

# The Realities of Time

*Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.*

Date: 29 September 2019

Preacher: Andy Roberson

[ 0 : 00 ] Thank you very much. Why don't we pray before we look at this passage together. Father God, we need your help. Please, by your Holy Spirit, would you speak to us now through the teacher's wisdom.

Father, please, would you help us to see ourselves rightly? Help us to see you rightly. Father, we pray that as we look at this passage of Scripture just now, that we would see Jesus in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.

We pray this in his name. Amen. Well, like I said, the teacher in Ecclesiastes, I hope this morning, will humble us by getting us to think about ourselves and our finite nature.

And he always does that to get us to trust God, to fear God. In fact, a helpful summary of the entire book of Ecclesiastes that I use is by a guy called Von Roberts.

And he sums it up like this. Face facts and fear God. That's what the entire book is about. Face facts and fear God. And so this morning, we're going to think about something that's very humbling.

[ 1 : 11 ] Something probably that we don't think about that often. We're going to think about time. That's what the teacher wants to talk about. He wants to talk about time. So by way of introduction, I'm going to read to you lyrics from a song.

It's not the one by the birds, if you know that, if there's a few grey-haired hippies here. Yeah, good. But it's actually a one that a few of the grey-haired hippies might also recognize.

It's by Pink Floyd. And it's the song Time. And I think that from the album Dark Side of the Moon, if there was to be a musical accompaniment to Ecclesiastes, for me, it would be Pink Floyd's Dark Side of the Moon.

And this is the lyrics to that song Time. Tired of lying in the sunshine, staying home to watch the rain. You are young and life is long, and there is time to kill today.

And then one day you find ten years have got behind you. No one told you when to run. You missed the starting gun. So you run and you run to catch up with the sun, but it's sinking, racing around to come up behind you again.

[ 2 : 21 ] The sun is the same in a relative way, but you're older, shorter of breath, and one day closer to death. Now I share that with you because that song reflects much of our thinking about this issue of time.

We probably don't think about time when we're younger. It's only when we're older and perhaps when we're getting closer to death that we start to ask questions like, Where did the time go?

How did all that time pass me by? It feels like we've missed the starting gun. And there's a frustration that comes with the fact that time seems to elude us.

That time seems to evade us. That it seems to be ticking away. Not only that, time is unpredictable. I mean, we try to an extent to control what our time on earth will be like.

But the truth is that our control is always limited. Each of us is trying to write the story of our lives. But the passage of time and the unpredictable nature of the times that come upon us remind us of one key truth.

[ 3 : 31 ] In the story of our lives, we are not the main author. As much as we'd like to be, we're not. And so we don't often think about this.

We don't think about the passage of time. We live for now. Live for the moment. Don't worry about the past. Don't fret about the future. We don't want to think about the fact that we are slowly drawing closer to death.

We don't want to think about the obvious fact that the sands of time will eventually erase all that we have been working hard for in this life.

That can be a depressing thought. That's why we don't think about it. But the teacher, as he does throughout Ecclesiastes, wants us to get real. Because it is real.

And actually what we see in the scripture is that when we start to face that fact, it frees us to trust in the God who is good and the God who is in charge of the times that we face.

[ 4 : 32 ] So, let's be wise this morning as we think about time. I've got three things just to see from this passage. Firstly, there is a pattern to time.

Secondly, there's a God who governs time. And thirdly, there will be a judgment at the end of time. There's a pattern to time. There's a God who governs time. And there will be a judgment at the end of time.

Firstly then, there's a pattern to time. Nothing is random. Nothing is pointless. Verse 1. There is a time for everything. And a season for every activity under the heavens.

And then in the poem that follows, we get a beautiful portrait of the order behind time. There is a time that God selected for each of us here to be born.

And there is a time selected for us to die. And what we read of here are the various different things that can happen in our lifetime. A time to plant and a time to uproot.

[ 5 : 32 ] A time to kill and a time to heal. A time to tear down and a time to build. A time to weep and a time to laugh. A time to mourn and a time to dance.

In a kind of beautifully succinct way. The teacher is describing the totality of human existence. There are good times and there are bad times.

And we'd love it if this list was all positive stuff, wouldn't we? But it's not. There are times in life where we have to weep and not laugh.

There are even times where it's appropriate to kill and not heal. There's a time for war, isn't there? During the Second World War, Neville Chamberlain, the British Prime Minister, he got this wrong. He was trying to negotiate out of conflict, declaring that this was the time for peace. He was wrong. It was a time for war. Which is why Winston Churchill was such a timely Prime Minister at that time.

[ 6 : 36 ] But it's not, if you look at the poem, it's not like a pendulum swing just between good and bad times. Some of these are neither good nor bad.

Have a look at verse 5. I have no idea what this means. A time to scatter stones and a time to gather them. It doesn't seem good or bad. A time to embrace. A time to refrain from embracing. Again, these are not kind of moral things. There's a time for keeping silent. Verse 7. Some of us need help discerning that.

There's also a time for speaking. Some of us also need help discerning that. But do you notice, these aren't moral choices. These aren't good or bad times. It's more ambiguous than that. Because not everything in life is black and white. The times that befall us, they can be good times. They can be bad times. Or they can be neither. There are times that are set in place.

[ 7 : 37 ] But we, the frustration is that we have no control over what these times will be. To an extent we do. Like to an extent we're able to understand the times.

Like we know not to dance at the funeral. We know that's a time for mourning. We can read it. We can understand that. But sometimes we are utterly helpless to understand what the timely thing to do is.

And we are utterly helpless to control it. We can't say in this coming week. I'm going to have the vast majority of my days being a time to laugh and a time to dance.

And I'll throw in a couple of minutes of weeping here and there. You know because I'm Scottish and I don't want to go too mad. And I'll have lots of hours of love and sometimes of embracing.

And that will be what my week will be like. You don't get to choose. The times that we face are not in our control. But neither are they random.

[ 8 : 36 ] Neither are they pointless. Do you know I think it's really interesting that the way the teacher describes this is in a poem. It's almost as if he's trying to convey that there is order and that there is beauty behind the messiness of life.

There is a plan behind the times. I'm a bit of a movie buff. I don't know if you guys are. But I wonder if I was to ask you what you think the best time travel movie is.

I think a few folks would say Back to the Future. But in my opinion the greatest time travel movie is Terminator 2, Judgment Day. What a great film. But there's a famous quote in that film that kind of sums up our thinking about time.

And it's this. There is no fate but what we make for ourselves. There is no purpose. There is no pattern. And it sums up the thought of our culture.

All that happens to you is dependent upon you. Now if you really believe that, it would paralyze you with fear. Because if it's all dependent upon me and my choices, that's terrifying.

[ 9 : 52 ] Because there's stuff that happens that I am completely out of control on. And more often than not, I make daft choices. We are not God.

We are not mini-gods constructing our own future, creating our own narrative. In life. Yes, there is order. Yes, there is purpose. But it does not come from us.

It comes from the God who governs time. And that's what the teacher is about to tell us. You see, if all you had was just this poem, it would be utterly, utterly depressing.

Because, verse 9, all the times we experience. And what does the worker gain from his toil? It's the big question in Ecclesiastes.

What gain is there? Answer? Nothing. You go through a rollercoaster of ups and downs in life. And then you've got nothing to show at the end and there's no gain.

[ 10 : 53 ] Thankfully, though, the teacher does not just have that poem. Because he knows that there is more. And this is the second point. That there is a God who governs all of time.

Have a look at verse 10. I have seen the burden that God has laid on the human race. He has made everything beautiful in its time. He has also set eternity in the human heart.

Yet no one can fathom what God has done from beginning to end. And do you see what the teacher is saying there? God will make everything beautiful in its time.

So all that befalls us. All that befalls this world. All these times are being orchestrated by the great maestro of time into one big beautiful symphony.

But we can't see it. Can we? We can't see how this is working out. How does something like cancer fit into verse 11?

[ 11 : 59 ] How do times of weeping and of war and of killing fit into that verse? And I know you guys are going through stuff at the moment that you're suffering.

And this is maybe a time for mourning here at Bruntsfield Evangelical Church. So how on earth does that fit into verse 11? The answer is we don't know.

And we're not meant to know. The teacher would say that you're a fool if you think you can work it out. Part of the frustration of humanity is that we can't work it out.

As he says in verse 11, we cannot find out what God is doing from beginning to end. We can't see the big picture. We lack the perspective. We lack the longevity to understand what God is doing with all these times that befall us.

And that's frustrating. It's frustrating not just because we want to know. It's frustrating because deep within all our hearts is set eternity. We are eternal beings made in God's image.

[ 13 : 07 ] We are not made to die. Death came into this world as a result of sin and rebellion. It was not part of the world that God declared to be good.

We are not made to be slaves to the tyranny of time. And every one of us knows it. That's why in every single culture across the world, there is some concept of life after death.

Because God has implanted eternity in us. That eternal longing, that question of what happens after we're gone. It's in all people, even if some people suppress it.

And by the way, just as an aside, that means that if you're here as a Christian and you're wanting to share the gospel with someone, you need to realize you've got a really good ally in evangelism.

Because eternity is in every human heart.

Even if people suppress it. As C.S. Lewis said, you never meet someone who's just a mere mortal. We are eternal beings. We are not made to die.

[ 14 : 10 ] There is purpose. There is meaning that we can't see it. And everything that we have, it seems to be just a breath. Now look, to be a Christian is to know that there is a purpose, that there is a master plan.

And by the grace of the Lord Jesus, we know what the end of that plan is. But that doesn't mean that if you follow Jesus, everything will be hunky-dory.

We don't need to convince you of that. Knowing there is a purpose to what happens to us does not mean that we know the details of how that purpose will work out. And so we feel this frustration in the church.

We want to know why. And we want to see how anything good or beautiful could come out of this. And here's where we've got to be careful. You see, we would like there to be a system. What I mean by that, we would like there to be a way of governing the world that we would like done. And if God doesn't fall into our system, we get angry or annoyed or we feel let down by him. [15:23] But that does not let God be God. Part of what Ecclesiastes wants to do is to help you let God be God. That's us trying to be God, coming up with how we think God should operate.

And then we get frustrated when God does not play by our rules. And do you know, one of the things that I have learned in studying the wisdom literature of the Bible, in Proverbs, Job, Ecclesiastes, one of the big things I've learned in studying these wisdom books is that there is great wisdom and there is great freedom in saying, I don't know.

I don't know. I don't know why you've done this. I don't know why this had to happen. This is the problem in the book of Job. Job's comforters, they have a system on how the world should operate, don't they?

Good people receive blessings from God. Bad people receive punishment from God. But Job, the perfect, innocent sufferer, smashes that system apart.

And they simply cannot believe that God would have caused that to happen to Job. He doesn't fit into their mold. The wild, untamable God of the Scripture does not fit their system.

[16:37] And so we get frustrated with verse 11 because we can't see how on earth God could make these times beautiful. It doesn't fit with us and it's not meant to.

You are not God. The teacher knows that what God will do eventually, but he's frustrated because he can't see how he's doing it.

You may have heard the illustration, but it's worth repeating. Time is like a tapestry. And from our under the sun perspective, which the teacher is using throughout this book, we can catch the fleeting glimpse of the back of the tapestry.

And if you've ever seen the back of a tapestry, it's all messy and frayed and it seems random and chaotic. But there is one on the other side of the tapestry, on the other side of time, who's weaving it together into one big beautiful picture.

We can't see it because we are in time and yet he is not. And so we have to learn to fear him. We have to learn to trust him. We need to let God be God.

[17:44] And we know that we are doing that in life because when the times are good, as verse 13 says, when we find satisfaction in our toil, then we thank God. We acknowledge that is a gift from God that I'm enjoying.

But when we face bad times, we throw ourselves onto God's sovereignty. Everything he does endures forever. God acts so that people will fear him, so that they will revere him.

And so please see this, brothers and sisters. God will not tell you all the reasons behind what he does. And it is not cruel or unkind for God to remind you that you are not the boss of your life.

We might want to cry out why, and there's lots of people in Scripture that do, but perhaps the deeper question we need to cry out is who. Who is the God who governs a world in which stuff like this can happen?

Who is he and can I trust him? And in order to trust him, we need information from above the sun. Simple observation of this world is not enough.

[19:01] What has he told me that shows me that I can trust him? And you know, God in his kindness, he hasn't left us stumbling about in the dark. Yes, there are some things that are hidden, but he's also revealed stuff to us.

As Deuteronomy 29.29 says, The hidden things belong to the Lord, but the things revealed belong to us. Trusting him doesn't mean being completely ignorant of what he is doing.

Everything will be beautiful, he tells us. And in his grace, we have the privilege of seeing something of this great plan more than what the teacher saw.

In fact, the apostle Peter tells us that the prophets of the Old Testament, the prophets and kings, people like the teacher, longed to know what we know today.

Because at just the right time in human history, something hugely significant happened, which helped us see something of God's great master plan.

[20:02] Galatians 4 verse 4. If you follow Jesus, you won't know why God allows certain things to happen to you.

But here's what you can know for certain. You are forgiven, you are redeemed, you are loved like God's own precious adopted child. Because Jesus came at just the right time. Jesus died, Jesus saved you. And the plan of the universe is that God will have his people living free from sin under King Jesus' rule. That's the beautiful picture. That's what will happen. And one day, when we are with Jesus, I believe we will be able to look back on our life. And maybe then we'll be able to say, oh yes, it had to happen that way. And now it's so beautiful. Verse 15 says that God will call the past into account. It's like he's taken it back, the past that we have forgotten.

[ 21 : 19 ] It's not forgotten. It's not forgotten to him. He takes it back to himself. And he's using it to weave it into something amazing. As Paul tells the Corinthians, this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison.

And so the teacher is trying to free us from the prison of self. And cause us to throw ourselves onto the everlasting arms of God. And this ultimately is how the teacher knows that it's not all pointless because of this third point.

There will be a judgment at the end of time. There's a pattern to time. There's a God who governs time. And there will be a judgment at the end of time. Have a look at verse 16.

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. You see, there can only ever really be purpose and meaning to time if there is judgment at the end of time.

[ 22 : 32 ] At the end, we will know. No one got away with anything. Jimmy Savile did not get away with it. His past will be brought back to him as he stands before the judgment seat of Christ.

Every deed will be brought into judgment. It's one of the big themes in Ecclesiastes. With all the uncertainties in our life, there is one big certainty and that is judgment.

In fact, that's how the book ends. It's the parting words. Every deed will be brought into judgment. You see, if there is no judgment, there is no meaning.

Because judgment implies that there are things that are objectively wrong and objectively right. And God will make sure that these things are accounted for. And so the teacher knows there has to be a time for judgment.

There has to be. The big problem he struggles with is he can't see when that will happen. Because when he looks out at the world under the sun, he sees wickedness prospering with no judgment, with no consequences.

[ 23 : 35 ] And when he looks at the human race, he sees that our time is short and that we all just end up dying. Have a look at verse 18. I also said to myself, as for humans, God tests them so that they may see that they are like the animals.

Surely the fate of human beings is like that of the animals. The same fate awaits them both. As one dies, so dies the other. All have the same breath. Humans have no advantage over animals. Everything is meaningless. A better translation is everything is a breath. All go to the same place. All come from dust. And to dust all return. Who knows if the human spirit rises upwards and if the spirit of the animal goes down to the earth.

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? Now do you see the tension?

If you were to look down a microscope, biologically, there is no difference between a human being and an animal. We all go to dust. But if you look into your heart, you see eternity.

[ 24 : 51 ] And people who say that we are just beasts are suppressing that eternity that God has placed in us all. And so if we are eternal, if there is eternity, there must be a judgment in eternity.

A time where everything will be accounted for. Eternity makes sense of right and wrong. As Dostoevsky said, if there is no immortality of the soul, then everything would be permitted. But the teacher believes in judgment. And yet, he can't quite work out how it's going to work out. His under-the-sun perspective is fuzzy.

Yes, God will bring judgment. Yes, we have eternity in our hearts. But we still die like animals. And he doesn't know how that fits together. And so he concludes with the great question.

The question that most of our friends and family and most people out there will have. Who can tell us what will happen after we are gone? No one under the sun.



Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.