

A Beautiful Mystery

Ecclesiastes 3:1-15

It's a scary thing to all of a sudden lose control. Nebraska winters are not unlike New England, and I remember one Sunday morning nearly five years ago losing control of our car on the way to church. As we came down the backside of an overpass, our tires never once caught traction the entire way down. You turn the wheel, you hit the breaks—no response, no control. It's frightening. Thankfully there were no injuries, though our car had seen better days.

But perhaps even scarier than losing control, is finding out that you never had it to begin with. That's what Solomon discovers in our passage this morning.

As he continues his search for lasting gain and significance under the sun—in anything we see and experience here and now—his exploration of time and eternity forces him (and us) to face the jarring reality that we are not in control. But whereas we might expect Solomon, given what we know of his study so far, to meet this realization like a watermelon against a brick wall, instead his response is more like a patient settling in for a root canal in the dentist chair—you know it's going to be uncomfortable, but given your pain, and compared to the alternatives, it's the best place to be. So Solomon takes an honest look at the dynamics of time and eternity for life under heaven, and invites us to come with him. And surprisingly, what he finds is not the vanity or vapor we've come to expect—the word doesn't even occur here. Rather we catch another glimpse of life from “above the sun,” from God's perspective, to help us see that God is working out *his* sovereign purposes in our lives in a *beautiful yet mysterious* way.

Ecclesiastes chapter 3 begins a new section, and looks like it might introduce a completely new conversation. Verses 1-8 are undoubtedly the best known passage in the book—what one author calls a “Catalogue of Times.”¹ Another author describes, “Despite the misfortune of having been made famous by the Byrds, this passage remains a great expression of the way men live their lives before the Lord.”²

But though we often read this poem by itself, it doesn't stand by itself here in the book, but it's part of Solomon's larger quest for lasting gain and significance in the few days we have on earth. He posed his opening question in 1:3: “What does man gain by all the toil at which he toils under

¹ Michael V. Fox, *A Time to Tear Down & a Time to Build Up: A Rereading of Ecclesiastes* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 193.

² Douglas Wilson, *Joy at the End of the Tether: The Inscrutable Wisdom of Ecclesiastes* (Moscow, ID: Canon Press, 1999), 40.

the sun?” Listen to the question he asks immediately following the poem, in 3:9: “What gain has the worker from his toil?” Same question.

And so what we have here is Solomon’s second major research project as he seeks to find some meaningful way to spend our lives here and now. And the objects he slides under the microscope are *time* and *eternity*—what effect do they have on the significance of our daily lives?

He begins this section, not with a question, but with an affirmation. Verse 1: “For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven.” To show us what he means, he lists fourteen pairs of life events, each pair containing a set of opposites (e.g. birth and death, weeping and laughing), to show us that there is an order to the rhythms of *all of life* under heaven.

One of my professors, Richard Schultz, offers (in my opinion) the best summary of what each of these poetic lines are talking about.³ As Schultz explains, Solomon starts by looking at the beginning and ending of life in v. 2. First, for people and animals, there is “a time to be born, and a time to die;” likewise for vegetation: “a time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is planted.” Beginning and ending of life. Then in v. 3 he looks at the destruction and repair of both bodies and buildings. As we live out our days in a fallen world, there is “a time to kill, and a time to heal.” There is also “a time to break down” buildings, whether in war or renovation, “and a time to build up.”

Verse 4 shows how we respond to life’s various situations: “a time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance.” Verse 5 is harder to understand, but seems to speak generally of joining and separating: “a time to cast away [or scatter] stones, and a time to gather stones together,” possibly referring to scattering stones over an enemy’s fields to make the land useless for planting (as in 2 Kgs. 3:25), and then gathering them again when the conflict is over. Likewise, concerning friendship or perhaps intimacy, there is a time to join, “to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing.”

Verse 6 describes how we treat our possessions: “a time to seek, and a time to lose; a time to keep, and a time to cast away.” Similar to v. 4, v. 7 shows us our responses to life’s tragedies: “a time to tear [as in tear your garments in mourning, something we see happening in ancient cultures], and a time to sew,” to put them back together and move forward. There is “a time to keep silence, and a time to speak,” perhaps generally in terms of knowing when it’s wise to say something or to keep your mouth shut, but again possibly with reference to one’s initial response to tragedy, from being speechless to being able to talk about it.⁴

Finally, v. 8 describes the fundamental emotions of human life: “a time to love, and a time to hate,” along with their social effects: “a time for war, and a time for peace.” These are the rhythms of life in a fallen world.

The question comes up whether this poem is simply describing what *is*, or whether it’s instructing us to figure out what *should* be *when*, and to live accordingly. On the one hand, we would clearly do well to keep in step with the rhythms and patterns of life. It doesn’t do any

³ I owe the summarizing categories for vv. 2-8 to Richard L. Schultz, “Ecclesiastes,” in *Evangelical Commentary on the Bible*, Gary Burge and Andrew Hill, eds. (rev. ed.; Grand Rapids: Baker, forthcoming).

⁴ See Schultz, “Ecclesiastes.”

good to plant your crops in the fall and try to harvest them in the spring. Standing at the bedside of your dead loved one is not the time for a comedy hour. Some of us (myself included) would do well to learn the proper time for keeping something, and the proper time for *throwing it away*. So yes, there is a certain cadence to life, and it helps to live according to it.

But we would be foolish not to stop and ask where this cadence comes from. Who crafted these rhythms, who wrote the score that creation dances to, or the play we're acting out? There may be appropriate responses to different situations, but what say do we have in the situations themselves? Look back at the list and notice how little of this we actually control.

Which one of us had any say in the day of our birth? Nobody consulted you about when you'd like to come into existence. And no one is going to consult you about when it's time to go. We're not at liberty to rearrange the calendar or shuffle the seasons to our liking. We recognize there's a proper time for weeping and for laughing, but we have no say in when those times come. The joy of the wedding day gives way to the grief of the car accident on the way to the reception. Which one of us can cause a war to happen or bring about national peace? There is a pattern at play in this world, but we're not the ones crafting it or calling the shots.

And in comes the shocking realization: *we're not in control*. Scholar Derek Kidner describes, "Looked at in this way, the repetition of 'a time [for this], and a time [for that]' begins to be oppressive. Whatever may be our skill and initiative, our real masters seem to be these inexorable seasons: not only those of the calendar, but that tide of events which moves us now to one kind of action which seems fitting, now to another which puts it all into reverse."⁵

The purpose of the list is to show us that every matter under heaven has a proper time and fitting place, but that we have no control over when that time and place is. So what do we do with that?

There is only one thing to do with it: *fear*. The only question is what or whom we will fear: the seemingly impersonal and dispassionate march of time, or the very personal, compassionate God who weaves it all together?

Our default, when we realize our weakness and inability to control things, is to fear life and the whole variety of hardships this world might dish out. Our hearts are filled with anxiety over the simplest things—driving back and forth to work (will there be an accident?), putting our children to sleep at night (will they wake up?), hitting "send" for that email (will they get angry and hate me?). We've heard too many stories of freak accidents and unexpected tragedies. So we think in terms of "risk management," and we take "safety measures." Now, to be sure, there's wisdom in those kinds of things. But it's not always wisdom that drives us; sometimes it's fear. The terror of what might happen if time gets its way. We may give lip service to a belief in God, but the way we live our lives agrees more with the assessment of notable atheist, Richard Dawkins, that human existence is "neither good nor evil, neither kind nor cruel, but simply callous: indifferent to all suffering, lacking all purpose."⁶

⁵ Derek Kidner, *The Message of Ecclesiastes* (BST; Downers Grove: IVP, 1976), 38.

⁶ Richard Dawkins, *River out of Eden* (New York: Basic Books, 1995), 96. As cited in Philip G. Ryken, *Ecclesiastes* (PTW; Wheaton: Crossway, 2010), 40.

We feel it and we fear it. And eventually this leads us either to give up and resign ourselves either to a meaningless existence or to the numbing effects of some sort of escape—sex, drugs, entertainment, anything to take off the edge. Or else to stand up in defiance of time and chance, in the spirit of William Earnest Henley’s poem, “Invictus”:

Out of the night that covers me,
Black as the Pit from pole to pole,
I thank whatever gods may be
For my unconquerable soul.

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

Beyond this place of wrath and tears
Looms but the Horror of the shade,
And yet the menace of the years
Finds, and shall find, me unafraid.

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.

The only problem with this is that it’s hogwash. We can’t do it. It’s wishful thinking at best, and sheer delusion at worst. Because eventually time will win, and you will lose. And even worse, adopting that attitude will crush you in the process. Because the painful reality is that even if you had the authority and responsibility to be in control, you lack the ability to execute it. You’re not strong enough, and neither am I.

But there’s another response to the realization that we have no control over the course of life: to fear the God who does. And by “fear” here, I mean reverence, respect, trust, joyful surrender. This, surprisingly, is the response that Solomon advocates, and in vv. 9-15 he explains why.

In light of time’s ordered march, Solomon poses his question and takes another look at human life under the sun. Verse 9 again: “What gain has the worker from his toil? I have seen the business that God has given to the children of man to be busy with” (3:9-10; cf. 1:13). But again, instead of concluding that all is vanity, the clouds part once more and we catch a glimpse of life from above, from God’s vantage. Listen to v. 11, which is the heart of this passage and Solomon’s commentary on the poem in vv. 1-8: “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.”

The march of time is not random or callous; God is the author of time and events. And he makes every event *beautiful, fitting, suitable* in its time—according to his plan. A plan so wonderful and expansive that there is no way for us to take it all in. God is working out his sovereign purposes in our lives in a beautiful yet mysterious way.

If you think of God's plan for all time and history as a great tapestry—a large rug with all of the different color threads working together to create a beautiful picture, Derek Kidner explains, “We are like the desperately nearsighted, inching their way along some great tapestry or fresco in the attempt to take it in. We see enough to recognize something of its quality, but the grand design escapes us, for we can never stand back far enough to view it as its Creator does, whole and entire, *from beginning to the end.*”⁷

Or to switch the image just slightly, and think of the tapestry still on the loom, Doug Wilson describes, “From the vantage underneath, little is visible but snarls and knots. But above, the beautiful pattern of the work on the loom can be seen. As Solomon has shown, we live out our lives under the loom, and everything we see is vanity. So how can we see the pattern above? The only possible answer is through faith in the sovereign God.”⁸

If that's true, if God is sovereign, which means he has absolute authority over all of time and history, that no event escapes his notice or his plan, then we can leave all our fears in his hands, and follow Solomon's instructions in vv. 12-13: “I perceived that there is nothing better for them than to be joyful and to do good as long as they live; also that everyone should eat and drink and take pleasure in all his toil—this is God's gift to man.”

Notice the similarity to his conclusion in 2:24-26. There is joy, even in the midst of vanity, if there is a sovereign and good God at work in and behind every matter. We're free from the anxiety, from the fear of callous and indifferent circumstances. We can enjoy the daily routine of life—eating, drinking, working—knowing that God is working his good purposes out in that. We can give ourselves to serving God and doing good, trusting him to take care of the results. And though it's not easy, and can in fact be unspeakably hard, we can even trust God when life falls apart, when the unthinkable happens, and tragedy strikes—not because we understand it, but because we are confident that God does, that he sees the whole picture from beginning to end, and that he is both powerful enough *and* good enough to work it out according to his plan.

There some things in life I want to understand pretty well before I do. If I'm going to dive into a swimming pool, I want to see for myself that there's water in it. If I'm going cross the street, I want check both ways with my own eyes before I step out. But there are some things I'm okay not understanding, *as long as the person guiding me is trustworthy*. I don't have to know enough about transmissions to agree or disagree with whether mine's shot; I can trust Steve Peluso to tell me straight. I don't have to understand the inner workings of biology and chemistry to trust a doctor's advice to put poison into my body in order to treat some cancer.

In the same way, though I may not understand what he's doing, I can trust God to work his purposes out. Like a root canal, it may be uncomfortable, but given the pain and the alternatives, there's no better place to be than in that dentist chair. Doesn't mean that I always like God's plan, or that it's easy, or that I don't ever protest. It doesn't take away the pain and the heart ache of life in a fallen world. But it does give hope and peace, and even joy, because you're submitting to the one person wise enough, strong enough, and good enough to do something about it.

⁷ Kidner, 39.

⁸ Wilson, 39.

God is not some capricious Hollywood producer who writes people into the script and then kills them off willy nilly for his own amusement. Everything he does is a finely orchestrated part of his plan—his very good plan. And he will be faithful to accomplish that plan. Take a look at vv. 14-15:

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. That which is, already has been; that which is to be, already has been; and God seeks what has been driven away (or perhaps, “will call the past to account,” NIV).

This is a picture of complete, sovereign authority and power. No one can add to or take away for the sovereign plan and work of God.

As Doug Wilson states, “This doctrine has a hard edge and more than one person has cut himself on it. But denial of the doctrine does not remove the [difficulties]. It just removes the possibility of finding any solace.”⁹ If we take sovereignty out of the hands of God, who made everything, who do we give it to? Who do we trust? Ourselves? Time and chance?

For some of us, the idea that anyone has authority over us is simply offensive; we don’t want anyone telling us what to do, let alone a God with absolute authority. For others, we fear that such a belief would mean we are mere robots (though we see no conclusion of that sort in Scripture). Still others want to protect God’s reputation, distancing him from the bad things that happen in the world (even though he’s quite comfortable taking ownership for them in Scripture, cf. Isa. 45:6-7). But most often, we have a hard time with the idea of God’s sovereignty because we don’t like it that God can have more freedom for himself than we have for ourselves.

We want to make the call, we want to run the show, and we’re afraid that if we don’t, then everything will come unraveling apart. The bottom line is, we don’t trust God. Either we don’t think he’s good enough, or we don’t think he’s powerful enough, because we don’t always agree with his decisions. We think, as Tim Keller explains, “If our minds can’t plumb the depths of the universe for good answers to suffering, well, then, there can’t be any!”¹⁰

But Solomon reminds us, we’re looking at the bottom of the loom. We’re looking at one small section of the tapestry. And if we look closely enough, we see that there’s a whole lot more to the story, though we’re unable to take it all in. Thankfully we don’t have to, because there is a sovereign God who has both the authority and the power to bring his plan to completion. And he has proven it in the life, death, and resurrection of his Son, Jesus Christ.

When we think of the march of time and history, that’s where it was all headed. Everything points to and flows out of the cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ. That’s the centerpiece of the beautiful mystery of God’s sovereign plan. That’s the story that makes sense of all our stories—all the joy and sorrow, all our efforts to know God, all our rebellion against God and his rule, all of human experience under the sun was folded into the life and story of Jesus, taken upon himself on the cross, that he might deal with our sin, bear our sorrows, and bring new life and wholeness to us through his resurrection from the dead, according to his sovereign grace.

⁹ Wilson, 43.

¹⁰ Timothy Keller, *The Reason for God: Belief in an Age of Skepticism* (New York: Dutton, 2008), 23.

Paul says “when *the fullness of time* had come, God sent forth his Son” (Gal. 4:4). “At the right *time*, Christ died for the ungodly” (Rom. 5:6). In Christ God made “known the mystery of his will, according to his purpose, which was set forth in Christ as a plan *for the fullness of time*, to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth” (Eph. 1:9-10).

Jesus is the centerpiece of God’s beautiful mystery. There was a lot that didn’t make sense in his life. The God of creation, taking on human flesh, only to be rejected and murdered by his creation. And yet God was at work in the mystery to bring about something beautiful—salvation, new life, new creation. There is hope in Jesus. In him, *only in him*, can the mysterious parts of our lives be made beautiful. If we believe in him, trust in him and his work on the cross.

Faith in a sovereign God is the only foundation for joy and hope in a fallen world. If that idea is new to you, and you’re trying to make sense of God and Christianity, maybe frustrated at staring so long at the bottom side of the loom, then I’d love to talk with you. Maybe you know Jesus and have trusted in him, but you likewise are frustrated with the view from under the loom, weary and discouraged with the cadence of life. I’d love to talk too, and pray with you. There are several people after the service by the organ that would love to pray with you, and take these things to the God who is working out his sovereign purposes in a beautiful yet mysterious way.

How do we respond when we realize we’re not in control? Rejoice that God is. Fear God—respect him and trust him. Enjoy the gifts he’s given you—the food, the drink, the work of your hands. And serve him by doing good all your days, clinging to the grace we have in Jesus, bearing witness to the grace we have in Jesus, making the most of your time (Eph. 5:16), and entrusting the results to God’s sovereign hand, knowing, again, that our labor in the Lord is not in vain (1 Cor. 15:58).

Discussion Questions

1. If you had heard the poem in vv. 1-8 before, what connotation did it have in your mind? Has your understanding of it changed at all when considering the bigger arguments of Ecclesiastes?
2. What do you think about the suggestion that the only proper response to realizing we’re not in control is to fear—either impersonal and dispassionate march of time, or the very personal and compassionate God who weaves it all together? What does it mean to “fear God”?
3. The subject of God’s sovereignty can be controversial for some. What indications are there in this passage that God is in sovereign control of time and history? How does your heart respond to this doctrine?
4. What difference does clinging to God’s sovereignty make for the ability to live our daily lives with joy and in service to God? What would be missing if we couldn’t count on God to be in control of it all?
5. How does the life and story of Jesus demonstrate God’s sovereign plan? How does that story help us make sense of our own stories?