

Ecclesiastes 3:1-15

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Date: 22 September 2024

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[0 : 00] Please turn back to Ecclesiastes 3 that was read for us earlier, page 554 in the Black Church.! A life of wisdom, a wise life must by definition be a life that understands the world the way it really is.

And wisdom is therefore desirable in part because it means that the person who possesses it, the wise man or the wise man, or the wise woman, knows what to expect and isn't derailed by things happening that they are thrown off course by, but actually just the things that happen in the course of life in the world the way it is.

A couple of weeks ago I used the example of a child building their first sandcastle. That moment when their great pride and sense of satisfaction, what they've managed to achieve, turns to sadness and horror when the tide comes in and washes their work away. And I said their parent isn't bothered in the least.

And the reason they're not bothered in the least is because they know what to expect. It has always been thus. The tide comes in, washes away the sandcastle. That is how it is.

The parent is mature. They know that that is how the world works. This book of Ecclesiastes is wisdom literature. That is, it is given to us to make us like the parent and not the child.

[1 : 34] It is given to grow us up in God's wisdom, to understand how things work in God's world, so that we can navigate the world as well as possible. So that we're not thrown off course by things that happen just as they always have in the regular course of life.

If you were here, Solomon started the book by reminding us of the unstoppable cycles of nature and the generations. People come and people go. Life is a vapor. That's just how it is.

And last week we saw him take us through his research into every single aspect of life under the sun in order to show us that there is no gain to be had. There is no personal profit to be extracted, as it were, from wisdom or pleasure or productivity or prestige.

They too are vapor. And that explains, doesn't it, the epidemic of dissatisfaction that seems to characterize Western culture in our day.

Those things, wisdom, pleasure, productivity or prestige, those are the things that we have been told to pursue in order to gain in life, in order to profit from life in this world.

[2 : 45] And actually, they're not able to do that because they are just handfuls of mist. Wisdom dictates that we grasp this.

And because the narrative of Western culture is going completely in the opposite direction, what Solomon is saying to us in this book is incredibly countercultural.

And this evening, Solomon adds another category to our understanding as he explains how reality, the world as it really is, reality requires us to accept that we are limited and finite and that God is not.

That's really the point of our section this evening. The wise man, the wise woman will accept that God holds the whole world in his hands. He is sovereign.

And everything that happens is beyond human control. God is God and we are not. Now, this goes against all of our instincts. We prefer the doctrine of Henley's poem, don't we?

[3 : 47] Invictus. In the fell clutch of circumstance, I have not winced or cried aloud under the bludgeons of chance. My head is bloody but unbowed.

It matters not how straight the gate, how charged with punishments the scroll. I am the master of my fate. I am the captain of my soul. That's the wish of every human heart.

That's the instinct that rises up naturally in all of us. We want to live independently in the world. We don't want to need anyone. We want to be able to stand against whatever comes our way and stand.

We want to stand. The reality, however, is that that's not the case. And deep down, actually, we all know that we can't live that way.

And this evening, I want us to see that Solomon gives us a poem of his own to explain why that's the case. So, here's our first point. It's simply this. God's sovereignty.

[4 : 48] God's sovereignty. That's the first thing that Solomon tells us. Verses 1 to 8. For everything, 3 verse 1, there is a season. And a time for every matter under heaven.

If you're anything like me, you can't read this chapter without the birds song from the 60s coming into your head. There is a time for everything. There is a season.

Turn, turn, turn. But this isn't a sentimental tune about the passing of time. It is a poetic description of how God is Lord over the times. For everything, there is a season.

And a time for every matter under heaven. And Solomon then develops, verse 1 as it were, through 2 through verse 8 by using a literary technique which places opposites side by side as a way of saying these and everything in between.

So, a time to be born and a time to die. Putting those two together is a way of describing the whole of life from conception to the moment the heart stops beating. Every activity, every emotion, every experience, every matter under heaven is determined by God.

[6 : 01] And these verses are often taught to focus on human activity. There is an appropriate time for you to act. That's the way it's taught.

Sometimes you'll do this. Sometimes you'll do that. And there is an appropriate time to do that. And the most sentimental versions of that kind of teaching appeal to verse 11. If you look down to verse 11, he's made everything beautiful in his own time.

To suggest that even our bad behavior like killing, verse 3, or hatred, verse 8, is somehow beautiful in its own way. But this poem isn't about human activity.

It's about God's activity. It's describing God's appointment of all things and how he is absolutely sovereign over absolutely everything. His plan, his timing, his rule extends to birth and death, to sickness and health, destruction and repair, love and hate, war and peace.

The entirety of human life, which even extends to those things that appear to be in our hands. Do you notice that? Verse 3, a time to kill and a time to heal. A time to break down and a time to build up.

[7 : 11] Those feel like decisions that we make as humans. But Solomon puts them alongside laughing and weeping, verse 4, to show that actually, although those are activities that we execute, God is the one who stands behind them.

He is the one who decides when those things happen. None of us choose when we laugh or when we weep. At the most basic and inane level, try stopping when you get a fit of the giggles when you shouldn't.

You can't. More seriously, it would be absurd to suggest that you can plan how long you will take to grieve the death of a loved one. The idea that you might schedule in your diary grief, it'll start at this time and finish at this time.

You can't do that. Solomon is telling us that God decides these things. Even the tragedies and injustices of life. Even the chaos. Indeed, the way the poem is constructed.

Did you notice this? It is designed to make precisely that point. There is no pattern and no order to it. Casting away possessions, verse 6. Tearing a garment, verse 7. Keeping silent, verse 7.

[8 : 19] It's deliberately random. Why? Because that is often how life feels. One moment you're mourning a loss. The next you're embracing a friend. The next you're dancing with your spouse all the while.

You feel hatred at injustices that go on all around you. And war rumbles on in Ukraine. Now, to be clear, where there is sin and where we make sinful decisions, God is not the author of that.

Sin is the responsibility of the one who sins. But this does not remove God's complete sovereign superintending of all things.

So, can you see? There is a time to be promoted and a time to be fired. A time to be criticized and a time to be praised.

A time to receive the cancer diagnosis and a time to get the all clear. To conceive and to miscarry. To be betrayed and to be shown loyalty.

[9 : 21] To be honored by your children and to be dishonored. To be loved and to be rejected. God has set the times of them all.

He has given you these things from His hand. You are not the master of your fate. And I wonder if this is the cause of so much of our anxiety and distress.

I reckon many of us, if we are honest, could draw a straight line from our grumbling and our dissatisfaction in life to the fact that we are not actually in control. And yet, Solomon's point is that trying to control these times, trying to control the seasons, trying to manage your life in such a way that it will be okay, that you will be able to navigate it alright.

Perhaps even trying to understand why God does what He does in your life. Well, to do that is too great and too marvelous a thing for anyone but Him.

Isn't that what the Psalmist resolved in Psalm 131 when he said, He said, He is talking about the inscrutability of what God is doing in His life.

[10:49] Our attempts to control our lives. It is to lift our eyes. That is an idiom for us acting proudly, assuming a position that we shouldn't take. It is to occupy ourselves with things that actually aren't our business.

We can't predict how things will go. We can't leverage things for our own gain. We are quite simply caught up in an adventure and we don't have the map.

Faithful, wise living acknowledges that God is sovereign and we are not. Now that doesn't play well with an Invictus spirit, does it?

One author has said, This doctrine has a hard edge and more than one person has cut himself on it. Plus, as we said, being part of an adventure without a map can make us anxious.

So, with this very clear and shocking statement of God's sovereignty in verses 1-8, it is really important that we recognize that what follows is there.

[11:55] Solomon didn't stop at verse 8. In fact, he goes on to explain and develop in what follows a bit more. Flesh it out. So, Solomon goes on to say, Point number one is God's sovereignty.

Point number two is God's sovereignty is fitting. We need to see that God's sovereignty is fitting.

That is verses 9-11. 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.

He has made everything beautiful in its time. Solomon reintroduces our toil. That was his topic in chapter 2, you remember. And what gain is there? What gain has the worker from his toil?

None. It is all vapor, a striving after the wind. That is what we discovered. But he mentions it again here in chapter 3 for contrast. Because while yes, our work and our plans, that is the business that God has given to the children of man, while our work and our plan is vapor, God has made everything beautiful in its time.

And look down again, verse 14, he goes on, Whatever God does endures forever. Nothing can be added to it, nor anything taken from it. God's labor is not vapor.

[13:05] God can shepherd the wind. Remember I said last week his phrase, striving after the wind, is actually sort of a description of somebody, like a traffic warden, trying to direct the wind in a particular way.

That is why it is foolish. But God can do that. And all his plans, Solomon says, are beautiful. Now this isn't actually the best translation, because Solomon isn't making an aesthetic judgment.

He is describing how God's plans fit together perfectly. That is a thing of beauty, but what he is describing is how they fit together. God's sovereignty is fitting. Our lives might be beyond our control, but they are not beyond God's.

And all the seasons and circumstances actually fit together perfectly. Everything that God has done is in keeping with the sovereign plan. Everything. Everything. The embracing, verse 5, when that person needed your care.

The refraining from embracing when it would have been inappropriate. And the consequences of both. The time you held your tongue, verse 7. The time you spoke up and the consequences of both.

[14:13] The time that war was declared and the time that peace prevailed. And the consequences of both. Somehow, it all fits together in God's plan.

Now what we need to see is that when Solomon says this, he is making a confession of faith. And this is necessary. We'll say more on this in a moment. But it's necessary because of what the poem has just made clear.

We can't see from God's perspective. For us, life is like a tapestry that we can only see from the backside.

With all the knots and the twists. It looks like a mess. It's got bits sticking out. There's no pattern. There's no order. But if we could see it from the other side, we would see a beautiful picture being weaved together with no mistakes.

Fitting and perfect all according to the master's plan. But we don't have that access. And for now, the reality is fitting or not, those knots and bumps are real.

[15 : 25] The mess is real. The confusion is real. And so Solomon, what he says next is even more important. Verse 11, if God's sovereignty, point number two, is fitting, point number three, God's sovereignty is frustrating.

It's frustrating. 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. God has put eternity into our hearts.

He has placed in us an awareness of and a longing for the transcendent. That is, he has given us a yearning to know the end from the beginning. If you think about it, life would actually be easier if we could forget the fact that there is a divine plan being worked out in our lives and in our world.

But God won't let us forget that. That is why, in fact, I think we pursue the distractions that Solomon tried in chapter two. The pleasure, the busyness, the attempts of greatness.

We know that God is. He made us in his image and gave us a sense of the divine. We also know in our subconscious that he's working out his plans in the world for good.

[16 : 38] But because we don't have access to that information, we don't like this. What he's actually doing in every circumstance, we don't like this. And we especially don't like not being able to know like him.

And so we try and shut it out. If we pause in the silence, if we take a break from busyness and distraction, one of the things that we'll realize is that we are very finite and that we are at the mercy of God in the world.

We don't like that. We'll also recognize that we have a great sense within us of the transcendent, of the existence of God in the world and the fact that we don't simply just think that he's there, but we know that he is.

And we suppress that truth. We don't like that either, so we try to shut it out. But we need to see. Solomon is telling us here that this inability to understand what God is doing is a feature of our humanity.

It's not a bug. God has done it and he has done it deliberately. See, when we cry out, what on earth are you doing, Lord?

[17 : 55] What on earth is going on here? He has put that frustration there. Now, the details of whatever the situation is, they all fit perfectly into the bigger picture, but we can't see how.

And it's not even like a one million piece jigsaw puzzle where with a bit of time and a bit of patience, you'll eventually sort it out. No. We don't have access to the map.

We don't have the big picture. We don't have the blueprint because we are not God. And it's frustrating. It's frustrating.

And we have to be honest about that. I want to suggest that much of our struggle in the Christian life is down to our unwillingness to accept this reality.

We have an illusion of control. We make our decisions. We plan our lives. We want to optimize for excellence. It's a phrase I discovered recently.

[18 : 52] And we do whatever we can to bring our plans to pass. But then God messes with those plans. And things don't go our way because he is working according to his plans, which are actually, believe it or not, better plans than ours, even when we might think otherwise.

And I want to say this. As sensitively as I can, this is especially the case when things aren't just frustrating but are painful.

When our desires, our good desires, whether it be for a spouse or for children or for a job that would enable us to provide or for good health, all good things, when those good desires are frustrated, when God withholds those things from us, this is true then as well.

His sovereign plan is fitting. His sovereign plan is fitting. Yes, it's frustrating but remember it is fitting. Fitting in the way it was fitting at the cross.

No one looking at Jesus as he hung in shame and disgrace and suffering, no one looking would have said, this looks like a good idea.

[20 : 07] This looks like a good thing. And yet, even though it was the greatest evil in the history of the world, in the wisdom of God, he was accomplishing the greatest good the world has ever seen.

Salvation of billions of people. And like, if you'd been there and looked at the cross, you would have seen suffering and death and shame and disgrace.

If you had the eyes of faith, you would have said, I see salvation. I see the plan of God coming together.

I see the point about what Solomon is saying. He can say that God's plans are fitting because even though to the naked eye they don't look it, he sees with the eyes of faith.

So, let me suggest, if like me, you struggle with this. In the darkness of your frustration and pain, go again to the cross of Christ.

[21 : 15] And stay there. Keep looking until the light begins to break through.

There's an advert that I've come across for Audible. You may have seen it. There's a woman whose car breaks down. And then she drops her keys in a muddy puddle.

And then an HGV drives past and takes her door off. And lightning strikes the car as it's towed on the recovery lorry. And all the way through, she's laughing. And at the end, it shows as she pulls her hair back that she's got earbuds in.

And the voiceover says, whatever life throws at you, laugh through it with comedy on Audible. That sounds great, doesn't it?

If only comedy on Audible could fix or bring lightness to the frustration and pain of life in the world under the sun.

[22 : 20] We need more than comedy on Audible if we're going to be able to find joy in the midst of all of this. Yes, the plan is fitting. But our experience of it often is very frustrating.

We need more than comedy on Audible. And as Solomon continues, he points us in that direction. Verse 12, this is a way to actually find joy in the vapor of life. I perceive 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. Here's the fourth point.

Point number one, God's sovereignty. Point number two, God's sovereignty is fitting. Point number three, God's sovereignty is frustrating. Point number four, God's sovereignty is enjoyed by faith. It is enjoyed by faith.

Everything is fitting. How can Solomon say this? Whatever God does endures forever. Nothing can be added to it nor anything taken from it. How does Solomon know that? He knows it by faith. He has come to see what God's design is in keeping his plans from us.

[23 : 29] Verse 14, God has done it so that people fear before him. Why does God burden man with life on these terms?

It is so that rather than seeking advantage or gain or profit from life, we should fear God. We should put our faith in him and order our lives around him.

The fear of the Lord is the beginning of all true wisdom. And this is why God won't let us find satisfaction anywhere else. Why does he keep frustrating our satisfaction as we pursue it in these other things?

Well, because to find it in those other things would be to sell ourselves too short. We were designed to find our joy and our satisfaction only in him. So if he was to give it to us in anything else, we would be sold short.

You were created to trust the God who made you for himself and to trust him with all that you are and all that you have. And when you do that, you can leave his plan to him.

[24 : 33] And you can enjoy the gifts that he has given you. All that you have, everything that you have, comes from the hand of God.

And when you stop for a moment to recognize that, the house you live in, the breath in your body, the sun in the sky, the water in the tap, the food in the cupboard, the friends or family around the table, your spouse, your children, your job, your colleagues, your salary, your every jolly thing. It's all gift. It's all gift. All of it. Every last grain of salt. And we need to learn to receive those things in that way and find satisfaction and joy in them all.

They are what God has given us. And we need to find our satisfaction and joy in those things as he has given them to us. And we do it the same way that Solomon did. We do it by faith.

We declare, God is the Lord of the times. It is all beyond my control. So, worrying about it is about the most pointless thing that I could do. He has made everything fitting. Thank you, Lord.

[25 : 42] Thank you, Lord. Thank you, Lord. That's where satisfaction and joy is found. In this life of vapor. In this life of frustration under the sun.

And huffing and grumbling and complaining that God's providence in your life is ruled offside here. Every believer should enjoy what they've been given. Did you notice?

Did you notice that it doesn't just say that God has done this so that people fear him? Do you notice that? Verse 14. Look again at verse 14. God has done this so that people fear before him.

See, Solomon isn't just referring here to a life of faith in God's world. Living by faith in God's world in a generic sense. He is describing something we do before God.

That is, in God's presence. He is describing worship. What we're doing now. And the reason for this is that it is here where we step aside from the cares and the confusion and in some cases the chaos of life under the sun.

[26 : 54] And we have our hearts reordered according to God's ways. Isn't that our experience? When we gather in the Lord's presence like this, he works in us by his spirit and our faith in his sovereignty over all of life grows.

When we're reminded that he can do what we can't and that he does all things well, our trust in his providence grows. When we express our longings as we sing and as we pray, our confidence in his plans for us, even in our struggles, grows.

And so we rejoice. The frustration of our longing to know what God is doing in the world should always drive us to worship.

That's how God has designed it. We can't see the end from the beginning. And God has created that disconnect in us so that we might fear before him, so that we might gather to worship, so that we might set aside our worries and cares of the world and humble ourselves before him in worship. Because this is really above all where we learn that we are not God. And this is where we are equipped to live a life by faith in his sovereign goodness and not by our own weak side.

[28 : 25] Let's pray together.