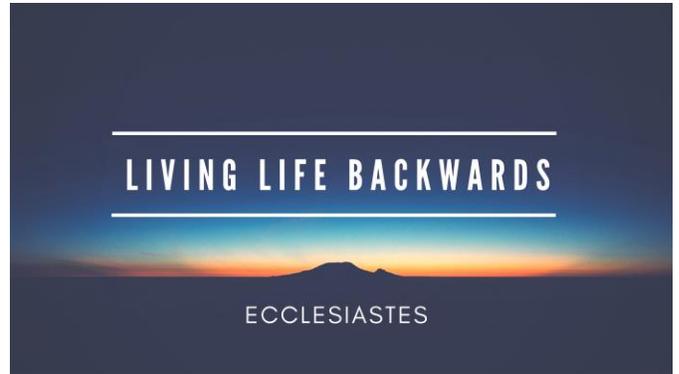


God Has Made Everything Beautiful In Its Time Ecclesiastes 3:1-15

Living Life Backwards, Part 3
David Sunday July 1, 2018



As we turn to Ecclesiastes 3, you will recognize these as some of the most famous words in the Bible. Many people have heard these words and don't even realize they come from the Bible. Those of you who grew up in the '60s or '70s are going to have a hard time turning off the sound track of The Birds singing, "Turn, Turn, Turn" as I read. Some of you are going to be whistling or humming that song for the rest of the day—and I'm speaking from experience.

This passage is rarely understood. Even at secular funerals, people will read verses one through eight, but they rarely go on from the poetry into the prose. Without the prose, we can't understand what God is doing in the poetry. So as I read, I want you to be listening for two important themes. These were pointed out by David Gibson in his brilliant book about Ecclesiastes entitled Living Life Backward. He says you cannot live well, you cannot live wisely, which is the point of Ecclesiastes—it's here to teach us how to live well in this world—you can't do that without accepting two basic truths that shape everything about our lives. 1) You are a creature bound by time, and 2) God is not. He is eternal. "We are a vapor; You are eternal. We are a moment; You are forever. Love everlasting reigning on high."

So listen for that as I read this passage: we are creatures bound by time; God is not. Hear the Word of God, beginning at Ecclesiastes 3:1:

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.*

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.*

Let's pray.

Lord, teach us to number our days, that we may present to You a heart of wisdom. Lead us closer to Christ, Whom You sent in the fullness of time to redeem us from the futility of life under the sun. We believe in the testimony that You have born concerning Your Son, that You have given us eternal life and that this life is in Your Son Jesus. Whoever has the Son has life; whoever does not have the Son of God does not have life. So dear Father, we pray that no one in this room would come to the end of this brief, vapor-like life under the sun without having found eternal life in Your Son. Send forth Your Spirit into our hearts today and fill us with joy in Jesus, we pray in His name. Amen.

There once was a time when I never worried. When I woke up in the morning, I did not grab my phone and check to see what had happened during the night or what messages were waiting for me to respond to or what appointments I need to be reminded to face in the day. I didn't worry about not having enough hours in the day to finish all the stuff I needed to do. I never had trouble falling asleep because I was brooding over the disappointments of days gone by. I slept like a baby. I never woke up in the middle of the night, panicking over all the things I needed to do the next day. I didn't fret about what might lie around the corner.

I had no regrets about time I had wasted and opportunities lost. I was not restless, thinking, “When will my time come?” I never felt frustrated that I wasn’t accomplishing enough. I wasn’t anxious about whether my plans would fail or succeed. I didn’t get stressed about whether or not I’d be late for an appointment, or how I was going to get from Point A to Point Z without running into traffic, or how I was going to have time to eat supper and still get to the meeting I needed to attend that night. No one ever felt like an interruption, back then.

Do you remember those days? We call them childhood. When I was a little child, I knew my mom and dad would take care of me. I didn’t think about my future with fear or ruminate about the past with regret. Each day I was fully present in that day. Each day was a new adventure. There was once a time when I did not know what anxiety felt like, and arrogance had not yet developed when I was a child.

*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.
² But I have calmed and quieted my soul,
like a weaned child with its mother;
like a weaned child is my soul within me.*

*³ O Israel, hope in the LORD
from this time forth and forevermore.*

Today in Ecclesiastes 3, God wants to lead us back to that simplicity; lead us into that serenity that was described in that sweet, short 131st Psalm I just quoted. God wants us to relearn a fundamental reality that has never changed about us. We are still little children in a world we do not control. And we will be, until our dying breath.

Our times are not in our hands. Our times are in the hands of Another.

You and I really have no more control over our lives today than we did on the day of our birth. We’re just as dependent on the care and provision of Someone else as we were when we were two years old.

Many of us will insist that is not true. We will protest. In the defiant words of “Invictus”:

*In the fell clutch of circumstance
I have not winced nor cried aloud.
Under the bludgeonings of chance
My head is bloody, but unbowed.*

It matters not how strait the gate,
How charged with punishments the scroll,
I am the master of my fate,
I am the captain of my soul.

[From "Invictus" by William Ernest Henley]

Invictus—it means “unconquerable, undefeated.” There is within the pride of human hearts this assertion of autonomy. “I’m not accountable to anyone but myself.” It doesn’t matter if God has given commandments that everyone must obey, lest there be consequences. It doesn’t matter that Jesus said:

Enter by the narrow gate. For the gate is wide and the way is easy that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many. For the gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life, and those who find it are few (Matthew 7:13-14).

Few are willing to humble themselves and become like a child. Jesus said if we’re not willing to do that, we can’t enter into the Kingdom of heaven. He wants us to know that this is the way of joy and peace. To the arrogant who says, “I will not submit to someone else being the lord and master of my life. I will be the master of my fate. I will be the captain of my soul,” God is saying, “Well, there’s a better way here. There’s a better way to live.”

To the anxious person who wonders how they’ll ever have the strength to cope with what life throws at them—whose heart is filled with worry and fear, rather than having the restful trust of a little child who is calm in the embrace of his mother—to that anxious heart, God is saying, “There is a way of peace, a way of joy, a way of contentment.” It starts with repenting of the mindset that thinks, “My times are in my hands to manage and control.” Instead, repentance says, in the words of Psalm 31:14-15, “*But I trust in you, O Lord; I say, ‘You are my God.’ My times are in your hand.*” That’s what the Holy Spirit designed this passage to do in the hearts of those who hear it.

Verse 1: A Pronouncement, Not A Prescription

So let’s start in verse one: “*For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven.*” That is a pronouncement, not a prescription. The Preacher is telling us here that all of life is unfolding under the appointment of God’s divine providence. Notice he uses the phrase “under heaven” in verse one, instead of “under the sun.” He’s pointing us to a place above the sun, to the high King of heaven Who rules and reigns over heaven and earth. He wants us to know that

behind all our human activity, there is an all-encompassing plan and design that this high King of heaven is faithfully unfolding in His time.

The Hebrew noun for ‘season’ means appointed time or predetermined season. So God is saying here in Ecclesiastes 3:1, “There is a design for your life and for the universe that is unfolding, and you cannot control it.” You can’t manipulate it. You can’t conquer it by downloading another productivity app on your phone. You’ve tried OmniFocus, and you’re on to Phase 3—what’s next? You’re not going to control your time. You can’t schedule all of it out on Google Calendar. You can’t insure your future through your 401k or your fidelity account, because your times are not in your hands. They’re in the hands of Another. They’re in the hands of the high King of heaven.

The lesson of this poem is not, “You need to become discerning of the times you’re in and learn how to act in those particular times and seasons.” It’s not telling you, “You know, usually it’s not good to kill, but if you really hate someone, well, there might be a time when it’s okay to kill.” That’s not what this poem is saying. It’s not a prescription of something we’re supposed to do. It’s a description of what God has done, of God’s activity, of God’s design. It’s calling us to observe reality, not to fight against it. Submit to the fact that your life and my life have been designed by Another.

The Preacher is aiming to persuade us that the way of wisdom and path of joy is to put our trust in the Designer. And if you’re going to trust Him, you’ve got to know what He’s like. So let me tell you something about the Designer, the Master of our fate, the Captain of our souls. Do you know what is the single most frequently repeated characteristic of God in the book of Ecclesiastes? It’s His generosity.

Out of all the things God wants to tell us about Himself, this is what He tells us more often than anything else in the book of Ecclesiastes. He is generous. He is good. He has showered good gifts upon His creation. He’s been very generous toward humanity.

That should incline our hearts to trust Him more. Now, there are going to be a lot of anomalies to life under the sun, so the next couple sections of Ecclesiastes are going to show us death, injustice, oppression, loneliness, ill-qualified leaders. We won’t be able to make sense of it—not while we’re still living under the sun. But we must never let the anomalies lead us to question the wisdom of God’s design or the goodness of His plan and purpose. We’re just little children right now. We can’t see everything from heaven’s grand perspective just yet, but we need to know there is a higher perspective. There is a bigger picture. There is a greater design, all made by One Who is exceedingly generous and good. Now, let’s flesh this out.

Verses 2-8: Everything is Included

In 3:2-8, there are 14 pairs of extreme opposites. They're put side by side. It's a way of saying, "Everything in between these opposites is included." So he starts with birth and death, verse two: *"A time to be born, and a time to die."*

I didn't choose the date when I would be born. Had I been invited to be part of the choice, I would have lobbied for mid-October. There's no more beautiful time of the year in the Midwest and I'd love to have a week in mid-October when I could just celebrate my birthday and enjoy the fall colors. But God gave me the end of August, right around the first day of school. "That's when you're going to be born."

And I have zero control over the day of my death. If I could design my death, I would choose to die at the end of a very full and faithful life, after being healthy and meaningfully engaged in fruitful activity for, say, 99 years. On my 100th birthday, I would go on a bike ride along the Fox River trail and not feel a single bone ache. Then the day after my 100th birthday, I'd wake up with a little cold which would turn into pneumonia around 3:00 p.m. I'd say, "You'd better call the pastor."

They'll call my friends, family and children. They'd gather around me around 6:00 p.m. They'll read some of my favorite Psalms, Isaiah 40, Romans 8 and Revelation 21 and 22. Then they'll sing, "It is well with my soul" at 7:30. By 8:00 p.m., I'd be with Jesus. That's how I would design my death—a wonderful party. But I have no idea if God's design or plan will be anything like that. It could be God's plan that the day of my death, or yours, would come before the end of July. We don't know.

Likewise, there's a time for every moment in between the day of our birth and the day of our death. There's time for your first step, first tooth, first spanking. Your first day of school, the day of your first kiss, the day you get your driver's license. [Maybe I should have reversed the order of those last two.] The day you start your first job. The day you retire. The day you get sick. The day your friend betrays you. The day you have an accident. The day you lose the love of your life.

While you were still in your mother's womb, Psalm 139:16 says to the Lord, *"Your eyes saw my unformed substance; in your book were written, every one of them, the days that were formed for me, when as yet there were none of them."* Now, I can't get my mind around that. *"Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is high; I cannot attain it"* (verse six). But it's true.

Look at all the variety of things that happen during a lifetime. Some of them are pleasant, some are painful, some are perplexing. There's planting and plucking up, killing, healing, weeping, laughing, mourning, dancing, loving, hating, war and peace. In some seasons you throw away things that seem useless, then other people come and dig through the dumpster, and the very things that someone threw away get repurposed and become useful and precious. Some seasons

are times for purchasing new things; other seasons are times for downsizing and decluttering. There's a variety in the times of our lives.

Then notice how relational life is from these descriptions. Almost every one of these varied circumstances involves navigating our relationships with other people. Even birth—you can't do that alone, can you? You need a mother who's laboring and cooperating in the process of your birth. It's people who make us weep. It's people who make us laugh. We dance at our wedding. [Kate and I didn't dance at our wedding, but we're practicing now so we can dance at other people's weddings.] And then we mourn when the one with whom we danced is taken from us. We embrace those we love, but with others, we get a sense, "I'd better not hug them. I'd better observe a little personal space." You go to hug them and you can tell they aren't open to that. It's relational.

Do you see how flawed life is in this fallen world? Maybe you've not lived long enough to realize it yet. Maybe so far you've experienced a lot of planting, a lot of building up, a lot of laughing and dancing and embracing and loving. But if you live long enough here in this "once Eden"—this good world that's been corrupted by sin—you will experience the flawed, fallen condition of it. Live long enough and you will weep. You will be broken down. Before you die, there will be times when you feel like you've been killed. You will mourn. You will lose. You will tear your clothing in lamentation—either figuratively or literally. You will feel hatred. If you know love, you will know hatred too. You will even see the brutal effects of war. It's all in the design.

Our daughter is home from Tennessee and brought two of the girls with her whom she nannies. It's been a delight to have them. The younger one is named Anias. She's five years old. She's darling, like her older sister. Kate and I prayed with her before she went to bed, then she said to Kate, "I want to pray too." Here's what she prayed: "Jesus, I love my mom. Jesus, I love my dad. Jesus, I love all people. I love everyone. Thank you, Jesus." A sweet, simple prayer. I heard that and thought, "Oh, if only I could ensure that Anias would experience just the bright side of life, just the good times."

Jen Wilkin writes:

We readily acknowledge that there is an appropriate time for everything, but we have fairly formed opinions on when those times should be. The time to heal is any time someone is sick. The time to be silent is when I'm done speaking my mind. The time to die is at the end of a full life, not a moment before. But we see all around us that tragedy and comedy, birth and death, mourning and dancing present themselves seemingly at whatever time they choose. Human comprehension labors to make sense of it all.

We can't. The times and seasons of our lives are inscrutable to us, impossible to understand or interpret. We can try to predict what's going to happen next, but we nearly always get it wrong. We can try to figure out a pattern, but it often looks more like a maze. The seasons thrust themselves on us, and here we are. We're not in control.

You can't plan when you're going to laugh or weep. You can't schedule grieving. You don't determine if you're born in a country that's in a season of peace or a season of war. You can't dictate how long these seasons will last or in what order they're going to come. It leaves us asking the question in verse nine, "*What gain has the worker from toil?*" If at the end of it all we end up in a box, six feet under, what's the gain in it all? From dust we came and to dust we shall return (3:20). This is really a burden. The NIV translates verses ten and 11 like this:

I have seen the burden God has laid on the human race. He has made everything beautiful in its time. He also set eternity in the human heart. Yet no one can fathom what God has done from beginning to end.

Verses 9-11: Everything is Beautiful

We long for eternity as it is in the heart of every human being. This is the burden God has intentionally laid on humanity. You can suppress the knowledge of God, but there's something in the heart of every person that longs for eternity; that says, "All that I'm looking for cannot be satisfied in this life." If at the end of our lives we simply die—and that's the end—what's the point of it all? We long for eternity, but we're stranded in time. We yearn to grasp what God is doing between the beginning of time and the end of time. And He tells us He has a plan, He has a design, but we cannot see it. We can't figure it out.

I remember a few years ago some elders and I were driving back from Minneapolis in February. I'll never understand why Desiring God has a pastors' conference in Minneapolis in February, but hundreds, even thousands of people drive up there on I-90. On this one trip, everything was going fine on the way home until just south of Madison. It was around 6:30 p.m. when all the traffic started slowing down to a snail's pace, then came to a complete stop.

A half hour went by. Then an hour. People started getting out of their cars, standing up on the hoods, trying to see, "Where does this thing begin?" But you couldn't see it. Everywhere you could look, cars and trucks were stopped on the highway. The national guard came by in snowmobiles, giving us gas. We waited and waited and waited, not getting home until about 4:35 the next morning.

That is the type of situation we see here under the sun. God has put us in a frustrating situation. It's a burden. We can't figure out the beginning from the end. God knows, but we don't.

But God tells us something wonderful in verse 11. He tells us that if you will trust Him about this, if you can believe that this is true, it will relieve that burden for you. It will give you peace. What is it that God wants us to know in verse 11? He has made everything beautiful in its time.

Everything is beautiful—in its own time. Everything is working according to a plan. Not just the times of peace, but also war. Not just the dancing, but the mourning. Not just the loving, but the hating. God has made everything beautiful in its time. The birthdays and the funerals. He's already done it. He's already designed this great plan—but we can't see it.

If you live long enough, you start to have a past. You don't feel this when you're five, but if you live long enough, there is a past. And in that past, there are a lot of twists and turns that you can't figure out. There are some painful things in the past, stuff you can't fix. Relationships you cannot mend. Wickedness for which you've seen no justice. It's like a jagged piece of glass. Every time you handle it, you get cut again—so you can't handle it much. You look at that event, that relationship, that wickedness and you think, "How can something so ugly, so dark, so painful ever be beautiful? Not that."

But we are nearsighted. We can only see the broken, jagged glass. We can't see the stained-glass window. We can't see what the Designer is making. That's because we are locked in time—but God is not. God is eternal. We see that in verse 14: "*I perceived that whatever God does endures forever.*" He's eternal. No one made Him. He made us. There never was a time when God was not and there will never be a time when God ceases to be. For God, the past, present and future are immediately present. I don't know how that can be, but God sees World War I and World War II and whatever is going to happen in the future and whatever happened 6,000 years ago—He can see it all.

There's a really interesting phrase in verse 15 that describes this plan of God: "*That which is, already has been.*" God knows. That which is to be in the future already has been in the mind of God. "*And God seeks what has been driven away.*" That's a shepherding term, describing a shepherd going out for his lost sheep. What it's saying is God is able to take all those tangled lines and threads and jagged pieces of your past, that you feel like nothing beautiful can come of, and He's able to bring it into the present and future in a way that becomes beautiful. He's able to do something beautiful with all of it.

Verses 14-15: Everything is Eternal

Whatever he does endures forever. Nothing can be added and nothing can be taken away, it says in verse 14. You can strive all you want to engineer your life, to achieve something lasting, something great. But none if it is going to add anything to God's perfect, beautiful plan. There's

nothing any human being can do to thwart God's beautiful design either. The Bible shows us this over and over again.

Think of the story of Joseph in Genesis. You can throw your brother in a deep pit. You can sell him to be a slave in Egypt. But what you intend for evil, God will work for good and for salvation (Genesis 50:19-21). In fact, your sin against your brother, Reuben and Simeon, might actually lead to your own salvation in the end, in God's beautiful plan. What you intended for evil, God is going to intend to bring you salvation. Isn't that beautiful? That's God.

Think of the Exodus. You can be the Pharaoh of Egypt. You can enslave the Israelites for 400 years. You can tell them to make bricks out of straw and break their backs with hard labor. You can oppress them. But you cannot defeat God's beautiful plan. God hears His people groaning. God remembers His covenant. God sees the people He loves and God knows how to make everything beautiful in its time. He'll divide that sea in half, if He needs to get His people to the Promised Land. He's going to do it—in His time.

Or think of David. You can be a man after God's own heart, who looks into the night skies as a young shepherd and writes the most beautiful poetry, "O Lord, our Lord, how excellent is Your name in all the earth" (Psalm 8:9). And you can know God as your Shepherd and love Him as your King and trust Him as the One Who will lead you in paths of righteousness for His name's sake. And then you can stumble badly and stray from those righteous paths. You can sink so low and become so treacherous that you would be willing to steal the wife of one of your most faithful, loyal soldiers, right when he's out fighting a battle for you.

Then when she becomes pregnant, in the panic of your fear and in the blindness of your pride, you could arrange to have that faithful man killed in battle while he's fighting your war. Yet even then, God is able to make something beautiful in its time. Because from those sins, you will experience such deep cleansing of repentance and such fresh joy in God's forgiveness that Psalm 32 and 51 will become a source of hope to the most broken sinner in the world. Hundreds, thousands, even millions of people will find comfort from your psalms of repentance.

And from that woman, from Bathsheba, God is able to bring you an Heir, a Son Who will forever reign on your throne—a righteous King Whose Kingdom will rule over all and will endure forever. When in the fullness of time that King finally comes into the world, you can look upon Him in all His humility, holiness, love and compassion, yet you can reject His rule. You can say, with the religious leaders, "We will not have this Man rule over us!"

You watch while they scourge Him and beat Him and plait a crown of thorns for His skull. Your mocking voice will join with the crowds, crying out, "Crucify Him! Crucify Him!" But some day you will see Him there on that cross and you will say, "It was my sin that held Him there until it

was accomplished. His dying breath has brought me life.” God has made everything beautiful in its time. There’s nowhere where that truth shines more brilliantly than at the cross. Through the ugliest, most wicked evil ever done, God has brought everlasting joy and beauty to millions. Because of that cross, there will be a new creation where God will dwell with man.

When we see Jesus, we realize the burden that God has placed upon man, God Himself took the burden. He became a Man. He lived in our time-locked world. He experienced all the dark things and the joyful things that are in that poem. He did it all at just the right time. Look at Jesus and you will see with greater clarity than Solomon could ever have imagined that God makes everything beautiful in its time.

Application: Fear the Lord

So how should we live this side of eternity when we can’t see so much? The answer is in verse 14. God has done it so that people fear Him—reference before Him. He’s created this longing in our hearts that cannot be resolved as long as we’re in time, so that we will look to Him Who is over time and above time and not captive by time, fearing before Him. To fear Him does not mean to live in terror or dread of Him. I like how Walter Kaiser defines it. This means to commit your entire being, to trust and believe Him. God is good. It means to desire nothing more than to be intimate with God, pleasing Him and submitting to His will. And it means to dread nothing more than God’s disfavor. That’s fearing Him. That’s the path of joy and peace.

Do you fear the Lord? Because without this, you will not be able to make sense of the inscrutable twisting seasons and times of your life. But when you fear the Lord, you can be freed from the anxiety and the arrogance that’s in our hearts, because God will give you peace about your past. All those tangled threads and jagged pieces will somehow be brought into something beautiful. God can give you confidence about your future, because you know that you are not your own, but you belong with body and soul, both in life and death, not to yourself but to your faithful Savior, Jesus Christ. He has so fully paid for your sins with His precious blood and set you free from all the power of the devil, that He will preserve you in such a way that without the will of your heavenly Father, not a hair can fall from your head (Matthew 10:29-31).

All things will work together for your salvation. You can be fearless about the future when you know you’ve got God as your Father. He’s holding you. He’s saying, “Son, I’ve got this. Daughter, fear not. I’m working it all out. I’ve made it all beautiful in its time. Trust Me.” The way to grow up into maturity in Christ is to grow small, to become a child again, to trust dependently on your Father.

Finally, if we fear the Lord, we can be fully present in the present and experience real pleasure and joy in the simple gifts of God. This is what verses 12 and 13 are all about. Be joyful! Do good as long as you live. Eat, drink and take pleasure in your toil. God has given you all this as a gift. He's given you food. He's given you drink. He's given you toil—work to do. Do it. Don't fret about it, because you know that you have nothing to prove. You are a child of God. You know God is able to work out anything in your past and you know God has your future in His hands. So receive His gifts with gladness today. Enjoy the good stuff He's given you to do. Rejoice. Relax.

Sometimes people ask me if I golf. I think sometimes people think all pastors do during the week is play golf. So my answer is, "No. I don't golf. I do occasionally walk around a golf course and hit the ball around, but I don't golf." With the Fourth of July upon us, this may be the week that I walk around one of those golf courses and hit a ball here and there...and everywhere.

I could get stressed out if I don't hit that ball as well as my son does—and I won't. I could get stressed out and angry if it's not going in the direction I thought it would go. I could get stressed out if I swing really hard, but all that happens is a big piece of dirt flies up in the air. But really, why should I lose any pleasure over that? After all, I'm probably going to get to explore places on that golf course that no one else has ever trod before. I'm going to see corners and parts of it that people rarely traverse. And I'm going to end up with more points than anyone else in the group.

So if every day we have on earth is given by our King, why would we squander God's good gifts by stressing out over things that ultimately make no difference at all? Fear God. Say to Him, "My times are in Your hands." Receive His good gifts. Relax in His love. Rejoice in His goodness. Live fully in the present, with peace about your past and great confidence in your future. Because for those who fear the Lord, "All shall be well and all manner of things shall be well" (Julian of Norwich). That's true. That's the life God gives us in Christ.

Let's rejoice in these truths!

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