

"The Lord of Time" Ecclesiastes 3:1-15

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[0 : 00] Before we open God's word, let us take a moment and pray. Jesus, you have said that the truth will set us free.

! Because we'll feel more liked, we'll feel more control, we'll feel more whole. But the truth is, to live in the truth is the only true way to live. Lord, we want to live according to your word. We want to have those lies that we believe, those untruths that we cling to. We want to see them banished. So Lord, help us. As we open your word, help us to see truth, see reality for the way it truly is, the way you have designed it to be. Lord, not to dismay us, but to draw us ever closer, ever closer to yourself. We pray this in Christ's name. Amen. I'll start off with a quote.

[1 : 18] This is from an article called The Twelve Months of the French Republic Calendar, and it's from the Encyclopedia Britannica. It still exists, by the way, encyclopedias. Just an FYI.

I thought it better to quote from this than Wikipedia on a Sunday morning, but anyways. Quote, French revolutionaries believed they did not simply topple a government, but establish a new social order founded on freedom and equality.

To mark the advent of the new age of liberty, they replaced in October 1793 the old Gregorian calendar with a new Republican calendar.

Henceforth, the year of the official proclamation of the Republic, 1792, would become year one. The Republican calendar was abandoned by Napoleon on January 1st, 1806.

This wouldn't be the first time that time was to be altered or adjusted by revolutionaries. In fact, it's happened a number of times throughout history.

[2 : 21] Another example, in AD 67, during the first Jewish-Roman war, the priestly class of Jerusalem began minting coins with the year one as a way of rejecting Roman hegemony.

Three years later, Jerusalem was razed to the ground. Didn't last for very long. Nevertheless, revolutionaries and leaders throughout history have sought to control time.

For the control of time means one can control the narrative. To have godlike power without limits. Time is a very powerful thing. Money comes and goes.

You can buy many things with it. Jobs can be lost and gained. But if you control time, you can control the world, or at least your sliver of it.

You could have anything you wanted, or at least, at the very least, you could undo those things that you regret. We're coming to Ecclesiastes 3.

[3 : 22] And we are faced with this concept of time. However, it does not teach us, Ecclesiastes 3, how to seize the day, or how to control time, or how to pursue peak efficiency in life.

Instead, it reveals in us as people that are completely subjects to time. Not masters of it. Constantly dominated by it.

Feeling the ache of not having enough of it. This is the reality of all of us living, as the sage of Ecclesiastes puts it, a life under the sun.

So our sage continues his disillusioning work. I used that term last week. The sage is looking to disillusion us. Our sage continues his disillusioning work, confronting our faulty worldview, so that we can rightly understand, in this case, time.

And more importantly, the one true God who is above time. So the sage will teach us what it means to, first, be subjects of time. The second, the nature of the sovereign over time.

[4 : 34] And then finally, he will help us to conduct a proper investigation of the end of time. And I use the end not as in time ending, but the purpose of time.

So that we may approach time in an appropriate way, and thereby live a full and wise life. So we'll jump right into it. Let's take a look at the subjects of time.

So the poem we have, verses 1 to 8, really 2 to 8, recounts times and seasons, and captures most, if not all, of the human experience.

I won't read it all. Matthew did a great job reading it. But you can see how it is connected to mortality, morality, work, creativity, emotions, relationships, and even conflict.

It recounts how humanity interacts with the world we find ourselves in, regardless of culture and era. I mean, you read this poem, and it applies to us as much as it applied to the people that were hearing it for the first time by the sage.

[5 : 44] I'll just read the second verse and the eighth verse, the beginning and the end of the poem. And it goes like this. Actually, I'll start in verse 1. For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven.

Verse 2. The poem begins, A time to be born, a time to die, a time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is planted. Verse 8. A time to love, and a time to hate, a time of war, and a time of peace.

If this were a situational, a list of situational circumstances that we could control through the right amount of discernment, or cunning, or wisdom, starting such a list, and ending such a list with the extremities of the human life wouldn't be the best approach.

Why? If this was a list of things we could get better at, you can't get better at being born. We are completely, we have no control over the circumstances of our birth.

Who we were born to, where we were born, who our parents are, how they raised us in those early years, nor do we master the moment of our death.

[7 : 01] And I briefly mentioned this last week, but it goes again this week really well. The euthanasia regime in our country, it flagrantly, flagrantly disregards this natural reality of death, that it is out of our control.

Yet even for those who choose assisted suicide, they do so precisely because their lives feel out of control. This week, it hit home to me afresh, because Robert Munch, the famed and beloved children's storyteller, announced at the age of 70 that he's going to be pursuing assisted suicide because of medical illness.

It's an affront, a flagrant affront to the sovereignty of God. The poem also examines the extremes of social interactions.

We see this in verse 8. It focuses on love and hate, war and peace. And in many circumstances, you cannot control these things because we cannot control or influence other people. and are often driven into situations by the wills of others. What do you do when a nation declares war on you?

[8 : 27] What do you do when your neighbor declares war on you? Many things are out of our control. So you see this section, verses 2 to 8, this poem that the sage is writing, reflecting on the human experience, it does not outline a vision of a balanced life that we can create, but rather describes the harsh reality that human life is filled with.

It's filled with ups and downs. Some victories, oftentimes more tragedies. Some things we can control, and many, many more things beyond our control.

Such things are often against our will and our best judgment. So you see verses 2 to 8, this poem describes what life is like for us who live under the sun and those that are subject to time, not masters over it.

So we have no control over each year or month or hour or minute as we live them. We can't reverse time or bend it to our will.

This is going to hit home pretty closely to Christine and I, a dear couple that were mentors to us when we were dating and got engaged and then afterwards.

[9 : 46] We don't keep in contact with them too often, but they're very dear to us. Monday, the wife, Catherine, she's going to find out if she has cancer for the third time.

And this time, it's a very aggressive cancer if she's going to get diagnosed to it. diagnosed with it, rather. We can't control any of that.

We can't control any of it. We are subjects to time. We are not masters of time. Life happens to us. We don't happen to time. So once again, the sage, after he's done reciting this poem, asks the question that we've seen in chapter 2, but he asks again in verse 9, and he says this, what gain has the worker from his toil?

And the answer again is none. And especially the answer is zero if our toil is an attempt to master time or to reverse time or to somehow get around it.

And a day when the autonomous and authentic self is held up as one of the highest, if not the highest value, this is a cause for concern.

[11:08] The sage is telling us that we aren't as much in control as we think. Even with all our carefully curated and well-thought-out plans, life can be somewhat unpredictable, perhaps even chaotic.

I'm sure you guys can think of situations where your careful planning has not gone the way you've hoped for. A relationship that you valued has begun to crumble and it's completely outside of your control.

But we have to remember, and I've tried to stress this in the weeks, the couple weeks that we've had in Ecclesiastes, that the sage is not a nihilist, nor is he a fatalist.

Rather, he's a sober and hopeful thinker. You read this, and maybe it doesn't sound too hopeful, but it is a hopeful message.

Why? Because if all there was in this material world was to live and to die, where we were subject to time and the whims of fate, then we would be in a very terrible spot as a human race.

[12:19] Although the sage, he ends the poem here, reflecting on the humanity, the nature of humanity in life of, in light rather, of life under the sun, he does not conclude the section.

So he concludes the poem, but not the section. As what follows is a description of the only sovereign over time. And it is most certainly not us. So this gets us to our second point.

Who is the sovereign over time? Look with me in verses 10 to 11. It'll be on page 16. Verses 10 and 11. 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 hearts, yet so that he cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end.

God has allowed mankind to exist in this life under the sun. It is he who has given us all that occurs between birth and death. And we see this connection, actually, in verse 11.

[13:26] It connects God as the creator and curator and the one who is sovereign over time because it connects to verse 1. Let's read verse 1 again. For everything there is a season and a time for every matter under heaven.

It is God who is at work with everything, making everything beautiful or suitable in its time under heaven. So what does this tell us about the world?

First, that the world isn't a random cosmic coincidence, that we didn't happen to exist by chance, but rather God alone has appointed the time so that everything, every birth, every death, every tear, every embrace, every interaction, it remains under his watchful eye.

Nothing can bypass him. Nothing surprises him. Verse 14 also speaks to the sovereignty of God over all creation. This is what it says in verse 14.

I perceive that whatever God does endures forever. Nothing can be added to it nor anything taken from it. God has done it. We'll get to that last part of verse 14 in a bit, but I'll pause there.

[14:44] God has done it. Because God has created time, he's not bound by time. He is sovereign over time. He is complete and whole in every aspect of who he is.

Theologians, they'll talk about God being simple. Not simple as in stupid, but that he is, who he is in its fullness, it's not that God is sometimes loving and sometimes merciful.

God is loving. He is merciful. He is his attributes. This idea, though, of God creating time and not being bound by it is captured by C.S. Lewis in mere Christianity in a wonderful way.

I'll read, it's a bit of a long quote, but it really captures this idea of God being sovereign over time. It begins like this, quote, almost certainly God is not in time.

His life does not consist of moments following one another. If a million people are praying to him at 10.30 tonight, he need not listen to them all in that one little snippet which we call 10.30.

[15:57] 10.30 and every other moment from the beginning of the world is always the present for him. If you like to put it that way, he has all eternity in which to listen to the split second of prayer put up by a pilot as his plane crashes in flames.

That is difficult, I know. You can get the idea if you think of it like this. Suppose I am writing a novel. I write, Mary laid down her work. Next moment came a knock at the door.

For Mary, who has to live in the imaginary time of my story, there is no interval between laying down the work and hearing the knock. But I, who am Mary's maker, do not live in that imaginary time at all.

Between writing the first half of that sentence and the second, I might sit down and have lunch or I might spend a whole year. It makes no difference to Mary's time inside the story.

In the same way, God has not hurried along in the time stream with the events of the universe. He has infinite attention to spare for each one of us.

[17:02] End quote. God is completely outside of time. He is like, as Lewis talks about, the author of time.

However, God is not just an author who writes a story then leaves the book on a shelf to unfold as he has planned. Instead, he is deeply involved in the human experience. In fact, we find throughout Scripture that he constantly enters into the story himself.

Once again, verse 11 addresses this by saying that God makes everything beautiful in its time, which also carries this idea that it's orderly and fitting. And in doing so, he stays deeply involved. Still, verse 11 also reveals that God created mankind with a profound understanding that life is about more than we see under the sun. He has given us a conscience and placed desires within us that are not just primal or physical.

Our emotions run deep and are complex and as we've discussed over the past couple weeks, we have this innate need for meaning and purpose and this is what separates us from the animal kingdom.

[18:16] This is a huge aspect of what it means to be made in the image and likeness of God. But if the first part of verse 11 speaks to how we are different from the animal kingdom, the second part of verse 11 speaks to how we are completely different from God.

It says that although we are given a mind that desires meaning and desperately searches for deeper understanding, we are unable to know what we yearn to understand.

We see just a little snippet of it. We cannot exhaust our search. Not only that, but returning to verses 9 and 10, we also see that God has given us this additional toilsome labor and business that further frustrates us.

So in just thinking and pondering through this text, just to ask the question, is this like a bit of a sick joke? Does God give us this mind to understand but then frustrates our ability and search to find this ultimate meaning?

Why give us a conscience and yet limit our ability to achieve our pursuit? And not a pursuit, but the pursuit. So is God playing a sick game or is it an act of loving mercy?

[19:44] And again, I talked about the sage being sober-minded and hopeful in his quest, in his investigation. So I ask, where is the hope in this?

And to answer that question, we're going to consider verses 12 to 15. And the sage here will have two perceptions.

He will perceive two different things. He will examine the matter. Look with me at this first perception from the sage, starting in verse 12. I perceived that there is nothing better for them than to be joyful and to do good as long as they live.

It's talking about humankind. Also that everyone should eat and drink and take pleasure in all his toil. That is God's gift to man. I'll stop there before we get to the next one.

God provides us with so much to enjoy in this world. So much to discover. So much to learn about. He gives us an incredible table of things to try, so to speak.

[20:55] We can enjoy this. We can enjoy food, moments with our loved ones, our spouse, our parents, our children, our friends. We can enjoy physical activity.

We can enjoy a good book. Maybe a beautiful garden or a stroll through the woods. If some of you remember the Messiah Reads we did with the book on the, it's kind of a bit of a survey on the prayer book by a lady named Julie Lane Gay.

We did a Zoom Q&A; with her and she talked about how she's an amateur botanist and she's convinced that roses exist simply for our enjoyment.

She's convinced of it. I mean other plants, vegetation, it has a purpose that feeds other wildlife or pollinates or whatever but she's convinced that roses are strictly for us.

I like that thought. I have no idea if it's true but it sounds wonderful and it sounds just the type of thing that God would do. We enjoy life but again we remember that we must enjoy it in its proper context.

[22:13] Recognizing that God is the source of all good gifts that he is sovereign over all including time but including the gifts that he gives us as people that live in this time under the sun.

So I'll say as you enjoy your gifts be thankful people. Practice generosity. thank the Lord often and always when you realize that what you have and what you are enjoying is from him.

So God's gifts should be appreciated for what they are while they last and attempting to make them permanent is both impossible and again an affront and a challenge to God's sovereignty.

So on one hand we ask the question why on earth would God give us this ability but also an inability to pursue and understand kind of the totality of reality and the sage is saying listen he has given us a ton of reality to enjoy so enjoy it.

Enjoy it. Don't overlook what you have because you are searching for this ultimate quest. Enjoy what he has given you. However the second perception helps us to better understand why we are given the gift of consciousness despite the frustrating and toilful limitations that he has described a couple verses before.

[23 : 39] Look with me at verses 14 and 15. I perceived the second perception I perceived that whatever God does endure forever 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.

God is all powerful we've established that he is outside of time he is a sovereign over time over everything that we see he sees he understands everything perfectly and he overlooks nothing and yet and yet in his kindness in his kindness he allows us to feel small he allows us to recognize our finiteness and to experience the sting and the prick of broken relationships and pain and death all resulting from sin sin being that act of turning away from the sovereign God and choosing ourselves ourselves as the king of our world the main character of our story giving into selfish desires and why is that?

Second part of verse 14 God has done it so that people fear before him so that people fear before him that we may know that he is great and that we are small that our existence is brief and but for a moment while his is eternal and as we fear him which means for sure to revere him and to be in awe of him but also to remember that God is one to be feared okay there is no strong man above God he is the epitome of strength he is to be feared but also revered also honored and as we fear him we find ourselves being drawn to him okay when we are small and we are confronted with the passage of time where almost certainly there is more time behind us than ahead of us and there is nothing we can do about it okay dear Catherine is waiting for an appointment tomorrow to find out if she has cancer okay and there is nothing she can do about it

I mean she cannot go to the appointment that is not going to change what is going on in her body and in light of that we turn to God who is huge and infinite and the sovereign over time and he is also kind and loving we find ourselves drawn to him he opens our eyes through our finiteness through our pain through our suffering through allowing us to feel the pain of this existence under the sun because that opens our eyes to see him at least in part for who he truly is but as the ultimate purpose of our pursuit of meaning we find ourselves again only going so far and finding that we are toiling under the sun in our quest to know the one true God the sovereign over time and yet even if we know we must fear God the question is how then do we ascend to him how do we how do we break through that ceiling how do we how do we enter into his presence our limitations especially as those subjected to time make us genuinely hopeless unless God himself intervenes this brings us to our last point the end of time in his graciousness

God does intervene that's a wonderful beautiful news of the gospel that we are powerless to connect with God to deal with our sin to find purpose and meaning and God doesn't say you didn't try hard enough or there's just not enough runway for you to get to me he intervenes into our existence the author enters the story in his graciousness God does not merely set the times and seasons for our existence under the sun but he designs and directs time towards an end an aim that culminates in his ultimate purpose for humanity all of time is centered around the incarnation the life the death the resurrection and ascension of Christ he has redeemed us so that we may know and be known by the triune God and this is at the very center of time itself the purpose of time what do I mean by this just a few bible verses

[28 : 45] Mark chapter 1 14 to 15 Jesus came into Galilee proclaiming the gospel of God and saying the time is fulfilled and the kingdom of God is at hand repent and believe in the gospel Hebrews chapter 1 and 2 long ago at many times and in many ways God spoke to our fathers by the prophets verse 2 but in these last days he has spoken to us by his son whom he appointed the heir of all things through whom also he created the world Romans chapter 5 verse 6 for while we

were still weak at the right time Christ died for the ungodly John 13 1 now before the feast of the Passover when Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart out of this world to the father having loved his own who were in the world he loved them to the end you see when we put our faith in Christ Jesus he redeems us from our sins rescues us from sin and death but he also rescues us from being subjects to the cruelty and tyranny of time so that this moment that we are in this temporal life that we find ourselves in that in some ways we can enjoy to its fullness but the other times we feel the pain and the frustration of it we put our faith in the one who is sovereign over time and friends his redemption that he gives us is not for a time and this is how he redeems us from time for redemption isn't for 10 years or for 100 years or even a thousand years it is eternal imagine if the redemption of God was for a time say 100 years we knew the presence of God in heaven for 100 years and then the 99th year it's the 12th month it's like five minutes till New

Year's Eve and God's looking at his watch saying listen it's been great it's been a slice but back you go that would be a huge type of torture and almost a hellish sick redemption or something that was called redemption but no he redeems us from time why by bringing us into his presence forever so salvation is eternal that is why after some of our prayers we say world without end because it reminds us that we will be with God not for a moment or a series of moments or even for a millennia but forever okay not subjected to time no more under the heavy weight and tyranny of time however we are still people living under the sun even though we are promised eternal life with Christ all we know is this mortal life put it another way how then are we to live as people who are already recipients of the eternal salvation that has been promised to us but do not yet experience it in its fullness now

I think Jesus gives us the answer Matthew 24 verses 36 42 and 44 I've just plucked out the key bits there but really this whole section is very important to meditate on this is what Jesus says but concerning that day an hour no one knows this is Jesus talking about his return not even the angels of heaven nor the son but the father only therefore stay awake for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming therefore you also must be ready for the son of man is coming at an hour you do not expect Jesus is telling us to live this life under the sun as people who are already recipients of eternal life to not get hung up on the beauties and the pleasures of this world as good as they are to not put our eternal significance in them but constantly look to Christ look to eternity look to heaven as those who fear the Lord we respond to his salvation by growing in our love for him and increasing our faith that his promises so that we can believe that his promises are true and eagerly awaiting his return when all will be made right where the tyranny of time no longer exists so church enjoy this life for what it is enjoy it this afternoon

I don't know take a nap enjoy a beautiful walk have a lovely dinner tonight I don't know whatever it is that you truly enjoy enjoy it for what it is a gift from God but a fleeting gift and look forward instead to the life to come allow that pleasure that you experience on earth just point you to the pleasures you will have forevermore in Christ's presence no longer subjects of time but children of the sovereign over time do not try to break free from the times or the seasons as if you could do not try to control time because you cannot instead look to Jesus the one who has conquered death who gives us eternal life through his precious sacrifice and victory over the tyranny of time let us pray how grand is your redemption oh God that you even rescue us from time and the pressures of this mortal life and the toilsome labor that we are engaged in under the sun and yet even still you show mercy to us so that we can enjoy this world and the problem is always that we try to enjoy this world as if it were heaven as if it were the kingdom of God and yet we reject you we want the kingdom without the king and we we repent of that help us to repent of that always help us to look to you greatly anticipating your return whenever that may be whenever you decide whenever that time will come about

Lord we thank you for the cross that it happened at a very specific time in a very specific place and it wasn't an accident but it was your good design Lord help us to be people that live eternal lives even though we are here under the sun we pray this in Christ's name amen holy