 and 15. 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. That which is already has been. That which is to be already has been. And God seeks what has been driven away.
I think the sense of that last phrase is that God does what he intends to do. Young children often get frustrated, don't they?
[14:27] Because they don't see the bigger picture towards which parents or the family as a whole are working towards. What to eat. What not to eat.

What to wear. What not to wear. When they can go to bed. Where they're allowed to go. Where they're not allowed to go. When they can have friends to stay. All these things which the 7, 8, 9 year old is concerned with.
They all have to fit, don't they, into a bigger picture of family life. A budget that has to be managed. Loose ends that have to be tied up.
Various activities for the whole family that have to be coordinated. Looking after relatives and so on. There is a bigger picture which they don't really see and can't really comprehend.
And it's the same with us. Behind the scenes of life stands God's complete and perfect overruling and ordering.
[15:24] Verse 14. Here is God's perfection in the way in which he orders his world. Nothing can be added to it. Nor anything taken from it. There is a perfection in all that God does.

Nothing is overlooked. He doesn't make any mistakes in the way in which he orders his world. Or the way in which he orders our lives. I received an email over the summer from someone who had been diagnosed with cancer.
And needed an operation at very short notice. And of course suddenly the whole question of time is just thrown up into the air. What about my job?

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My family? My life? Perhaps at best asking what season of life, what time am I about to enter into? At the very worst asking, perhaps this is indeed going to be the time to die.
In the email he wrote, The key thing is remembering such experiences are always designed by God to deepen our faith in him.
[16:34] Life is rarely smooth for very long. And always the Lord allows that which disrupts for his own gracious purposes. It's a wonderful email to receive.

So fear God. Because of his perfect ordering of the times and seasons of life. But notice too, there's another reason to fear God in Ecclesiastes chapter 3.
And that is in verses 16 and 17. Moreover, I saw under the sun that in the place of justice even there was wickedness. And the place of righteousness even there was wickedness.
I said in my heart, God will judge the righteous and the wicked. For there is a time for every matter and for every work. Here is another time when every matter and every work will be brought into judgment.
So often people scoff, don't they, at the idea of judgment. And yet it is something that we long for.
[17:42] Justice. Just think of the outrage that greeted the news over the summer. Jeffrey Epstein, the American financier and sex offender, had committed suicide in prison.

Think of the outrage the parent feels when a child has been wronged. It's a reminder that however much people may dislike the idea that God will judge, we are in fact hardwired to want justice in our world.
The alternative, of course, is a world where there is no justice and no judgment. And everything simply ends at the grave. To live in a world like that, well it wouldn't matter, would it, how anyone lives their lives at all.
To live in a world like that would be unspeakably terrible. And yet wonderfully, verse 17, God will judge every matter and every work.
Which means that everything matters. God is the judge of all. God has designed life with all its passing seasons. So that we have a right view of him.
[18:57] So it's worth pausing, I think, before we move on. And just ask yourself the question. How do I relate to God? How do I relate to God, if at all?

Do you treat him as if he's a little God? A godlet, as we might say. Who is there to give you the kind of life which you feel you deserve.
And which you feel would be best for you. A God, in other words, who is there to serve you. Or do you have a right view of God?
A God who wonderfully is in charge of all the details of life. Who is perfect in the way in which he brings the seasons of life to you.
Beautifully organised. And the one who is the judge of all. So that's the first reason why God has organised time and the seasons of life as he is.
[19:59] The second is that we might have a right dust view of ourselves. Because although we are unlike the animals, in that we have eternity in our hearts.

In one way, we are just like them. Have a look at verses 18 to 20. I said in my heart with regard to the children of man, that God is testing them.
That they may see that they themselves are but beasts. For what happens to the children of man and what happens to the beasts is the same. As one dies, so dies the other.
They all have the same breath. And man has no advantage over the beasts. For all is vanity. All go to one place. All are from the dust. And to dust all return.
Dust. It's an echo of the final words that the Lord God speaks to Adam and Eve. Before they are thrown out of the garden of Eden.
[21:03] What was it Satan had said to them? I've put Genesis 3 verse 5 on the outline just to remind us from that first reading. For God knows that when you eat of it, your eyes will be opened.

And you'll be like God. Knowing good and evil. Not so much knowing good and evil, but deciding good and evil. Right and wrong.
How they would live in God's world. It is a rejection of God's rule. Playing God instead. And in response, God banishes them from the garden.
He sends them away. Every day they'll have to live with the effects of sin. And ultimately with death. They will die. Genesis 3 verse 19. By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread.

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Till you return to the ground. For out of it you are taken. For you are dust. And to dust you shall return. Do you remember how we said two weeks ago that Ecclesiastes shows us what life is like outside the garden of Eden.
[22:07] What life is like in a world where everything is affected by sin and the consequences of sin. Everything is distorted, spoilt and perishing. Like dust the effects of sin gets everywhere.

It's why there's injustice. It's why there's wickedness. It's why there is death. Life is like that fairground ride.
In a sense which you wish could go on forever. But it ends only too quickly. Life is like that holiday. That wonderful time away.
But it feels that it's time to pack your luggage again. And go home all too soon. We want things to be significant, substantial and lasting and to matter.
But life is fleeting. The clock is always ticking. Just think of W.H. Auden's poem, Funeral Blues.
[23:11] Immortalized as it was in the film Four Weddings and a Funeral. It begins with the words, stop all the clocks. It ends poignantly with, I thought that love would last forever.

I was wrong. See, the impermanence of life is oppressive. We want things to be significant.
We want us to be significant. But nothing lasts. In other words, God has ordered life outside the Garden of Eden to make it abundantly clear that we live in a world where human sin and rebellion and the effects of sin are everywhere.
We're not like God. We're not in charge of the times and the seasons of life. We live in a world full of injustice. A world crying out for God to step in and sort out the mess that we've created.
A world where everyone will die. So again, I think it's just worth stopping and pausing and asking a question.
[24:21] How do you think of yourself? Do you move through life imagining that in some way you are God? Trying to be in control of your life as if you are the one who determines the times and the seasons.

Perhaps getting frustrated when things don't go your way. Perhaps desperately striving to keep things away, whether it's old age or whatever it is, that you dislike.
I take it that if we have a right view of ourselves, a right dust view of ourselves, then it stops us needing to be in control of everything that happens to us.
It means also, I think, that death will become part of our lives. Let me explain what I mean by that.
It's not surprising that in our culture, which has turned its back on God, that same culture can't bring itself to face up to death. Because of death, of course, death reminds us so clearly that we are not God.
[25:28] And therefore, of course, for Christians, it should be very different. One of the best books I've read on Ecclesiastes is this one.

It has the title, Destiny. Learning to live by preparing to die. It's rather a shocking title in many ways.
But the point is that if this world, well, this world is not the real deal. The point is that the real deal is the new creation to come. And yet, we insist, don't we, in living as if this world was the real deal.
As if this world is the world that is permanent and lasting and substantial. The ultimate thing to live for. The ultimate thing to invest ourselves in.
But it's not. A right fair view of God. A right dust view of ourselves. Well, let's finish by thinking about two big implications for the way in which we should live.
[26:39] Firstly, I've put them on the outline. The first big implication is surprising, I think, in many ways. It is that we should enjoy God's good gifts. That is what frames Ecclesiastes chapter 3.

Have a look at the end of chapter 2, verse 24. We touched on this last week. There is nothing better for a person than that he should eat and drink and find enjoyment in his toil.
This also, I saw, is from the hand of God. For apart from him, who can eat or who can have enjoyment? Or look at chapter 3, verses 12 and 13.
The middle of the chapter. I perceive 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. We'll see how the chapter finishes. Verse 22. So I saw there is nothing better than that a man should rejoice in his work.
[27:42] For that is his lot. Who can bring him to see what will be after him? What do you say? What's going on? Well, perhaps like me, you've had your fair share of cooking disasters.

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Afterwards, you carefully assemble your ingredients. There's a new recipe you're excited to try. The picture, of course, looks fantastic.
The picture always looks perfect. A friend of mine used to make what they call presentation food. And she has explained to me that the picture is rarely the real thing.
It's a kind of fake picture just for the recipe book or the online picture. So you get everything together. You put it in the oven. But then, of course, you get it out of the oven.
At which point, things have gone badly wrong. It is burnt. It is ruined. But then, perhaps, you notice that actually there is a little corner of your creation that is okay.
[28:47] A modest residue, if you like, of what the whole thing was meant to be like. And although you haven't got a whole cake to enjoy, you can, at least at that point, sit down with a cup of coffee and enjoy that little part, which is wholesome and enjoyable.

Well, I think that's what's going on here in Ecclesiastes. As the preacher, if you like, surveys, he surveys the ruin of our fallen world. And he notes the modest residue of the original goodness of creation.
A good meal you can enjoy. Perhaps for some of us, a job we enjoy. Perhaps that moment of friendship or the holiday or time with family.
It doesn't undo everything we've seen in Ecclesiastes 1 and 2 and 3 so far. There's still vanity. There's still here today, gone tomorrow. And yet those things can still be received as good things from God.
There's still a lot wrong with our world. There are loads of things we'd like to be different in our lives as we live in the ruins of a fallen world. But while perhaps the temptation may be to grumble, instead our lives are to be marked by gratitude.
[30:08] Gratitude. Enjoy the good things that God gives us. I wonder if your life is marked by that kind of gratitude. Rejoicing in God's good gifts.

Yes, the whole of life is affected by sin and the consequences of sin. And yet there is residue which we can enjoy of God's good creation design.
So one implication, enjoy God's good gifts. The second implication, trust God's good purposes. Because the New Testament gives us a very special promise to those who belong to the Lord Jesus.
So turn, if you will, to Romans chapter 8. Romans chapter 8 on page 1138.
Now if you were here two weeks ago, you'll remember that we looked at this chapter then. We saw, didn't we, how in verses 22 to 23, the whole of creation groans.
[31:14] Indeed, we groan, living in a world where the effects of sin have gone everywhere, longing for a new creation. So what is God's promise to those who belong to the Lord Jesus in the midst of all of that?

Let me read verses 28 to 30. And we know that for those who love God, all things work together for good.
For those who are called according to his purpose. For those whom he foreknew, he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers.
And those whom he predestined, he also called. And those whom he called, he also justified. And those whom he justified, he also glorified.
Notice, will you, that for those who belong to Jesus Christ, every season of life is purposeful. Verse 28, they work together for our good.
[32:19] Whether that season of life is a time of laughter or a time of weeping, whether it's a time of starting things or finishing things, whether we're at the beginning of life or the end of life, whether it's a season of life which is full of expectation or a season of life which is full of disappointment, whatever the season of life you're in is part of God's loving purpose for our good.

But you say, what is that good? Well, verse 29, it is that we become like God's glorious Son, the Lord Jesus Christ.
There is no greater, more wonderful good that God could be working towards in our lives. And notice, who is the promise for? Because it's not a promise for everyone.
It is verse 28, for those who love God, for those who trust in the Lord Jesus. And yes, life will still hit us in the way that Ecclesiastes chapter 3 describes.

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We don't know what's coming next, we don't know how long each season of life will last for, but we can be assured that in all the seasons of life, we can be assured of the good and glorious goal to which God is working out his perfect purposes.
[33:49] That, of course, is the road to joy in the circumstances of life, and it is the road of satisfaction in life.

I take it satisfaction comes when I know that God is God and I am not. I take it satisfaction comes when I accept the creaturely boundaries and the creaturely existence of my life, that I am not God, that God is God, and accept the seasons of life, both for myself and I love, who also trust in the Lord Jesus, as coming from God's good and wise hands.
So often we forget, don't we, that we are creatures, and that God has planned out the details of our lives perfectly. David Gibson says this in his book.
Living well in God's world means recognizing that when it comes to our own lives, we are not mini-gods, and this is his creation, not ours.
We have all the pieces of life given to us, and things come and go, and seasons change, and it is only God who knows exactly where everything is meant to go, in which order, at what time, and why.

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