

The Times of our Lives

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[0 : 00] How about I pray for us and then we'll get into it. Let's pray. Father, we thank you again for your word and we pray again that you would help us to understand it, that we might be encouraged to live for you in light of it.

We ask it in Jesus' name. Amen. Well, in 1965, a band called The Birds, here they are. I love those haircuts and glasses there.

They released a single called Turn, Turn, Turn. I don't know if you've heard of this one. A few in the early morning services did, but it reached number one in the US and became internationally known.

Take a listen. Turn, Turn, Turn, Turn.

There is a season, turn, turn, turn. And on it goes.

[1 : 24] Turn, Turn, Turn, Turn, Turn. You recognize where it's from, of course? Turn, Turn, Turn, Turn, Turn, Turn, Turn, Turn. From our chapter in Ecclesiastes today. Actually, with the photos, it's quite moving, isn't it? Who would have guessed, though, that the teacher in Ecclesiastes would write an international hit?

But what did the teacher originally mean by it? Because there's a few different views. But I think the clue for us is in verse 1 with that phrase, under the heavens, at the end of verse 1 there.

It's different to the phrase, under the sun, that we looked at last week, if you were online then. As we saw last week, to live under the sun means to live in a fallen world outside the garden, the Garden of Eden.

But even outside the garden, we still live under the heavens, that is, under God. Under God's sovereign rule, under God's control.

And so the teacher is saying, when it comes to the times of our lives, whatever they may be, they're under heavens, under God. Or put differently, this poem is about God's sovereign control over the times of our lives.

[2 : 31] It's not so much about our wisdom to decide when to plant or when to uproot, although we need that kind of wisdom too. Rather, it's about God's sovereignty over the times of our lives.

And we know that because even the first one, we have no control over, do we? I mean, who plans when they will be born? We can't do that, do we?

We have no control over our birth. And for most of us, no control over our death. But God does. And so it's more about God's control over the times of our lives.

Every one of them, in fact. If you see verse 1 again, notice there is a time for everything. And a season for every activity under the heavens.

Every one, he emphasizes, is under God's control. And to highlight this, the teacher then lists 14 different pairs to try and capture our whole lives.

[3 : 27] And in each pair, you've got both ends of the spectrum, did you realize? Which is a way of trying to capture everything in between as well. We do it with some of our sayings.

So, for example, if we say people both great and small, we mean everyone else in between, don't we? Or if we say places both land and sea, we mean places everywhere in between as well, don't we?

And it's the same with these pairs. And in fact, the first one captures all our lives, doesn't it? A time to be born, a time to die, and every time in between.

That's our whole life. When it comes to the times of our lives, they're all under God's control. He sets the times and seasons for us. Not only when we're born and when we die, but also when we plant or uproot, it says in verse 2.

This could refer to literally planting in the springtime and then harvesting in the autumn time, like we saw in the video. But either way, God sets both those times because he sets spring and he sets autumn, doesn't he?

[4 : 37] Or it could refer metaphorically to a time to plant new roots in a new job or a new house. Or to uproot, change jobs or change house. Either way, especially in this market, God provides those jobs and houses, doesn't he?

Or if the teacher is writing sometime after Solomon, which I think he is, he may well have in mind the nation of Israel itself. Israel was called God's vineyard.

He planted Israel by establishing them. And then because of their sin, he uprooted Israel into exile, didn't he? Or it could be all of the above.

Either way, the point is it's under the heavens. It's under God's control. And this is true for all the other pairs as well. Even verse 3, a time to kill and a time to heal.

Again, a time to kill could refer to the time of exile when Israel were conquered by other nations. And a time to heal could refer to them being brought back from exile.

[5 : 41] In fact, on the next slide from the prophets, when they return to God, he will notice heal them. There will be a time of healing. Or just like in verse 8, with war and peace, it could also refer to a time of our own history, when soldiers are forced to defend their country and kill, like we saw in the video.

And then there's a time of peace and healing. Which suggests, by the way, that these times on view here are not just short periods of times, you know, our days, weeks or even years, but also longer periods of time, like the stage of life we're in or the season in history we're in.

And perhaps in our season of COVID, at the moment we can relate to verse 5, you know, time to embrace and a time to social distance, basically. But again, the point is, all these times of our lives are under the heavens.

They're under God. Not that we can then blame God for all the bad stuff. Remember, this world is fallen, subjected to futility because of sin.

This life is outside the garden. The bad stuff is already here. But God is sovereign over when it comes, the times of our lives. Of course, we still have some control, yes.

[7 : 06] We can still make decisions, yes. But in the end, COVID has reminded us, certainly, that we're not ultimately in control, are we? I mean, who would have let COVID happen if we were actually in control of our lives, our world?

No one. God is in control and he must be to be God. I mean, who wants to follow a God who's not sovereign, who's not in control?

I mean, what's the point of praying to a God if he's not in control, not sovereign? There's no point, is there? But then if God is in control, what's the point of our work?

What do we gain from all our labor? Point to verse 9. You see his question there in verse 9? What do workers gain from all their toil?

Here the teacher is saying that we can use our time to work hard, plan wisely, but ultimately, if we're not in control, we cannot guarantee any gain from all our work.

[8 : 11] There's no guarantee our work will pay off because we're not totally in control. For example, we can work hard to save up for our super and enjoy retirement, but then the GFC hits and our super takes a hit.

Or like many others, Michelle and I worked hard and planned wisely to visit relatives overseas last year, but then COVID came and that all went out the window. For another family, they won a trip overseas, the first time they've ever won anything.

They planned to go overseas and enjoy time with a big family holiday, COVID came. It all went out the window and they don't get the prize back. It's non-refundable. We've all had times and experiences like that, haven't we?

Well, all we've worked for has just gone out the window. Or it just doesn't seem to last, like our health. You know, you work hard, eat well, exercise, but our bodies still break down, don't they?

And so what's the point of working hard when we're not in control so we can't guarantee our gain? What do we gain from our toil, he says?

[9 : 22] And there's a sense of frustration in this question for the teacher. And if you don't believe me, look at what he says next in verse 10. He says, He has also set eternity in the human heart, yet no one can fathom what God has done from beginning to end.

You see, as a devout Israelite, he knows God is in control, that God has made everything beautiful in its time. That is, God's timing and plan is beautiful.

It's fitting. It's just right. When I was younger, I used to watch TV shows, The A-Team. I don't know if anyone ever watched this. I was a teenage boy, all right? Just don't hold it against me.

I must confess, when the remake came out, I watched it as an adult too. But anyway, the leader is Liam Neeson on the front of the picture there. And his character's name is Hannibal Smith.

And he has this line that he often says, almost every episode, he says, I love it when a plan comes together. You've got to do the husky voice because he's always smoking a cigar. But I love it when a plan comes together.

[10 : 54] And as a teenage boy, it was beautiful to see all the action and the unrealistic stuff that made the plan come together. It was beautiful. Well, the teacher knows God has a plan that comes together.

And it's beautiful. It's fitting. It's perfect at just the right time. And it's not just him who knows this. He says, all of humanity also senses this.

He says in verse 11 that God has placed eternity in the human heart, such that whether people are Christians or not, we sense there must be some sort of rhyme or reason to our lives.

There must be some eternal big plan that makes sense of our lives. That's why humanity is so religious and often searches for some divine force or destiny.

Even in movies, I hear people talking about the universe is telling me dot, dot, dot. I don't know if you've heard that. Humanity may not believe in God, but they all long for some sort of eternal divine plan to make sense of their lives.

[12 : 10] And yet the burden is no one can fathom it. No one can work out what God has done or planned from beginning to end, says the teacher.

Not even the teacher himself. Oh, sure, he knows God's promises in the prophets. But as he looks around at life outside the garden, he cannot fathom God's plan to achieve God's promises.

And we can sometimes feel this burden too, can't we? Have you ever asked yourself, what on earth is God doing in my life? Why has God allowed me to go through this?

How could this possibly be fitting or beautiful in the language of the passage? And again, if the teacher is not Solomon, he could be looking around at his kingdom and thinking, this is not the kingdom God promised.

What is God doing? And so what's the teacher's conclusion to the times of our lives? Well, it's twofold. And they both start with the words, I know.

[13 : 20] Firstly, to enjoy life and to fear God. So verse 12, he says, I know 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. The best we can do, firstly, he says, is to enjoy the good times, the good seasons God gives us as gifts.

Now, there is wisdom in this because it reminds us that when we enjoy things in life, it's a gift from God, not an expectation.

You see, there are lots of good things to enjoy in this world, a good meal, a good glass of wine, if that's your thing, or a good coffee. I had a really good coffee last Friday, actually. And sometimes even our work is satisfying, but we shouldn't expect it to always be so.

Remember, we live outside the garden. And God said in Genesis 3 to Adam that our work is going to be painful toil. That's the expectation.

[14 : 27] By the sweat of our brow. And so we should actually expect work to be hard. And we should expect life won't always go smoothly. But when it does, then, when we do enjoy things, when there is a season of life that goes smoothly, we do realise it's God's gift to us.

For our times are under the heavens, under God, in this fallen world. Of course, the world teaches us differently, doesn't it?

It says we're entitled to a good life. That things should always go smoothly. But God never promised that. And we don't experience that either, do we?

I mean, how often do things not go smoothly? I mean, even trying to find a car spot or going shopping. I mean, there's so many times I've come home from the shops and forgotten something on my list.

I've had to go back, making medical appointments and the like. You see, God is much more realistic about life in this world outside the garden. And tells us it won't always go smoothly.

[15 : 39] So when it does, it's God's gift to us. Which means we should be a whole lot more thankful than we perhaps are. I mean, when the electricity goes out or the internet crashes, as it did with a number of homes, including Tim Walker, I think, we may wrongly complain or rightly lament.

We can lament because it is painful. But then are we thankful for all the times it works so well? I'm not. I just assume to have electricity all the time.

And when we get sick, we may wrongly complain or rightly lament because it is painful. But then do we give thanks for all the times we are not sick but well?

For the teacher, he is realistic about life outside the garden and knows when it is good, then it must be a gift from God. But the question then is, why then doesn't God give us good times all the time?

Why does he allow us to suffer bad times too? Well, here's his second answer with the words, I know, verse 14. I know that everything God does will endure forever.

[16 : 58] Nothing can be added to it and nothing taken from it. God does it so that people will fear him. Whatever is has already been and what will be has been before and God will seek what has been driven away.

I notice in verse 15, the teacher again speaks of God's sovereign control. He says, verse 15, what is, that is what is now in the present, well, it's already been decided in the past.

What will be in the future, well, that too has already been decided before. And God will even seek what has been driven away in the past, such that even the past is not out of his sovereign reach.

Which is great news for those of us who have family or friends who seem to have walked away from Christ. They are not beyond God's sovereign reach.

If they are part of his plan. But the point is, everything God does, verse 14, will endure. No one can stop it. And his purpose is so that people would fear him.

[18 : 08] They would realise they're not in control and submit to God who is in control. I mean, COVID has been painful for so many people, but it has also caused many to look to God.

People have become Christians through online courses. In fact, this morning, right now, at St. John's, there are two people being baptised who became Christians earlier this year.

C.S. Lewis once wrote, God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our conscience, but shouts in our pain. The bad times are his megaphone to rouse a deaf world.

That people might look to him, fear him. Trust in him. And so for the teacher, given he's not in control of the times of his lives, the best he can gain from all his work is to enjoy life with thankful realism.

You know, life's got to be tough most of the time. Just thank God when the good gifts come. That's how it is. And secondly, to fear God, since it's God who's really in control.

[19 : 18] Now, as I said, there is wisdom for us in this. But the thing is, the teacher still cannot fathom God's plan, can he? He doesn't know God's big plan.

So his thankful realism still has a tone of resignation to it. The best he can hope for, mostly a tough life with a few gifts thrown in.

This is his lot, he says in chapter five on the next slide. You know, just enjoy the few days God gives us. This is our lot. It's a resigned tone.

It's not a very excited one, is it? And his fear of God has a tone of apprehension and uncertainty. And because this awesome God who is in control of his life, well, he's not exactly sure what God's big plan is for his life.

And so what exactly is God doing here? It's more of a frightful fear, which is why I think there's an even better conclusion for us in Christ.

[20 : 21] Because in Christ, we can know God's big plan and even more than that, God's deep love. In a way, the teacher never could, such that when it comes to the times of our lives, we can face them with more than a thankful realism and frightful fear.

We can face them with a thankful optimism, actually, and a fatherly fear. On the next slide, from Ephesians 1, it reminds us that God has made known to us the mystery of his will, his plan in Christ.

To do what? Unite all things in Christ. That is, to bring all things under Christ's kingship and grow us in Christ's likeness.

That's God's big plan. And God used his sovereign control over the times and seasons of history to send his son to die for us, to make this plan happen.

And so, as you see there, notice, at just the right time, the fitting, the beautiful time, God sent his son to die for us.

[21 : 31] And notice it demonstrates God's deep love for us, that he would do it even while we were sinners, even while we were God's enemies.

I mean, that's deep love, isn't it? And so, knowing this big plan and this deep love for us in Christ, it means we can face the times of our lives, not with a thankful realism, but even a thankful optimism.

Why? Well, because we know God's love means he'll work for our good. That's something to be optimistic about, isn't it? That's what we heard in our reading, didn't we?

And we know, we know more than the teacher knows, we know that in all things, God works for the good of those who love him, those who believe in him.

But notice that good is to conform us to be more like his son. That's part of God's plan, remember? To grow us and help us trust in God more and more, just like Jesus did.

[22 : 37] Which is why working for our good doesn't mean life is always going to be smooth. I saw this picture a teenager did between their plans, your plan, a nice smooth ride to the finish line.

God's plan, up and down, up and down. It's true, isn't it? Why? Well, to force us to look up and trust in him, to grow in Christ.

I mean, if life was always smooth, would you be forced to trust in God more or less? Less, isn't it? So God's plan and love means we can face the times of our lives, both ups and downs, with even a thankful optimism.

First, because we know God is working for our good in all those times, up and down, to make us more like Jesus. And second, because our glory is guaranteed, which is also something to be optimistic about, isn't it?

In fact, so guaranteed that on the slide, the word glorified at the end is past tense, even though we're not there yet. That's how guaranteed it is. You're guaranteed because it's part of God's plan, those he predestined, he called, justified, and his plan includes being glorified on the last day.

[24 : 03] But our glory is also guaranteed, not just because of that plan, but because of his great love. For as we also heard in our second reading, Paul went on to write, he, that is God, who did not spare his own son, but gave him up for us all, how will he not also, along with Christ, graciously give us all things?

That is all things we need to make it home to glory. You see, God's love, if he loves us enough to give up his son for us in history, then he loves us enough to bring us home to glory.

I mean, do you really think Christ, he'd give up Christ to die for you and then waste his death by not bringing us home to glory? Would God really waste the death of his only son?

Of course not. No, his love guarantees our glory. And so when it comes to the times of our lives, unlike the teacher, we know more. And so we can have more than a thankful realism, we can have a thankful optimism.

Knowing God's big plan and deep love means he works for our good and our glory is guaranteed. And so unlike the teacher's frightful fear, we can have a fatherly fear, one that still reveres God as the one in control, yes, but one that knows God as our heavenly father, whom we can confidently approach in prayer and whom we can confidently trust in life to work for our good and guarantee our glory.

[25 : 35] Let me finish. I was visiting someone last week, Friday, I think it was, and she's part of our congregation, actually, they both are. She's had cancer for a while now and they've been trying different types of chemo for the past year.

It's not long ticked over the one-year anniversary. She found out last week that none of them have worked and yet they both continue to pray and trust in God.

As the husband said to me in a text message, we are in God's hands. He knows God's sovereignty, which is a comfort to him. And the wife said, I'm 59 and if this is it, that's okay.

I'm thankful for the 58 years of good health God has given me and that I have somewhere really good to go. You see, even in this season of suffering, they have a fatherly fear of God and a thankful optimism in life.

Let's pray we might do the same. Let's pray. Our gracious Heavenly Father, we do thank you that you have made known to us your big plan and your deep love for us in Christ so that we know more than the teacher knew.

[26 : 50] And we thank you that this means we can know that you are at work in all the seasons of our life, both ups and downs, for our good to make us like your son.

And we thank you also that it means that our glory is guaranteed. And so with these two things alone, we pray that you would help us to face the times and seasons of life, remembering you are our Heavenly Father and with a thankful optimism that you are at work.

We ask it in Jesus' name. Amen.