

Ecclesiastes 3 - A Time for Everything

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[0:00] We've come, I think, to probably what is the most famous section of the book of Ecclesiastes. This section is often read as a poem at funerals by Christians and non-Christians alike.

I'm sure you've heard it read. As you read it though, I think that poem at the beginning doesn't really make a whole lot of sense without the bit that follows it. In lots of ways, I think that first section in the poem is quite hopeless without what follows.

So my plan is just to try and walk through the passage with you this evening, and we've got some chance for questions and chance to discuss it in groups, and we'll finish by 7.30.

So let's think about A Time for Everything. The more you look at that poem, the less sense it makes in some ways. You would expect a poem like that to make some kind of progress, wouldn't you? A Time for Everything.

A Time to be born, what comes next, a Time to grow up, maybe a Time to get a job, a Time to work that job, and then Death at the end. But it doesn't make any progress at all.

[1:06] And I think that's deliberate. I think it's the circularity of life that is being pointed out over and over again in Ecclesiastes. That's where the book starts, isn't it? That everything goes round, nothing makes any progress.

And so this poem flits around making no progress at all. It's made up of 14 pairs, two lots of seven, which is perhaps significant as the number of perfection in the Bible.

But whatever it is, it seems, doesn't it, that the main point is that life is made up of seasons of time, blocks of time. Some of those blocks of time are happy times.

Birth, love, laughter, building. Some of those times are sad times. Weeping, mourning, war, hate, death.

And some of them seem in some senses just slightly ambivalent, don't they? Neither happy nor sad. You know it's where the scattering stones is happier than gathering stones. Do you know? I'm unsure.

[2:06] Searching or giving up. Silence or speaking. And so it is with our lives, as the writer of Ecclesiastes says, your life, my life, is made up of blocks of time.

Some of those blocks of time will be very happy. Births, weddings, graduations, new jobs, new friendships. Some of those blocks of time will be sad, death, redundancy, breakup, sickness, loss. There will be wins and losses. There will be tragedies and triumphs. And some blocks of time will be just events which are neither happy nor sad, but are just kind of there.

You know, this job rather than that job. This meal rather than that meal. This car rather than that car. This train rather than that train. And so we kind of just work our way through these events, these blocks of time, these seasons, lived in particular places with particular people at a particular point in history.

Nathan and I were talking in the office this week about it. And we were saying just the season of time for people who live in London, especially young people, is often a very short time.

[3:19] You know, there's a time for London, right? In the life of lots of young people, which is often short. You're here for a time. You're not sure how long it is. You're planning what's next.

And so it is often, isn't it, at the beginning of life. You don't imagine at the beginning of life that it will be made up of many sad blocks as well as happy blocks. You imagine, don't you, that you can build your life with these blocks because you think you're planning them and you're putting them into place.

But actually there will be other kinds of blocks coming your way. You might not be able to find a job. You may or may not get married. Your marriage may or may not be happy and easy. It might be

difficult.

You might face sickness. You will face grief. And moving from place to place doesn't actually change that much. We still work our way through these different seasons.

A time to live and a time to die. A time to plant and a time to uproot. And like I said at the start, I don't think there's much hope in the list in one sense. There's nothing here that a secular humanist would not affirm.

[4 : 24] Which is why it gets read at loads of people's funerals, right? But the writer has more to say and he will come on and say it. But it is worth noting, isn't it, that this is in the Bible, right?

So you need to know, I need to understand that being a Christian does not inoculate me from the seasons of life and the passing of time in the ordinary way that it affects everybody around me. It's not like time for the non-Christian is made up of random disconnected blocks of happiness and sadness and everything in between. But for the Christian, time is a meaningful progression to a goal that we are achieving in our strength.

No, right? Redemption does not make you superhuman or kind of transhuman. That's a bad word, isn't it? Because it means something else. But you know what I mean.

It doesn't make you kind of above humanity. You are still a person, a human, living in this world.

Redemption does not change the environment in which we live.

[5 : 21] Salvation for us is experienced by us as humans in a real world where there is the passing of time and where we face happiness and sadness and everything in between.

God works, doesn't he, in the mundaneness of our lives. I was thinking about this with someone this week, that God works in the mundane things. Actually, our lives are not made up of lots of really, really significant things.

Actually, our lives are made up of lots of mundane things. And God is at work in the mundane, which is brilliant because we live in the mundane. That is our address in the seasons that come and go.

So perhaps you're in a time of grief and sadness. Well, those come and they go. They will pass. Not because you will get over it. It will become part of your story.

But you will face happier times. You know, are you in a time of joy? Well, that too will pass. Enjoy it. But don't hold on to it as if it is the only thing that's coming to you.

[6 : 26] Because there is a time for everything. A time for everything. Then comes verse 9. Okay. And what follows really is an explanation of life in the seasons from verse 9.

Life in the seasons. In verses 9 to 11, we see something of the existential crisis of the poem. If life is really just a collection of all these different seasons, then it is actually kind of really dissatisfying.

The idea is that we're not really gaining from our toil in verse 9. It is a great burden. What do workers gain from their toil if they are just given all these blocks? Happy blocks, sad blocks, random blocks.

What is there to gain from all of that? I have seen the burden that God has laid on the human race. It's a heavy burden to carry. If you get out your phone and look back over your camera roll, I don't know how far back you can scroll.

It depends how long you've had the same brand of phone, right? And you can go back as far as you can go. Maybe as many as 10 years. And you will see a snapshot of time. A moment captured.

[7 : 37] And it will evoke all kinds of memories. And such is life. A collection of memories that seem to go nowhere ultimately. And verse 11 tells you that everything is beautiful in its time. That actually there is beauty and wonder in it.

But the pain is, end of verse 11, He has also set eternity in the human heart. Yet no one can fathom what God has done from beginning to end.

Eternity is in our hearts. So we're given these blocks of time and we long for more. Is this all there is? I feel like I was made for more. Earlier this year, I preached at the funeral of a good friend who died in his 50s from a heart attack.

And his four children were there and they all spoke at his funeral. And they spoke of how much they missed him. And one of the refrains that came through in their speeches and in the speeches of others was, He was taken too soon.

That was the thing they kept saying. It was too soon. Which of course is true, right? Dying in your 50s from a heart attack is very young. It is too soon in one sense. But the misunderstanding is that it would not be about right if he died in his 90s.

[8:53] Because actually the fact is, verse 11, God has set eternity in our hearts. Eternity is in our hearts. We long for more, but our bodies are unable to keep going.

Our desire for life exceeds the strength of our bodies to keep living. And that is a burden to carry. The building blocks of your life are not only too random for you to fathom or to build anything. There are also too few of them to build what you want. You will not get enough of them. A time for this, a time for that. But certainly not enough. Eternity is in your hearts and you do not have enough building blocks to build what you want.

And so in verse 12, the writer returns to his big message, which he also repeats in verse 22. Look down at verse 12. I know that 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. Verse 22. So I saw that there is nothing better for a person than to enjoy their work, because that is their lot. For who can bring them to see what will happen after them?

[10:08] Now, as you saw last week, it's not... The writer of Ecclesiastes is not saying, listen, just eat, drink and be merry, because that's all there is. You know, I think we talked a bit about that, didn't we, about different cultures that say, well, listen, this is what life is, this is all you've got, so just eat, drink and be merry, because you don't know what's going to happen tomorrow.

It's not that, is it? It's rather that in this short life, where nothing that we do lasts and where we don't have enough building blocks to build what we want, eating, drinking and working is what God has given to us to enjoy.

And we should enjoy those things as gifts to us from him. That's what verse 18 is saying. When the writer says that we are like the animals, he does not mean that we have no greater moral significance or spiritual significance than a beast.

Rather, his point is that like the animals, you die. So as he puts it in verse 19, the same fate awaits them both. Everything is meaningless, vaporous, because it doesn't last for long.

And we, like animals, are not building things that last. We are dust and we return to dust. In a few short years, nobody will remember us. And even those who do get remembered, they don't always get remembered accurately.

[11:14] And they, you know, they might tear down their statue in years to come. And I don't think it's any great advantage to Nelson that he's standing on the top of a column in Trafalgar Square. He knows nothing about it. It's of no benefit to him.

Verse 21 sums it up like this. Who knows if the human spirit rises upward and if the spirit of the animal goes down into the earth? Now, the translation of that is difficult.

It could be a question, like the NIV puts it, or it could be a statement. The human spirit rises upwards, the animal goes down. Which I think is more consistent with the rest of the chapter, as we'll see in a moment.

But the point is that people don't know that. It doesn't actually make a difference to the stuff that you get now. Not because we're ignorant of it, but because our activity doesn't actually seem to achieve that much more than the animal.

The beaver might make a dam that lasts longer than they do, right? But we too, we don't necessarily achieve anything or build anything that lasts. We return to dust.

[12:15] And so, verse 22, you might as well enjoy your work because this is the time to enjoy it. Now, there is more to say, and we will say more in a moment.

But I want you with the people next to you, or person next to you, to ask this. Which time are you in now? Don't necessarily go into too much detail about that if you don't want to. But what are the blessings of this time?

How is it beautiful? Everything is beautiful in its time, so there's something beautiful at the time that you're in. And what is frustrating and a burden? In what way is it wise or unwise to hope for progress in the time that you're in?

What are you trying to build in the time that you're in? Talk to the person next to you about it, and then we'll come back and feed back. Go for it. Great. Sorry to interrupt your conversations.

Those are like pretty deep questions to throw out and give you like two minutes to talk about.

Especially if you're sat next to someone you've never spoken to before as well. So, well done. Let me keep going, because I think we can unpick some of this in the last session.

[13:22] So we'll not, in the last feedback bit. So we'll not unpick all that at the moment. But I'm hoping that you're beginning to see, to think about, God has put me in this particular time.

There are good things about it for which I should rejoice and I should enjoy. There are difficult things which I must carry as a burden. And also, it is in some sense foolish to try and build too much.

Right? It's not about what I am doing and what I am achieving. So although there is progress and I am, in one sense, hopefully laying the foundations of things that I might reap later on in life.

Actually, to think that I am achieving something that means that I am less than a creature of dust is a myth. Okay. So here's the writer's point so far that we've got to.

You and I live in seasons of time. Seasons, that's quite difficult to say. Seasons that come and go and bring very different kinds of events. They don't last long, don't last as long as we might like because eternity is in our hearts.

[14 : 26] We don't get as many as we want. Our desire for eternity is frustrated by the limits of our bodies. And our spirits do go up, right? But like the animals, we don't take anything else with us.

Yeah, what we have done here, we leave behind. And so the key to enjoying life is not ignoring those realities, but embracing those realities and living within them, enjoying what God has given us now as gifts from him.

But there's something else, I think, to see in this passage. So look down at verse 14 to 17. Because while we don't build, God is building.

I think that's the point here. Verse 14. I know that everything God does will endure forever. 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 call the past to account.

[15 : 30] And I saw something else under the sun. In the place of judgment, wickedness was there. In the place of justice, wickedness was there. I said to myself, God will bring into judgment both the righteous and the wicked.

For there will be a time for every activity, a time to judge every deed. This is part two then, really. We are given lots of blocks of time.

Out of which we're not able to build anything that lasts. Nothing of eternal significance. But God is building with those blocks something of eternal significance.

God is taking us with our limits and our frustrations and is building his designs in this world with people like us. And that's incredible because God, in the process of doing that, will right all wrongs. He will hold to account. So you get in those middle verses, don't you? In the place of judgment, wickedness was there. In the place of justice, wickedness was there. The writer goes to look for justice in this world, in the places that you should find it.

[16 : 34] And instead he found corruption and wickedness and evil. But, he says, God will actually bring into judgment both the righteous and the wicked. And there will be a time for every activity and a time to judge every deed.

Every wrong will be put right. Every deed will be judged. And what God does lasts forever. We cannot add to it. We cannot take away from it. And so we should fear him.

God does it. End of verse 14. God does it so that people will fear him. Will fear him. It's interesting. I think the idea of fearing the Lord is a bit of a theme within Ecclesiastes.

It seems that the key to life is to recognize the smallness of what we are doing and the bigness of what God is doing. Ecclesiastes is not only trying to get you to know your frailty and the fact that you're going to die and to keep remembering that, but also remembering that God does not die. And God is forever. We are building with sand castles that will get washed away. And he is building a kingdom that will persevere. So with the person next to you, let's just finish off this and then we'll come to our closing conclusion.

[17 : 53] How does knowing God's work endure help us live in our time? Well, so go back to the time that you said you were living in. How does knowing that what God is doing is going to endure? How does that help you in the time that you're in?

And how does remembering your mortality help you live well now? So it's those two things, yeah? Your mortality and God's enduring immortality of his works.

How does that help you in the moment you're in? Go for it just for a minute or two. Okay, I'm on a promise to finish by half past seven.

So let's have some feedback from you. Oh, that clock's a minute fast, so I've gained a minute. Okay. Any thoughts?

How does knowing God's works endure help you live in your time well? That's a really badly phrased question, isn't it? The grammar of that is poor, sorry. Anybody, did anybody talk about anything helpful?

[18:58] Which one? Yes! Of the 15 things I said, Jamal, which was...

One thing I said. I don't know, I've got one. About the... I think I just said something about like actually everything what we're going to do with all the moments of my day.

Because I'm not going to do with that, but actually what we're going to do with all that. Yeah. Where can you spend, and that will be the same thing? Yes. That's really helpful, isn't it?

I'm going to say, I'm going to say this, that it helps me deal not just with my successes and seeing them in the limited way that they are. It also helps me deal with my weakness. Because my weakness is not the defining thing either, because it doesn't last, is it?

Yeah, that's really helpful. Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. We just really greatly said about living in the light of the judgment to come. And also the phrase came up, like, if everything's in God's hands, then we can trust Him, and we can work everything for our good.

[20:08] Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. Living in the light of judgment to come. We can trust the God who's working all things for our good. Yeah. It's massively liberating, isn't it?

Like, I don't, maybe, maybe you don't find it liberating, but I just think to think that God has put me in the place that He's put me for the time that He's put me there to live for His glory as best as I'm able. Knowing that I'm not actually able to do my best all the time because I, you know, I'm not capable of, you know, of doing that all the time.

But that it doesn't matter because I'm not actually building anything. I'm trusting the God who is building something. That's massively liberating, particularly in a, you know, where everybody is trying to build something, aren't they?

And they're trying to put together the blocks of their career in order to do what? You know, actually, you know, if the Lord blesses you with a career that you seem to climb up, praise the Lord, enjoy it, right?

But whatever you do, make sure that you're knowing the Lord through it. Because actually knowing God, fearing God, that's actually the key to enjoying life, isn't it?

[21:17] You will not enjoy the progression of your career unless you know God in the midst of it. And fearing God in the midst of it is really, really important. Anybody else? So, I don't know what Grace was saying about that, being like the prior, you know, that thinking that was simple to be able to be like our small world.

So, in knowing that actually, it doesn't really matter what we do as long as people can see the Lord through us and come to see him, yeah.

We're building with sandcastles, aren't we? You know, they're going to get washed away. Yeah. Yeah. Let me finish with an illustration. I'm going to tell you a little story.

So, CT Studd, if you've never heard of him, I've put his picture on the back of your handout. I couldn't help but edit it with chat to you, PT. So, I put a copy of Ecclesiastes in his hand and made him have a confused look on his face.

Anyway, CT Studd was one of the original Cambridge Seven. The Cambridge Seven were seven young men with Cambridge connections. They weren't all at the university, but they were in the town.

[22:27] Who, in the 1880s, went to China to join Hudson Taylor's China Inland Mission. And Studd was probably the most famous among them. Not least because, at the time, he was one of England's best cricket players.

He famously played in the team that lost to the Aussies at the Oval in 1882. And they then came up with the Ashes because the Aussies wrote in the newspaper that it was the death of English cricket because they were so good and England was so rubbish.

And so, then they've played for the Ashes ever since. And like most sportsmen, CT Studd was massively driven. One biography I have which touches on him is of the Cambridge movement, which is really about the student Christian movement.

It says this of CT Studd. Studd's chief natural characteristic was thoroughness. He had become an outstanding cricketer more by thoroughness than by native genius.

And the devotedness which had kept him, hours before the mirror practising, a straight bat, was transferred to his spiritual ambitions. Half measures were repugnant to him. His mind worked in a

broad, simple sweeps, making him, at whatever he set his hand, utterly single-minded.

[23 : 43] And so, that sort of sporting attitude he applied to his missionary work. And he started by giving away, I think at least most of his inheritance as he set out on this new venture to China.

Sadly, his missionary endeavours were not as straightforward as batting for England. And ill health forced him to return from China. And then he went instead to India.

And then ill health forced him back to England from India. He then went to Africa, specifically the Belgian Congo, where he spent the last 20 years of his life. The Biographical Dictionary of Christian Mission says this about those years.

It says, Another biographer in the Evangelical Times wrote this.

His wife, who remained in England throughout his tenure in Africa, except for a loan visit in 1928, died in 1929. Another biographer in the Evangelical Times wrote this.

[24 : 47] His wife, suffering with asthma and a heart condition, pleaded with him not to go, that is to the Belgian Congo, as had his mother earlier in his life. But neither this nor the opinion of his daughters weakened his resolve.

If they had known the separation would be for two years, and then for eleven more, their distress would have been even greater. Now, listen, I don't know C.T. Studd's story well enough to comment on all of that.

But I think very few people today would recommend his lifestyle. I don't think many do. But C.T. Studd captured his attitude in a poem. It's very long. I'm not going to read it all. But it has this bit in it.

I think it's on your handout. Two little lines I heard one day, traveling along life's busy way, bringing conviction to my heart, and from my mind would not depart. And then it has this refrain, which goes throughout the poem.

Only one life will soon be passed. Only what's done for Christ will last. Now, I was thinking this week, I wonder the sort of ecclesiastes-ness of that verse.

[25 : 47] Right? So, I think in one sense he's right, isn't he? Only one life will soon be passed. That's the poem, isn't it? Life and death. We don't last for very long. It is soon gone.

Only what's done for Christ will last. Well, I think he's trying to capture this idea that actually it is God who is building stuff. God does stuff which endures forever. But I'm not quite sure that he captures it quite right.

I think Ecclesiastes 3 would write that chorus like this. Only one life will soon be passed. Only what Christ does will truly last.

This is, I think, the point with some of the sort of our overzealous, or the overzealousness of C.T. Studd maybe if I could put it like that.

It's because we just sort of baptize a worldly ambition and think if we put Christian over it, it's somehow okay. But actually what we need to understand, even in Christian ministry, even in our work for the Lord, even in church ministry, actually it's what God is doing through us that lasts.

[26 : 55] Not what we are building that will last. And that is wonderfully liberating. Because if you read Ecclesiastes 3 and go, okay, that means that God's not really interested in my nine to five.

He's really interested in the work I do in church because that's where I'm building something that will last. Then you'll end up with an exhausting version of the Christian life, which is not what Ecclesiastes is trying to aim for. Ecclesiastes is saying, listen, you live in a world where God is building and he's given you everything to enjoy.

Enjoy it. Fear him. Trust him. Live your life knowing him and he will build his kingdom. Let me pray. So close. Heavenly Father, how we thank you that you know what you're doing, because honestly we don't. And Lord, we feel the frailty of the work of our own hands.

And we feel how unable we are to understand everything or to concentrate properly on anything or to achieve the things that we want to achieve. And tomorrow morning we'll have a job list and we'll have the same job list at the end of the day.

[28 : 05] And Lord, thank you that that's not you, but that's us. And so help us to embrace our humanity the way that you've made us and to keep our eyes on you and what you're achieving.

That we would enjoy what you've given us now. That we'd live lives to your praise and your glory. And that we would love you because we know that we have a part in what you're doing by your grace and your mercy in Jesus.

As we pray in his name. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.