

Time Under Heaven

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- [0 : 00] Then we're going to read two parts of Ecclesiastes. Ecclesiastes in the Old Testament. First of all, in chapter 1 from verse 1 to 9, and then in chapter 3 from verse 1 to 11.
- So, first of all, Ecclesiastes chapter 1, reading the first nine verses. The words of the preacher, the son of David, king in Jerusalem.
- Vanity of vanities, says the preacher. Vanity of vanities, all is vanity. What is man gained by all the toil at which he toils under the sun?
- A generation goes and a generation comes, but the earth remains forever. The sun rises and the sun goes down and hastens to the place where it rises.
- The wind blows to the south and goes around to the north. Around and around goes the wind, and on its circuit the wind returns. All streams run to the sea, but the sea is not full.
- [1 : 11] To the place where the streams flow, there they flow again. All things are full of weariness. A man cannot utter it. The eye is not satisfied with seeing, nor the ear filled with hearing.
- What has been is what will be, and what has been done is what will be done. And there's nothing new under the sun.
- And then in chapter 3, reading from the beginning down to verse 11. For everything there is a season.
- A time 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.
- A time to kill and a time to heal. A time to break down and a time to build up. A time to weep and a time to laugh.
- [2 : 12] 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. 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 hate. A time for war and a time for peace. Amen. What gain has the worker from his toil?
- I've 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. Amen. May God add his blessing to these readings and in his holy word.
- [3 : 19] As we look at this theme that we just read from in Ecclesiastes. This theme of time. Time. Particularly time under heaven. Because you'll have seen this.
- We read in these passages that are actually two denoting, if you like, two aspects of time that the preacher referred to, the author referred to.
- Time under the sun and time under heaven. And we're going to look at what's been said there in regard to time. Time under sun.

What is that referring to in relation to how life is perceived without God? But then time under heaven. Life, knowing that God is sovereign.

That God's in control. Time. Time under heaven. And I suppose the incentive in many ways for looking at this passage in Ecclesiastes 3 was in relation to my own time.

[4 : 22] Because believe it or not, today certainly nears the completion of 12 years of my ministry, of my time here in Livingston. I was inducted here on the 4th of July 2009.

I came here in my late 40s. I'm now in my early 60s. I'm very much aware of the passage of time that many of us have shared together in that particular passage that we've experienced in the last 12 years.

But what about time that we find referred to in Scripture? Well, as we read there, a very definite statement that we read at the start of chapter 3.

For everything there is a season and a time for every matter under heaven. And as we look at this passage more closely, to see how important it is to come to grips with the truth, with the importance of living in the times that God has given us, to live under the knowledge of the sovereign control of God, and to know that under heaven.

As we notice, there are two distinct references to time. Time under the sun, time under heaven. We can look at that more closely in a moment.

[5 : 49] But to be reminded that as we see the progression of time, to know that this is God's time. God's time. God's the author of time.

He's the creator of time. And God, who is the author of time, holds your times in the palm of his hands. So, let's look at the passage, first of all, in summary, of what we noticed, certainly in the first chapter, regarding life lived under the sun.

In fact, for the first two chapters of Ecclesiastes, the first two chapters of this particular book of wisdom, the author called the preacher here, the author, in all likelihood, King Solomon, but he's spoken, first of all, of the emptiness of life under the sun.

In other words, under the sun that speaks of life lived apart from God. That striving for purpose and meaning without God.

That striving to satisfy life without truly delighting in the one true God. In fact, in chapter 1, verse 14, the preacher summarized that kind of living under the sun.

[7 : 09] He said, I've seen everything that's done under the sun. And behold, all is vanity and a striving after wind, a chasing after the wind. In other words, life under the sun, life lived without God.

Emptiness, vanity, worthlessness. Just a chasing after that which has no substance, no eternal values.

And as well as the author said, vanity of vanities, all is vanity. But after the preacher here, after he's looked at the meaningless of life under the sun, he moves to observing life lived under heaven.

And there's a complete change in his thinking. There's a moving forward away from that refrain that he uses of life, you know, being vanity, life under the sun, being vanity, life without purpose and meaning.

And he's come to see where true meaning lies. He's come to understand where true purpose is lived under. And that's under God.

[8 : 20] A fulfillment, a true fulfillment in life lived with the knowledge that God is sovereign. Because up to this point in chapter 3, all he's been speaking about is meaninglessness.

The meaningless events under the sun. But he's now got a new perspective. Well, we might say a renewed perspective. He sees things not so much under the sun, but under heaven.

And he's seeing a Godward perspective. God above all. As opposed to a manward perspective of life under the sun. I mean, this is somebody who's searched for purpose.

He's searched for meaning. He's searched for purpose and pleasure and work. But he realizes these things in themselves haven't brought any true lasting satisfaction.

And he comes to realize that only God, only God can bring true meaning in life. And so he's going to now look at God. He's going to look at life lived under the knowledge of the sovereign control of God over the events of man.

[9 : 29] And he's going to discover true meaning in that knowledge of God. God, maker of heaven and earth. God, maker of time itself.

And so the preacher here, he's come to that point in his searching where he's come to realize where true meaning and purpose lies. Maybe, perhaps over time, the time that God has granted you this side of eternity.

Maybe that's been your spiritual journey. You've been searching for meaning and purpose in life. Maybe you've been searching for meaning and hedonistic pleasure. You've searched for meaning and purpose in your work and your job.

And you've tried to satisfy, you've tried to fill that God-shaped space in your life with all these short-lived feel-good factors. And I've found that, in fact, they haven't taken you to true satisfaction, but have taken you even further down into sin and misery and heartache and emptiness.

And you've tried to fill that gap in your life with what the world said was going to satisfy you. You've tried to get everything that was supposed to make you happy, but instead just brought you to your knees in despair.

[10 : 54] Life under the sun that had appeared so bright, but turned out to be utterly dark, utterly empty. And you reach rock bottom.

You reach rock bottom and you're searching and seeking. But God searched and God found you. As God keeps on searching and finding the lost. And God turned your life completely around.

And you truly did find true meaning and purpose, true delight, true joy under heaven. And you discarded finding purpose and life under the sun.

And above all, in that, finding that true meaning and purpose, you found that true meaning and purpose in the knowledge of the Lord Jesus Christ. Because he first found you.

And he turned your life upside down. He turned your life totally around and turned your life to live under heaven rather than under the sun. And it's that life under heaven that, as we said, the preacher here, the author here, knows is giving him true meaning.

[12 : 01] And it tells of God's providences. God's providences that are perfect. God's control over life that gives true meaning and purpose.

So what about then life under heaven? Well, let's look again at the passage. For everything, there's a season and a time for every matter under heaven.

the solution has been found. The solution to life's meaning has been found. And it's the knowledge of God. In particular, the knowledge of the providence of God.

That providence that tells of, well, it's our shorter catechism tells us. It tells of God's most holy, wise, and powerful preserving and governing all his creatures and all their actions.

In other words, God's control. God's control over every aspect of your life. And for a believer, that gives the most enormous comfort and knowledge that God is sovereign.

[13 : 04] God is in control. And that's what the preacher's discovered here in life under heaven. He's found the solution to the problem that life under the sun created.

He's come to realize the sovereign providence of God under heaven is what he's clinging to. He's seeing true meaning in the providence of God, the control of God, God who sees all things beforehand.

God who knows all things. And the preacher here as a preacher and every one of you here will see that God's, the knowledge of God and control the knowledge of God's sovereignty is the solution to the meaninglessness of life apart from God.

And so the preacher here is saying that the only solution to meaninglessness in life is to accept that there's a sovereign, divine, providential ordering of all things.

That gives meaning because there's no hope, no hope in your life or my life without God's control, God's sovereign control.

[14 : 14] And knowing that and trusting in that. And the preacher shows that certainly in the first eleven verses that were read there in chapter three. The ordering of your life and my life certainly beyond our own personal control but all under God's control.

You know, you can work it out even from the passage. None of us controls our times. None of us controls the, even the very times as the preacher says here when we're going to weep or we're going to rejoice.

I mean, no one in their right mind is going to choose a time to weep and mourn and die. And so, the preacher's pointing to the truth that the great events of life, the great events that characterize each part of your life, they're not in our control, they're not in your control, but they're in God's full and absolute control.

even the dark and difficult times in your life, even what we're living through at this very moment, even in the ongoing restrictions, constrictions that the pandemic's brought to us, God has sovereignly decreed what has happened, what is happening, and he'll sovereignly decree when these difficult times will end, and he'll do so for his great purposes.

He's already revealed man's fragility under his sovereignty, because there is a time for every matter under heaven. But then I think we do need to probe these verses a little more.

[15 : 48] Let's look more closely at what the preacher's saying here in these first eight verses, because he tells of two particular, in fact, more than fact, two particular aspects of time.

He tells of appointed time, he tells of appropriate time, and in fact, even tells of, we might say, even eternal time, if you like, time without end.

Appointed time, a time for every season, every appointed time. Appointed time, what does that mean? It refers to control. It refers to time everything that's appointed by God.

A set time for everything in your life. A time for every activity to happen. Everything in the universe under God's sovereign control. Your times, the events of your life, the circumstances of your life, all under God's appointment.

Because nothing happens by chance or by coincidence. Even the painful times, even the difficult times, these are appointed times.

[16 : 59] Everything's under the sovereign control of God. And you see that in that very carefully structured poem, little poem in the middle of, or really at the start of chapter three there, there are 14 sets of experiences that really come under the heading of the appointed time of God.

And as the preacher gives these particular aspects of life, then he gives his verdict. this is all what happens under heaven, under God's providential control.

Positive events, if you like, negative events, but events that cover all of life, from birth to death, from laughter to weeping, from peace to war, and so on.

And the preacher acknowledges that these are the appointed times for mankind. Man isn't the master of his time. I'm not the master of my so-called faith. No. God is Lord.

David the psalmist, he acknowledged that in Psalm 31. My times are in your hand. Let's never forget that. Even when you're going through all the various strata of your times in your life, the good times, the difficult times, the challenging times, the new times, the times of unexpected joy, the times of unexpected sadness, the times of unexpected pain, the uncertain times, and the times of fulfillment, they're all times under the appointed hand of God.

[18 : 39] Even as we were reminded last Lord's Day evening, remember we were looking at one of the themes anyway, the theme of blessed interruptions. Remember when Jesus was in full flow of his teaching and he was interrupted by someone outside that house he was teaching, that person telling Jesus that his mother and brothers were outside and that interruption in Jesus' teaching, but in fact a blessed interruption.

And we know that these times that God gives us, these blessed interruptions, these things that supposedly disrupt the flow of our lives, and yet God giving you these blessed interruptions as opportunities, opportunities to trust the more in God, opportunities the more to tell others of the love of the Lord Jesus in your life, the glorious gospel of the Savior.

And these blessed interruptions are under God's sovereign control because God does all things well. But that's not the whole matter of time that we see here because there's actually a future perspective, particularly as we read there from verse 9 to 11 where the preacher talks about eternity.

There's an eternal perspective of time. See, time, we might say appointed time, it's not just a present reality. There's an appointed time, as we notice with the children, when all present time will cease.

But we might say there's an eternal dimension, an eternal dimension to God's providential ruling. And the preacher here, he speaks of that.

[20 : 26] He knows that man's life is not just a meaningless breath and then nothing. The preacher tells us that there's that sense of eternity in the heart of man.

There's that sense of the divine in every heart, whether a person acknowledges that or not. Everyone has a sense of God in the heart. And in saying that then, there's that awareness of eternity, even beyond our present existence.

And you know, even the most hardened atheists will, whether they like it or not, will confess that. I remember when I was a student back in the early 2000s and one of the things we did was go and visit a care home, in fact, a very well-known care home in Edinburgh.

And one of the staff said to us that even the most hardened of people there, the most hardened of atheists who never once, it seems, had acknowledged God when it came to that awareness of the passing of their life, then there was that terrifying prospect in their lives and their hearts of an eternity, an eternity beyond death.

And therefore, there was no peace in their hearts when eternity beckoned. But for the one who knows that there is that joy of everlasting life in the presence of the Lord Jesus, then we can say that, yes, you know that there is that eternity.

[22 : 04] As the preacher tells us, verse 11, everything's beautiful in its time. In fact, the word here for the word that he uses for time here is exactly the same word in verse one for appropriate.

So God's designed, God's ordered everything of present time and the eternal aspect of our lives in his presence, all appropriate, all suitable, all fitting for the glory of God.

everything is beautiful in God's ordering of your life. And so there's an application to be derived here, to enjoy the time that God has given you, enjoy the blessings that God's gifted you even in the times that he's given you in your life.

Because God has appointed your times, times that are appropriate, that are fitting in all your needs, and know that you're secure in the providence of God for your life.

And find satisfaction then in what God has given you. Enjoy the goodness of God, even as you honour him and revere him. If we read on in the chapter, we'd see that in verse 14.

[23 : 27] Because the preacher here, he now comes to accept that there's a divine perspective in his life. That life under heaven. That he's living under the perspective of God.

And that's going to make such a difference in your life. It's going to make such a difference in your day-to-day life, in your work, in your relationships. Knowing the comfort that God is sovereignly in control of your life.

And of course, when we think of God's control, God's sovereignty as providence, you see that ultimately in the coming to earth of the Lord Jesus. Because he came just at the right time.

He came not a moment too soon. He came not a moment too late. God had appointed a time for his son. God the Father appointed a time for his son to come.

And had appointed that time even in the depths of eternity. But the timing of Christ's coming, utterly appropriate, utterly fitting, being fit for purpose, we might say.

[24 : 35] That purpose being to bring salvation to his own. Of course, that coming, the coming of the Lord Jesus for you who are his, that's brought true meaning, true purpose in your life.

Because that purpose, you know, is to honour him, to glorify him, and to serve him. God knew from all eternity that the Lord Jesus would come from heaven to earth.

That knowledge even before creation of time itself. And that's really too deep for us to understand. And yet it's so wonderful to contemplate. But you know, there's another time, another time under heaven, another time under God's complete control.

And that's the time of the return of the Lord Jesus. And that's going to be at exactly the right time. And that's going to be not a moment too soon, or a moment too late.

And just as with every other aspect of the providential control of God, it's going to be wholly appointed and wholly appropriate. Because it's time, as we were saying to the children, time that only God the Father knows.

[25 : 49] Concerning that day and hour no one knows. Not even the angels of heaven, nor of the Son, but the Father only. And really that, of course, means that each one of you, each one of us has to take great care how we live this side of eternity.

That's what the Apostle Paul wrote to the church in Ephesus, Ephesians 5, 15 to 16. Look carefully then how you walk, not as unwise but as wise.

And then he said these words, making the best use of the time because the days are evil of us. Maybe if you prefer the older version, redeeming the time because the days are evil.

God's given each one of you, yes, a race to run, but he's given you a particular time to fulfil, to fulfil that race, that course of your life.

And in that life you're going to have joy. You're going to have joys, you're going to have sorrows, you're going to know achievements, you're going to have disappointments. But how are you making the best use of the time that God's given you?

[26 : 58] He's told us that we're being given three score in ten years or maybe longer, however much time God gives you. However much time God gives you, the sign of eternity.

And you know, each one of us, I, you, we all confess that we waste so much of that time. We waste it in trivia, in needless nonsense, and well, especially in the age that we're living in, to be the more proactive in using the time that God's given us to witness to the Lord Jesus Christ.

Well, use the time that God's given you and use it well. Make the most of every opportunity that God gives you to shine for Jesus under heaven.

and do that before you enter the glory of heaven itself. You know, time is precious. Well, use the hours that God gives you.

You can't get them back once the hours are spent, as it were. You can't retrace them. But use these times well. It was the wise theologian Jonathan Edwards, he once wrote this, he wrote a whole set of resolutions at a very young age.

[28 : 13] But one of the resolutions was this, never to lose one moment of time, never to lose one moment of time, but to improve it in the most profitable way I possibly can.

Is that your resolution? Is that your resolve? Well, I pray that in the time that God gives you, use it well, use it to his glory, because you are to live your life, not under the sun, but under heaven, under God's appointed time, and do what you do to his glory in the appointed time that God gives you, and do what's appropriate for his praise and for his glory.

Amen. let us pray. Our loving heavenly Father, you who have gifted to each one of us time, and the times that you have provided for us.

Lord, forgive us for the many times when we have neglected to serve you, the many times when we have abused the gift that you've given in our hands.

Forgive us, Lord, we pray. may we the more resolve to improve life under heaven with the strength of God the Lord to serve you, to honour you, to glorify you, and to do it for your name's sake.

[29 : 39] We pray, Lord, these things in Jesus' name. Amen.