

Beholding God At All Times

Ecclesiastes 3:1-15

Introduction

Good morning! My name is Brad and I'm one of the pastors here. Happy Father's Day! I know today might seem like a great occasion to go somewhere (anywhere!) other than the depressing ol' book of Ecclesiastes in order to celebrate and encourage dads, but no, we will be sticking with our summer sermon series titled, "Getting Over Life Under the Sun". Although God our Father might appear in Ecclesiastes and in our lives to be the cranky old man upstairs who pounds his cane on the floor anytime we get a little too rowdy, today's passage points us to the heavenly Father we can trust at all times. So on this Father's Day, we might say Ecclesiastes 3:1-15 is perfect timing--pun intended.

I've titled today's message, "Beholding God At All Times". If you wanna know how this message could be summed up in a sentence, here it is: Time isn't on our side, but God is. I think today's passage can be broken down like this: the author gives us a poem about time and then provides two conclusions.¹

With that said, if you are able, please stand with me to honor the reading of God's word. Again, today's passage is Ecclesiastes 3:1-15. That's page 554 if you're using one of the Bibles in the chairs. The text will also be on the screen. Hear the word of the Lord:

For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven:

² a time to be born, and a time to die;

a time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is planted;

³ a time to kill, and a time to heal;

a time to break down, and a time to build up;

⁴ a time to weep, and a time to laugh;

a time to mourn, and a time to dance;

⁵ a time to cast away stones, and a time to gather stones together;

a time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing;

⁶ a time to seek, and a time to lose;

a time to keep, and a time to cast away;

⁷ a time to tear, and a time to sew;

a time to keep silence, and a time to speak;

⁸ a time to love, and a time to hate;

a time for war, and a time for peace.

¹ Sidney Greidanus, *Preaching Christ from Ecclesiastes: Foundations for Expository Sermons*, Loc 909-911

9 What gain has the worker from his toil? 10 I have seen the business that God has given to the children of man to be busy with. 11 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. 12 I perceived that there is nothing better for them than to be joyful and to do good as long as they live; 13 also that everyone should eat and drink and take pleasure in all his toil—this is God's gift to man. 14 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. 15 That which is, already has been; that which is to be, already has been; and God seeks what has been driven away.
Ecclesiastes 3:1-15

May the Word preached here today echo among the nations. And all God's people said, *Amen*. You may be seated.

Exposition

In the Fall of 1964 the British band known as The Rolling Stones entered the top ten of the Billboard charts for the first time with their famous song, "Time is on My Side". The lyrics reflected the sense of control a man had over his lover, knowing that even if she left him she would just come running back, it was only a matter of time--or in other words, time was on his side. However, as the song became part of pop culture, along with the band, it grew into an anthem of the eternal youth, a sense of being larger than life and beyond the control of time. Which certainly was helped along by the seeming timelessness of the band, especially its lead singer, Mick Jagger, who at 75 years old is still producing and performing music today.²

But as a Christian, each time I'm singing along with the song it's almost ruined by the same striking thought: "No, time *isn't* on my side." And it's all Ecclesiastes' fault!

This week we arrive at the what is no doubt the most recognized part of Ecclesiastes, a poem about time.³ In fact, it might have been more appropriate to open up with a reference to The Byrds' song "Turn, Turn, Turn"--but instead I just asked Jason if we could make it one of our songs today. The interesting thing about the popularity of the poem is that it seems people are drawn to it for the wrong reason, as if to gain some sense of control and meaning amidst the changes in our lives and world. The biblical

² Wikipedia, "Time is on My Side," https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Time_Is_on_My_Side; Wikipedia, "Mick Jagger," https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mick_Jagger

³ Greidanus, Loc 881

purpose of the poem, however, is just the opposite, showing us that time is actually not on our side at all.

As you might remember, the author of Ecclesiastes, who is known to us as “the Preacher,” intended to provide a text of wisdom to the Old Testament people of God, showing them how everything under the sun is meaningless apart from God. Here, the Preacher intends to show us today how meaningless it is to chase after yet another thing we all long for: not just time itself, but the ability to be sovereign over time.

I. Poem - vv. 1-8

He begins in verse 1:

*For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven,
Ecclesiastes 3:1*

This is the Preacher’s thesis statement before he launches into his poem.⁴ Even though God isn’t mentioned here, we know from the Preacher’s conclusions that all the times and seasons *under heaven* are fixed by the God who is *in heaven*.⁵ That’s because God himself is eternal, and he exists outside of time. Moses came to understand this as we see in his psalm:

*Before the mountains were brought forth,
or ever you had formed the earth and the world,
from everlasting to everlasting you are God. Psalm 90:2*

The only reason there is such a thing as time is because God created it in the first place. And since God created it, time looks to him to rule over it. And so the poem itself brings this concept out as it literally feels like the ticking of a clock, as the time for things come and you can’t do anything about it: “a time to be born, and a time to die; a time to plant, and a time to pluck up; a time to kill, and a time to heal; a time to break down, and a time to build up”.⁶

There is also a completeness to the structure of the poem, where each line combines two opposites in order to represent the whole. For example, when the beginning of the Bible says that “God created the heavens and the earth,” it’s using the two opposites,

⁴ Greidanus, Loc 909-911

⁵ Greidanus, Loc 956-962; Philip Graham Ryken, *Ecclesiastes: Why Everything Matters*, 79-80

⁶ J.A. Loader via Greidanus, Loc 1010-1012

heavens and earth, to represent the whole creation. So when the poem says “a time to be born, and a time to die,” it represents what? All of human life.⁷ So God’s sovereignty over the times and seasons of life is complete, it’s all-encompassing.

The nature of the poem and how it’s meant to strike your heart reminds me of a camping trip when I was around ten years old. My friends and I decided to ride our bikes on an eight-mile trail through the woods, and at about the halfway point a massive thunderstorm struck. I had never been so scared in all my life. We were completely soaked, the trail turned into a stream, and nearly every direction we fled it seemed like bolt of lightning struck directly in front of us. We ended up huddling in a small cleft, and the youngest guy in the group was screaming at his older brother, “We’re gonna die! We’re gonna die!” And, I’ll never forget it, the older brother--not the most spiritual guy I had ever known--suddenly shouted with great piety, “Shut up, I’m trying to pray!”

What I’m getting at is that we were overcome in that situation with our smallness, that we were caught in something much bigger than ourselves. That’s how this poem should land on us when we hear lines like,

a time to be born, and a time to die; Ecclesiastes 3:2a

Here are the two appointments we all must keep: birth and death. Let me ask you, what control did you have over the time of your birth? Obviously none, right? Well, the same is true of your death. You might say, “Well, what about suicide?” And, “Doesn’t how you take care of your body affect how long you live?” Yes indeed, but at the same time the Bible tells us a person’s

days are determined, and the number of his months is with you, and you have appointed his limits that he cannot pass, Job 14:5⁸

Let’s just go ahead and acknowledge the complexity in this. It would appear to be much simpler if God was a little more one-dimensional. And some people even choose to walk down that path, saying, “Yes, God of course brings about the miracle of life, but surely he has nothing to do with the evil of death.” In fact, I just finished a book about lament where the scholar gave the biblical basis for acknowledging God’s sovereignty over our suffering, but then attacked the idea that God had any involvement in the premature death of children.⁹ I think what this came from was his years of witnessing Christians

⁷ Ryken, 80; Greidanus, Loc 918-920

⁸ Ryken, 81-82

⁹ Glenn Pemberton, *After Lament: Psalms for Learning to Trust Again*

say to grieving parents, “It was just God’s timing.” A well-intended statement, but probably not well-timed.

Likewise, I cannot resolve in a statement what takes a lifetime of wrestling with regarding the sovereignty of God. I will only say here, as is clear in this poem, that to truly be God means being God over *all things*, not just *some things*.¹⁰

Similar to this, the poem continues,

a time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is planted, Ecclesiastes 3:2b

Now, we could choose to take this as a metaphor for birth and death, but why not just take it as it is?¹¹ There are appointed seasons in which we plant things if we want them to grow, and seasons to pluck them up when they’ve fulfilled their purpose. Of course, we can ignore those appointed times, like trying to plant a vegetable garden in the winter. But that would be missing the point that there are appointed times for such things, and we *are not* the ones who do the appointing.¹²

The Preacher continues, there is

*a time to kill, and a time to heal;
a time to break down, and a time to build up; Ecclesiastes 3:3*

Once again, we find ourselves on a little bit awkward topic. “Uh...healing yes, but isn’t killing bad? We’re Christians, we can’t say there’s an appropriate time to kill. Wouldn’t that be a political statement?” But remember, the poem isn’t so much a guide for taking action as much as a guide for beholding God. And he does not hide this part of his character from us, saying to Moses,

*See now that I, even I, am he, and there is no god beside me; I kill and I make alive; I wound and I heal; and there is none that can deliver out of my hand. Deuteronomy 32:39*¹³

This is probably an appropriate time to remind ourselves that this is a God who is relating to a world in full-on rebellion against him. Was blood ever intended to be spilled in the perfect world that he created? No way! Not until the first man and woman

¹⁰ Ryken, 81-82

¹¹ Greidanus, Loc 929-930

¹² Greidanus, Loc 1015-1019

¹³ Ryken, 82; Greidanus, Loc 1020-1021

disobeyed him and God killed an animal to provide clothing to cover their naked shame.
¹⁴ There are thus appointed times for killing in a world gone wrong, and that does nothing to tarnish God's character as good and just.

But we would be right to then ask, "Wait, if God is sovereign over everything, aren't we just robots or puppets who act out his will? Isn't it his fault that we walked away from him and started killing each other?" It's a good question. And it demands us to consider what the Bible has to say about our own responsibility for our murderous hearts. Yet how can they be true at the same time: God's sovereignty and our responsibility? What a hard question!

At Antioch, as pastors we see this as one of those open-handed issues wherein we want our church to be a people who wrestle together with the Scriptures and choose unity despite landing at various resolutions, or perhaps never quite being fully resolved on the matter. I will say, however, that much of the answer lies in the mystery of being creatures trying to relate to a Creator, who exists outside the terms of the created order. We do well (as Psalm 4 tells us) to "ponder in own hearts on [our] beds, and be silent."¹⁵

The Preacher continues, there is

*a time to weep, and a time to laugh;
a time to mourn, and a time to dance; Ecclesiastes 3:4*

In the scope of life under the sun, there are appropriate times to weep and appropriate times to laugh. This covers the entire spectrum of human emotion--not just sorrow and joy--but everything in between. We would certainly love to control which ones we experience most, but that is task that is far beyond us.

There is also

*a time to cast away stones, and a time to gather stones together;
a time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing; Ecclesiastes 3:5*

This part of the poem might require some background from its ancient Near Eastern context. In wartime it was common practice to cover an enemy's fields with stones so they couldn't grow crops. Then in peacetime it followed that you gathered stones

¹⁴ Genesis 3:21

¹⁵ Psalm 4:4

together in order to clear the field for planting again.¹⁶ So the sense here is the spectrum of human relationships, from coming together to breaking up, and everything in between.

Life under the sun also includes

*a time to seek, and a time to lose;
a time to keep, and a time to cast away; Ecclesiastes 3:6*

We are all more than familiar with the ebb and flow of pursuing things and letting things go, whether something as simple as yard sale items or as profound as life dreams.¹⁷ And as much as we would love to determine their arrival and departure, God is master of all.

There is also

*a time to tear, and a time to sew;
a time to keep silence, and a time to speak; Ecclesiastes 3:7*

More than just a reference to fabric, this is the spectrum of responding to life events. In the culture of the Old Testament people of God, the response to bad news was tearing your clothes. Then when the time was right to move on, you would sew your clothes together again. This also included an appropriate time to be silent and an appropriate time to speak (which Job's friends only got half right¹⁸).¹⁹ Determining those times would be convenient, but they aren't up to us.

The poem comes to an end with there being

*a time to love, and a time to hate;
a time for war, and a time for peace. Ecclesiastes 3:8*

The conclusion of the poem provides terms that almost sum up many of the lines that came before it.²⁰ And we're left with an overwhelming sense every single detail of human experience, all of life under the sun laid before us. It's like, "Whoa, yep, that's an accounting of everything in this world...but...why did we go through all that again?"

¹⁶ Greidanus, Loc 1030-1036

¹⁷ Greidanus, Loc 1038-1043

¹⁸ Job 42:7-9

¹⁹ Greidanus, Loc 1045-1049

²⁰ Greidanus, Loc 1052-1053

II. Conclusion #1 - vv. 9-13

So the Preacher reorients us with the question,

What gain has the worker from his toil? Ecclesiastes 3:9

It's the same question that kicked off the book of Ecclesiastes, and thus it's a reminder of his purpose of searching for meaning in life under the sun. He has certainly been a participant and observer of "the business that God has given to the children of man to be busy with." And the burning question comes, "Is it worth it? Is there anything to be gained from it?"²¹

It's almost as though the poem has already given the answer, as each line cancelled itself out: "a time to be born, and a time to die"--no gain; "a time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is planted"--nothing left, no gain.²² The answer emerges yet again, everything under the sun, life apart from God, is meaningless; it's vanity; it's chasing after the wind.

And to give specific definition to the pickle in which we find ourselves, the Preacher writes in verse 11,

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. Ecclesiastes 3:11

God has made everything beautiful in its time, or in other words, his will and his timing are always good, pleasing, and perfect.²³ To be honest, it doesn't consistently feel like God's timing is beautiful. Does it to you? When sickness comes or loved ones die or unexpected bills show up or depression lingers or a job won't come or a spouse won't come or a baby won't come. No, there are moments we cry out along with Martha, "Lord, if you had been here...if you just would have been on time..."²⁴

Why can't we just trust that God's timing is perfect?! Here's why: "he has put eternity into [our] hearts". We long to see the big picture, to know his purposes behind everything, to have our every "Why?" answered. Think of how often we find ourselves

²¹ Ryken, 90

²² Greidanus, Loc 1056-1060

²³ Romans 12:2

²⁴ John 11:21

saying things like, “Where did the time go?” “When will my time come?” “How can I make the most of my time?”²⁵ We want to know, but we can’t--we “cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end.”

God has set the boundaries--I have this deep desire to know why he does what he does in my life and in the world, but I can't. I am bound in time, and yet my heart longs for that which is not bound in time, the eternal.²⁶ Where does that leave me? Frustrated, confused, bitter maybe. Tired of trying to figure it out. And that, according to C.S. Lewis, is actually not a bad place to be. He wrote,

*If I find in myself a desire which no experience in this world can satisfy, the most probable explanation is that I was made for another world.*²⁷

It's a realization that this world alone cannot give us the meaning we so desire. And so we can start down the path of getting over life under the sun. This leads the Preacher to his first conclusion. In light of all this, he says,

12 I perceived that there is nothing better for them than to be joyful and to do good as long as they live; 13 also that everyone should eat and drink and take pleasure in all his toil—this is God's gift to man. Ecclesiastes 3:12-13

Curiously, starting to get over life under the sun directly impacts how we live under the sun. Surrendering the eternal to the eternal God relieves us of the burden of trying to be God. And, like children, we're left with the important tasks of playing and obeying, or in other words, being joyful and doing good as long as we live. It's the same conclusion we saw the Preacher arrive at last week when all his pleasures disappointed: eat and drink and take pleasure in your toil--this is God's gift. The spirit of this conclusion was captured by David in Psalm 131:

O LORD, my heart is not lifted up; my eyes are not raised too high; I do not occupy myself with things too great and too marvelous for me. But I have calmed and quieted my soul, like a weaned child with its mother; like a weaned child is my soul within me. Psalm 131:1

²⁵ Zack Eswine, *Recovering Eden: The Gospel According to Ecclesiastes*, 125

²⁶ Ryken, 92

²⁷ C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, 120

III. Conclusion #2 - vv. 14-15

But that may perhaps be a really unsatisfying conclusion. “Ok, so I’m just supposed to get over my questions and frustrations? Become this fatalist whose tagline is ‘Everything happens for a reason’? What about the Crusades? What about the Holocaust?” And from setting of the Book of Ecclesiastes, it seems like the answer is yes--because we have no other choice. The Preacher writes,

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. Ecclesiastes 3:14

This is his second conclusion. In light of his observations about time, God has set up life under the sun this way so that we stand in awe of him. If that’s unsatisfying, it’s probably because on some level we struggle to trust God’s timing in light of the mess of the world we see around us. But thankfully we don’t live in the day of the Preacher. And if ever we were to question God’s timing, we have only to look at one event, the one event for which time itself was created:

4 But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, 5 to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons. Galatians 4:4-5

Here is the definition of God’s character, the character in which he rules over all the times and season of life. He is the God, who when the timing was just right, sent his own Son, Jesus Christ, to set us free from meaningless life apart from God. And think about it, he came at a time and place that didn’t seem to matter much, doing work for most of his life that didn’t seem to matter much, only to come into his own for about three years, just long enough to show some promise before being killed. Jesus gets the mystery and disappointments of time under the sun.

And even though his soul was troubled when the time came for his death, he didn’t say, “Father, save me from this hour,” but “No, it is for this purpose I have come to this hour.”²⁸ And he laid down his life, entrusting it to the God who is sovereign over all. And God raised him back to life in three days. Here’s what this shouts to us: although time is not on our side, God is. Embracing that, day after day, in every moment of our frustration

²⁸ John 12:27

with time, has the power to do just what the Preacher concluded with: to stand in awe of God. Or, to put it in the words of the author of Hebrews,

Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us give thanks, by which we offer to God an acceptable worship with reverence and awe; for indeed our God is a consuming fire. Hebrews 12:28-29

Conclusion

And so to help us with this once more, we come to the table. On the night he was betrayed, he took a loaf of bread, and after blessing it, broke it and gave it to his disciples and said to them, “This is my body, which is broken for you; eat this in remembrance of me.” He also took a cup of wine, and after blessing it, gave it to his disciples and said, “This cup is the new covenant marked by the shedding of my blood. For as often as you eat this bread and drink from this cup, you announce the Lord’s death until he returns.” **We are announcing that Jesus Christ is how we behold God at all times.**

Our tradition here at Antioch is to come forward and break off a piece of bread and dip it in the juice. There will be stations here in the front; gluten-free bread will be available to your right. If you’re a baptized believer, come and remember what Jesus has done for you. If you’re a believer but not yet baptized, let us know so we can help prepare you for baptism and communion. If you’re not a Christian, this sacred symbol is not for you, but rather than taking communion, we encourage you to take Christ. He has made himself available to you this very moment. There will be pastors in the back and people to pray with you on the sides. Let’s pray.

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