

Time Is But a Breath

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[0 : 0 0] And so if you would please turn with me your Bibles to Ecclesiastes chapter 3. We started this sermon series in the book of Ecclesiastes about four weeks ago, and we are now in chapter 3, verses 1 to 15.

Let me pray for the reading and preaching of God's word. Father, you have placed eternity on our hearts.

So I ask that this morning, for anyone here who does not have the assurance of eternal life in Jesus Christ, that you would save them by the power of your Holy Spirit today.

And we ask that all those who belong to you already, your sons and daughters, would grow in humility, their submission to you, in the wisdom and the freedom of living under your sovereignty, rather than seeking to be rulers of our own lives.

So Lord, do that work, accomplish that work in us, in our hearts, in our minds, in our lives, as we listen to your word now.

[1 : 2 8] Speak to us. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen. If you are able, please stand and join me as I read to honor God as we read his word.

Ecclesiastes chapter 3, verses 1 to 15. For everything, there is a season. And a time for every matter under heaven.

A time to be born and a time to die. A time to plant and a time to pluck up what is planted. A time to kill and a time to heal.

A time to break down and a time to build up. A time to weep and a time to laugh. A time to mourn and a time to dance.

A time to cast away stones and a time to gather stones together. A time to embrace and a time to refrain from embracing. A time to seek and a time to lose.

[2 : 3 1] A time to keep and a time to cast away. A time to tear and a time to sow. A time to keep silence and a time to speak.

A time to love and a time to hate. A time for war and a time for peace. What gain has the worker from his toil?

I've seen the business that God has given to the children of man to be busy with. 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.

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. I perceive that whatever God does endures forever. Nothing can be added to it nor anything taken from it.

[3 : 3 4] 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. This is God's holy and authoritative word. You may be seated. There are a number of occasions throughout the year that remind us of the steady march of time.

Labor Day tomorrow reminds us that the summer is basically over. Sorry. Outdoor pools are closing. Vacations are ending. Or some people are away doing their last weekend vacation for Labor Day.

And schools are restarting. Some of you celebrated birthdays recently. And anniversaries recently. Which are all reminders that you are one year, another year older.

On New Year's Day we all recognize the passing of time. Which never fails to come. The new year. Like soldiers in a military parade that march forward rhythmically and relentlessly.

[4 : 44] Time just ticks. Tick tock. Tick tock. Without pause. Without variation. In pace. And that's what we see in this famous passage in Ecclesiastes 3.

Time to be born. Time to die. Time to plant. Time to pluck up what is planted. Time to kill. Time to heal. Whether you run as fast as you can or stand still.

Whether you scream at the top of your lungs or you stay silent. There is nothing you can do to affect this march of time. We want to grasp on the time as it passes by.

But it's like striving after wind. It doesn't stop for us. It keeps ticking until we are all dead and buried in the grave. And even then.

The time doesn't stop ticking. It keeps ticking. The world keeps going around until we are all forgotten. And the place. Our place on earth remembers us no more.

[5 : 43] In light of that reality. What sense can we make of our lives? What meaning can we find in a world like this?

Ecclesiastes 3.1-15 teaches us an invaluable lesson. It teaches us that as humans who inhabit fleeting time. We should fear God who inhabits eternity.

And I'm going to unpack that for us in two parts. First, there is a season for everything. And secondly, but the reason for everything is beyond our grasp. That's the two main points that I want to impart to you.

First, we see a beautiful poem. A haunting poem in verses 1-8. Which tell us that for everything there is a season. And a time for every matter under heaven. Verse 1 is really a summary heading for the poem that follows.

And the poem is made up of seven verses total. Each of which is made up of paired lines that are thematically linked. And within each line, there are two poles of opposite things.

[6 : 45] Like time to be born, time to die. And seven, as you know, if you've been with us through our sermon series in the book of Revelation, is the number of perfection or completeness. Because God finished and rested in creating the world after seven days.

In seven days. So the seven represents the totality of human experience and human life. This is what our entirety of our life is like in verses 2-8.

And fittingly, verse 2 begins this way. A time to be born and a time to die. A time to plant and a time to pluck up what is planted. In the course of my sermon, about 16,000 people will be born.

And about 7,000 people will die. Every day, there are baby showers. Every day, there are funerals. And the second line of the couplet speaks of the same theme, but using the illustration of agriculture.

There's a time to plant, to sow seeds. And then there's a time to pluck up what was planted, to harvest. Which is a kind of death for the plant. But it gives life to another.

[7 : 51] As in life, as in farming, there's a season for everything. In the engineer yeast where this was written, you sow seeds in the spring. And then the plant grows in the summertime.

And then you harvest it either at the end of the summer or fall before the winter chill destroys the crops. There's a season, a determined season for everything. Similarly, verse 3 says there's a time to kill and a time to heal, a time to break down and a time to build up.

If you have farm animals, which I know this is Boston, most of you don't, but believe it or not, there are some church members who do. Or if you're involved in other kinds of animal husbandry, there's a time when you attend to your wounded animal and you heal that wounded animal.

You bandage up the wounded leg and you apply feeded medicine, whatever. And then there comes a time, this very animal that you fed and that you healed, now you must slaughter that animal for sacrifice, for food.

Similarly, in war, there's a time to kill enemy soldiers in the battlefield and peace times when it's a time to heal the wounded. This is followed up in the second line with an illustration from construction.

[9 : 07] There's a time to break down and a time to build up. I think we're supposed to understand this both literally and figuratively. There's a time to break down and raise an old house and there's a time to build up a new house from the foundation up.

But not just physical buildings, there's also a time to break down and dissolve a company, a school. There's a time to build or launch a new company or a new school.

I was notified this past week that one of our sister churches within our denomination just closed their doors, right? Even as several others are launching and starting anew from our denomination.

There's a time to break down and a time to build up. Likewise, verse 4 says there's a time to weep and a time to laugh, a time to mourn and a time to dance. To every single one of us, there are times that make us weep.

And I'm sure you can think of several. A disheartening medical diagnosis. The heartbreak of wayward children. People afflicted by drugs and alcohol, other kinds of addictions.

[10 : 13] Children starving from poverty. The ravaging effects of war. But there are also things and times that make us laugh. The silly, pure laughter of children.

The unintended slapstick comedy of your clumsy friends. A funny line from a book or a movie. A thoughtful gift from a friend who knows you well.

The love of family members. Likewise, there are times when we mourn and there are times when we dance. In one season, we dance joyfully at a friend's wedding reception.

And in another season, we attend the funeral of that very friend. Because I'm a young pastor, I've officiated a dozen weddings or so, but only a few funerals.

Only one funeral of a church member. But I know that there's a time coming and a season coming when I will be doing more funerals than weddings. Verse 5 continues.

[11 : 14] A time to cast away stones and a time to gather stones together. A time to embrace and a time to refrain from embracing. Okay, what does this mean? This one has puzzled a lot of people.

Time to gather stones and time to cast away stones. Some people think that maybe this also might be related to some kind of building or clearing away a farm, like a field for farming or whatnot.

However, if we interpret it that way, it doesn't match the second half of the couplet, which says time to embrace. And a time to refrain from embracing, which is why I don't think that's what that means.

I think there's this decisive clue in Genesis 31, 43 to 48. There where Jacob and Laban are entering into a covenant with each other. Here, Jacob instructs his kinsmen to gather stones.

The idea is that you gather stones, you pile it up as a pillar, and now it becomes a memorial between you and the other party of a covenant, an agreement, a relationship that you have forged with one another.

[12 : 13] So I think gathering stones and casting away stones refers to the embracing of a new relationship or partnership, or the dissolving and the breaking up of that relationship or partnership, which is why it matches perfectly with time to embrace and a time to refrain from embracing.

There is a time when you, like a lot of people, students that are arriving for the first time to Cambridge to start orientation at school. I think we had several MIT students last week and this week and a lot of people starting at Harvard and other schools here.

And that's a time and a season when you meet new friends. It's a time to embrace, a time to gather stones. But then a few years later, graduation will come.

And that's a time to cast away stones. That's a time to say goodbye, to refrain from embracing. Even for our church. Today we have the joyful occasion of welcoming Todd and the Bourne family.

It's a time to gather stones together, to embrace. But today also we say goodbye to the Yangs, right? Charlie and Stephanie, this is their last Sunday with us, moving back to California. And it's a time to cast away stones as well.

[13 : 26] There's also a time to seek and a time to lose, a time to keep and a time to cast away. This is probably speaking of possessions. There's a time to seek what you do not have, to look for something, to buy something, to acquire, as well as a time to lose that which you already have.

There's a time to shop for new clothes. And then there's a time when you accidentally leave your clothes and shoes in your hotel room, right? There's a time when you shop for your earphones.

And then there's a time you leave those earphones on your plane. There's a time to buy books. And then there's time to get it wet in the rain and lose them. There's a time to keep your possessions.

And despite what some of you hoarders might think, there's also a time to get rid of those things. Time to throw them away. Every day. The stores at the mall are busy with shoppers.

Every day. And every day. Salvation Army. Or the Miller favorite savers are busy with people donating stuff. There's a time to seek.

[14 : 32] Time to lose. Time to keep. And a time to cast away. Verse 7 continues. A time to tear. And a time to sew. A time to keep silence.

And a time to speak. There are times when your jeans and sweaters tear. And there are times when you sew them up. And this example, this illustration of fabric sometimes tearing open and then sometimes being sewn closed, then becomes a metaphor for another kind of opening and closing.

A time to keep silence. And a time to speak. There are times when we should open our mouths to speak. And times when we should close our mouths in silence.

Sometimes we can't help but sit silently with someone in deep sorrow or grief. But other times we speak in order to offer counsel. There are times when we are silent before God or others.

Because we feel our unworthiness. And there are times when we speak confidently. And share our faith or share our convictions with others. And finally, the last couplet of the poem, verse 8, says a time to love and a time to hate.

[15 : 41] A time for war and a time for peace. Which is fairly self-explanatory. There are times when you love. There are times when you hate someone. And when you amplify that to the national level.

That's when there are times of war and times of peace. Now, having gone through the poem, this poem is frequently misinterpreted.

And there are a few important things that we need to keep in mind when we are trying to understand it. First off, this poem is not intended to be a neat contrast between good times and bad times, as some people claim.

If you go through the poem and try to label what you consider to be good with a plus sign. What you consider to be bad with a negative sign or a minus sign. Then you will notice that there is no structure.

There is no consistent theme or pattern in this poem. They are all over the place. And some lines are ambiguous. For example, verse 2. It says, a time to plant and a time to pluck up what is planted.

[16 : 38] Which one of those is good? Obviously, planting maybe might seem more like life. But isn't it good when you harvest a thing and eat it? Isn't there a time and place for both?

Likewise, verse 7. Time to keep silence and a time to speak. Which of those things is positive and which of those things is negative? In fact, if you want to match with the analogy earlier of sowing and closing, it's actually when you're keeping silent that that is a good thing.

Right? Right? And on top of that, there are metaphors here where it's things here that are clearly meant to be ambiguous like the ones we were talking about.

But in addition to that, even the ones that you might think are perfectly clear, like being born and dying. Clearly being born is good and dying is bad. Actually could be ambiguous. Because if you look later at Ecclesiastes chapter 4, it says this, And I thought the dead who are already dead more fortunate than the living who are still alive.

But better than both is he who has not yet been and has not seen the evil deeds that are done under the sun. So what's better, being born or dying?

[17 : 47] Or we might say, surely mourning is bad and dancing is good. Weeping is bad and laughing is good. But then Ecclesiastes 7, 2-4 says, It is better to go to the house of mourning than to go to the house of feasting.

For this is the end of all mankind and the living will lay it to heart. Sorrow is better than laughter, for by sadness of face the heart is made glad. The heart of the wise is in the house of mourning, but the heart of fools is in the house of mirth.

So again, what's positive and what's negative? The preacher is not trying to place a value judgment on each of these items. In fact, I think he intentionally scrambles them so we can't discern a consistent pattern or order to these lines.

In verse 5 and verse 8, he intentionally inverts the order of the couplet. So, for example, in verse 8, it says, A time to love and a time to hate. And if you were to match the pattern of the rest of the poem, you might expect to find a time for peace and a time for war.

But he inverts the order and mentions time for war first and then time for peace. I think the preacher deliberately scrambled these items to prevent us from reading value judgments into these things or to figuring out some kind of pattern to make sense of it all.

[18 : 57] And I think that's precisely the point. Life is not neat. Life is complex. Full of good times. Full of bad times.

Full of hard times. Full of times of smooth sailing. Full of times where the going gets tough. And everything in between. And you can't always tell what's good, what's bad.

In fact, verse 11 says later, God has made everything beautiful in its time. The second important point to remember about this poem is that it's descriptive and not prescriptive.

It's describing the way things are, not prescribing the way things should be. And how do we know that? Because the very first line of the poem speaks of two things that we have no control over.

The day of our birth and the day of our death. These times are ordained by God, even for those who take their own lives, and do not come at our bidding or according to our planning.

[20 : 00] Verse 2 is not a command to sow seeds in the spring and harvest in the fall. It's simply an observation of the fact that there is time for planting and a time for plucking up. Likewise, verse 4 is not an exhortation to weep and mourn when it's appropriate, and laugh and dance when it's appropriate.

Although that's not bad advice. I mean, you've all had the experience of someone laughing out loud in a very inappropriate time of the conversation. Or you've had someone maybe start crying at a very celebratory occasion and being really sad.

We are supposed to rejoice with those who rejoice and weep with those who weep, and so there is an appropriate time for those things. But that's really not the main point of verse 4. It's not a prescription to weep and laugh at the appropriate times.

Rather, it's an observation that times of weeping and times of laughing come to us all, heedless of our desires, beyond our control.

In J.R.R. Tolkien's Fellowship of the Ring, after, everybody laughs now when I mention the Lord of the Rings, after learning about the grave events of Sauron's rise and the discovery of the One Ring of Power, Frodo says to Gandalf, I wish it need not have happened in my time.

[21 : 19] And Gandalf wisely replies, And so do all who live to see such times. But that is not for them to decide. All we have to decide is what to do with the time that is given to us.

That brings me to my second point. There is a season for everything, but the reason for everything is beyond our grasp. That's what verses 9 to 15 teach us.

We want to control time. We want to be masters of our times and seasons. But Ecclesiastes 3 teaches us that the time is not subject to us. Time is but a breath, and trying to grasp hold of it is like striving after wind.

And that's why the poem is followed immediately by this rhetorical question in verse 9. What gain has the worker from his toil? This is the exact same programmatic question that was posed earlier in chapter 1 verse 3 and chapter 2 verse 22.

And the consistently implied answer to this question is nothing. There is nothing to be gained in our toil under the sun. The preacher is returning again to his theme of the cyclical nature of life.

[22 : 32] As he said in chapter 1 verse 3 to 6, Generations come and go. The sun rises and sets. The wind blows to the south and then back to the north. So what is there to gain in this kind of world?

We celebrate baby showers and birthdays, but we're all destined to die one day. We plant things that we know will eventually be plucked up one day. We build things that will one day be disintegrated and will break down one day.

There isn't a single thing that humans build that lasts forever. There are times when we laugh with our family members on game nights and graduations and vacations, but so soon there will be times when we must weep with them.

Debilitating diseases, tragic accidents. So on. So what do we stand to gain from all of this?

What really is the point of it all? Many people think that the poem of verses 1 to 8 are beautiful, and I agree. It's haunting and beautiful. The American folk artist Peter Seeger wrote a song entitled Turn, Turn, Turn.

[23 : 35] You guys know that song? It's a good song. It's subtitled To Everything There Is a Season, which repeats Ecclesiastes 3, 1 to 8 verbatim. And this song was popularized by the band, the American rock band, The Birds.

And that's a great version of it if you listen to it. But it sounds like a sunny beach song, which seems so inappropriate given the content. For all these reasons, this is perhaps the best-known passage in the book of Ecclesiastes, and that's why even at non-Christian funerals, even at atheistic funerals, this passage is often read.

But of course, the song, as well as all these people who use this passage in their funerals, leave out verse 9. But without verse 9, you're missing the whole point of the poem.

Because the whole point of the poem is the disappointment and despair at the cyclicity of life under the sun. This is not a good passage to read at a funeral, unless you're a believer.

Look at verses 10 to 11. 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. 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.

[24 : 57] If you search online for the text, if you type up Ecclesiastes 3.11 in your Google search, and look for, go to Google Shopping or something, or Google Images, you'll find that there are hundreds, hundreds of mugs and cards and wall art that have this verse.

But nearly all of them do not include the last part of verse 11. Yet so that he cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end. This is a good reminder for all of us about sound biblical interpretation.

If the first part of the verse sounds really good to you, but then you have no idea what the second part of the verse is talking about, then that's not a license to just lop it off and then run, run, run where you go with that first part of the verse.

No, it's time to sit with it and wrestle with it, ask questions of it, and consult people who understand it. Yes, God has made everything beautiful in its time.

Yes, God has put eternity into man's heart. But God has made it so that we cannot find out what he has done from the beginning to the end. The times that verses 1 to 8 speak of is not our time, as Bible scholar Roland Murphy puts it.

[26 : 09] These are God's times, not our times. Eternity is God's purview, not ours. And that's why it says in verse 14, Isn't that a humbling thought?

There's nothing that we do that can add to what God is doing. And there's nothing that we do that can take away from what God is doing. That word forever, there is the same Hebrew word translated eternity in verse 11.

It's speaking of what God does. God has instilled in the heart of every human being an inkling of eternity, our longing for eternity.

But because we are finite and temporal creatures who inhabit fleeting time, we cannot quite grasp hold of it or make sense of it. We can't understand why everything happens in its season.

It's like we have a sense of what this thousand-piece puzzle is supposed to look like. We have a vague sense of it. But we only have ten puzzle pieces. And we're trying to make it all fit.

[27 : 27] And it doesn't make sense. Or it's like seeing a huge mosaic, but zoomed in so that you only see two tiny picture frames next to each other.

And you have no idea how those two pictures are related because you can't see the whole picture. What do these two pictures have anything to do with each other? We are eternal souls within time-bound bodies destined for death.

We seek reason, we seek purpose, and we seek meaning behind everything in life, but in the cyclicity of life, in the inevitability of death, the reason and the purpose and the meaning that we seek escape us.

Try writing your own version of this poem. I think that would be a good exercise for you. A time to be unemployed.

A time to be employed, but in a job I never imagined I'd have. A time to get rejected by schools and programs. A time to be admitted.

[28 : 42] A time to be healthy. A time to be diagnosed with a chronic illness. A time to have a boyfriend or a girlfriend. A time to break up. A time for rich, rewarding friendships.

A time for strained relationships and loneliness. Can you really make sense of all of these details of your life? Do you really understand the purpose and the meaning, the reason behind them all?

None of us can. Because the divine, eternal, omniscient perspective is not available to us. Only what he has revealed to us is available to us.

And hence the thesis of Ecclesiastes, the vanity of vanities, all is vanity. Hevel, that's the word. Breath, the mere breath. Breath, striving after wind.

There are profound real life implications of this truth. And here's one. Verses 12 to 13 says, I perceive that there is nothing better for them than to be joyful and to do good as long as they live.

[29 : 46] And that everyone should eat and drink and take pleasure in all his toil. This is God's gift to man. For a book that has the reputation of being a Debbie Downer, it speaks an awful lot about joy and enjoying.

This is almost exactly the same as chapter 2, verse 24. And it's the second instance of what is known as the Carpe Diem passage. There are five Carpe Diem passages I explained last Sunday.

The Carpe Diem is just a Latin phrase that means seize the day. It's the idea that you're supposed to take advantage of the opportunities you have today in the present and to enjoy life today while it still lasts rather than counting on tomorrow that may never come.

These Carpe Diem passages in Ecclesiastes are moments of profound insight and light in the book. And it contrasts two approaches to life. First approach to life is that you approach life under the sun as a means for gain.

That word gain is contrasted with the word gift as I talked about last week. And the second approach is to receive life as a gift from God. Gain is some profit or advantage that you derive, a wage that you earned through your hard work, while gift is something that you receive freely without cost because of the generosity and grace of another.

[31 : 07] If you approach life as a means for gain, we imagine that we are masters of our own fate and we seek to use and control our lives and the circumstances of our lives and the relationships of our lives in order to get ahead, in order to make a difference, in order to leave a legacy, or in order to gain some kind of surplus.

That's what it's like to live for gain. But if we approach life as a gift from God, then we understand that the seasons of life are not ultimately up to us and we live surrender to him.

We embrace the wisdom of humility and the freedom of insignificance. And that's what enables us to really enjoy the simple pleasures of life, to eat and to drink and to take pleasure in all our toil.

Here are some telltale signs that you have not reckoned with the fact that your life and time itself is hevel, a mere breath, and that life is not meant to be approached for gain, but as received as a gift.

Do you get irritable or angry when someone interrupts your plans? You had planned to have a productive afternoon and get all of your household chores done, but your child is cranky and crying, threatening to derail all of your well-laid plans for the afternoon.

[32 : 41] Do you get irritated and angry in that situation? Or are you able to humbly receive the afternoon that God has planned to give you of consoling and comforting your child, of loving your child that's before you as a gift?

Or do you see your afternoon as your means for gain? Here's another question. Do you accept what you perceive to be bad things from God as well as the good things from God?

Illness, rejections, loss of loved ones, disappointments. When life turns sour, do you become bitter toward God, angry at God?

Or are you able to say, as Job said in Job 2.10, shall we receive good from God and shall we not receive evil? Do you trust in God's sovereign rule and his providential care for you through the valleys as well as the mountaintops of life?

We might not yet see the beauty of such seasons under the sun, those valley times, but do you trust that God above has made everything beautiful in its time?

[33 : 59] Or how about this? Do you drive around the streets of Boston like you're a Formula One driver? I know some of you out there. Is every drive a race against time trying to see if you can whittle down and beat that estimated time of arrival on your Maps app?

Are you always trying to exploit that gap between cars and trying to find leverage and push and shove into that fast lane on the highway, competing against these other drivers?

Why are you in such a hurry? It might be because you see time not as a gift from God, but as an opportunity for gain.

Some of you remember Winnie Truex? Yeah. She was a good friend to many of us, moved to North Carolina, and she's one of the coolest and funniest people we know. And I remember I gave her a ride one time, and then afterward, she described my driving colorfully this way, Sean, woo, Tokyo Drift.

I think it's an exaggeration. That's a Fast and Furious reference for those of you who don't know. And I think that's a movie about car racing that's probably inappropriate for me to mention in a sermon.

[35 : 25] So don't watch it. Now, when he said that, it was so funny that I laughed out loud. But then inside, I felt the conviction of the Holy Spirit.

Why am I in such a hurry? Our hurriedness reflects the busyness of our own hearts. The fast-paced life in the city is not conducive to receiving life as a gift.

So we need to be watchful. If you drive like that, not only are you more likely to get into an accident, you will never notice the trees that you're passing by or the sun that's setting.

You will never enjoy the breeze on your face with the windows rolled down or the sun shining on your face because you're doing this. You will miss all the gifts of the present while racing for the future.

There's an insightful passage in C.S. Lewis' book, Screwtape Letters, which talks about living in the present and receiving the gifts of the present rather than living on this never-ending treadmill of the next thing.

[36 : 46] It's an imagined correspondence between senior devil Screwtape and his nephew and junior devil Wormwood, which is why in the conversation they refer to God as the enemy. So remember, this is devils talking, demons talking.

This is what Screwtape advises Wormwood. The humans live in time, but our enemy destines them to eternity. He, therefore, I believe, wants them to attend chiefly to two things, to eternity itself, and to that point of time which they call the present.

For the present is the point at which time touches eternity. Of the present moment and of it only, humans have an experience analogous to the experience which our enemy has of reality as a whole.

In it alone, freedom and actuality are offered them. He would, therefore, have them continually concerned either with eternity, which means being concerned with him, or with the present, either meditating on their eternal union with, or separation from himself, or else obeying the present voice of conscience, bearing the present cross, receiving the present grace, giving thanks for the present pleasure.

Our business is to get them away from the eternal and from the present. With this in view, we sometimes tempt a human, say a widow or a scholar, to live in the past. But this is of limited value, for they have some real knowledge of the past, and it has a determinate nature, and to that extent resembles eternity.

[38 : 17] It is far better to make them live in the future. Biological necessity makes all their passions point in that direction already, so that thought about the future inflames hope and fear.

Also, it is unknown to them, so that in making them think about it, we make them think of unrealities. In a word, the future is, of all things, the thing least like eternity.

It is the most completely temporal part of time, for the past is frozen and no longer flows, and the present is all lit up with eternal rays. Hence, nearly all vices are rooted in the future.

Gratitude looks to the past, and love to the present. Fear, avarice, lust, and ambition look ahead. To be sure, the enemy wants men to think of the future too, just so much as is necessary for now planning the acts of justice or charity, which will probably be their duty tomorrow.

The duty of planning the moral's work is today's duty. Though its material is borrowed from the future, the duty, like all duties, is in the present. This is not straw splitting. He does not want men to give the future their hearts, to place their treasure in it.

[39 : 29] We do. We want a whole race, perpetually in pursuit of the rainbow's end, never honest, nor kind, nor happy now, but always using as mere fuel wherewith to heap the altar of the future every real gift which is offered them in the present.

In what ways are you heaping up the gifts of the present that God has given you as mere fuel upon the altar of the future?

Therefore, do not be anxious about tomorrow, for tomorrow will be anxious for itself. Sufficient for the day is its own trouble. And here's another application of this truth.

It says in verses 14 to 15, I perceive 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. The first sentence of verse 14 and verse 15 match.

[40 : 42] They mirror each other and essentially say the same thing, thereby framing that middle part which says God has done it so that people fear before him. It's emphasizing that. Whatever God does endures forever.

Nothing can be added to it, nor anything taken from it. Once again, these times and the seasons of life are not our time, but God's time. He has put eternity into our hearts, yet so that we cannot find out what he has done from the beginning to the end.

And what does this mean? That God seeks what has been driven away. I think the fourth century Bible scholar Jerome got it right in his Latin translation of the Bible.

He renders it this way, and God, this is a translation, and God repeats what has passed away. It means that God will bring to pass again the events of the past that have been driven away.

And in the end, all will have to give account to him. For us, mere mortals, there is no escape from the cycle of life. There is nothing new under the sun.

[41 : 44] The sun rises, the sun sets, the sea ebbs and flows, the wind goes round and round. That which is already has been, and that which is to be already has been. God has embedded this very futility into the cyclicity of life so that people fear before him.

That's the purpose. The fear of God in the Bible is not the terror you feel in the face of an evil tyrant. The Proverbs 15.33 says, The fear of the Lord is instruction in wisdom, and humility comes before honor.

If we know how big God really is, and how small we really are, then if we know how holy God really is, and how sinful we really are, then that produces, naturally in all of us, fear, awe, reverence, and worship.

And that's the fear of God. To fear the Lord is to live every waking moment before the presence of, and under the authority of, and for the glory of God.

The futility of life is intended to teach us to fear God, to recognize that God is in control, and we are not.

[42 : 58] That God is the sovereign one, and that we are not. That God is the creator, and we're only creatures. Do you approach the times and seasons of your life with this humility and the fear of the Lord?

Or do you fancy yourself to be the master of your time, seeking to control time and leverage time in order to advance yourself? I was a college student that during the first few weeks of my first semester, I scheduled out my entire four years of college, including my study abroad year, which I did end up doing.

And so I am well acquainted with this temptation and sin. If you're like me, someone who likes to make plans future plans, grand plans, then you need to examine your heart for pride, which views time and life as a means for gain.

It says in James 4, 13 to 16, Come now, you who say, today or tomorrow we will go into such and such a town and spend a year there and trade and make a profit.

Yet you do not know what tomorrow will bring. What is your life? For you are a mist that appears for a little time and then vanishes. Instead, you ought to say, If the Lord wills, we will live and do this or that.

[44 : 23] As it is, you boast in your arrogance. All such boasting is evil. We are but a mist that appears for a little time and then vanishes.

That sounds a lot like Hevel in Ecclesiastes, doesn't it? A vanishing mist. For everything, there is a season and a time for every matter under heaven.

But those seasons and times do not come according to our stopwatches and schedules. Most of today, I plan on laughing and dancing.

Tomorrow, I'm scheduling in an hour of weeping and mourning. The next week, I am spending my whole day building up, building my career in earnest.

By year 2026, I will be married. By year 2030, I will have my first kid until I die at ripe old age of 100. 100. It's arrogant boasting.

[45 : 29] It is not wrong, as we talked about with C.S. Lewis' code, to make tentative plans and to make diligent preparations. But we should do so with the understanding that all of our plans are always contingent on God's plans.

Robert Burns, a renowned 18th century Scottish poet, I think I've mentioned this before to some of you, he was plowing a field for his garden, his backyard, and then one day he noticed that as he was plowing in the field, this whole bunch of mice just scurrying away and he realized that unwittingly he had disturbed a mice nest while plowing his ground.

And pondering at the fate of those mice, he thought about the unanticipated events of life that frequently derail our own plans. And with this mind, he penned this famous line of his poem, To a Mouse, which goes, the best laid schemes of mice and men often go awry.

And that's where John Steinbeck got his title for Of Mice and Men, which is exactly about that, of the tragic tale of George and Lenny whose simple, innocent dream of settling down on their own piece of farmland with soft, pet rabbits is dashed by unfortunate, unanticipated events.

It says in Proverbs 16, verse 1 and verse 9, the plans of the heart belong to man, but the answer of the tongue is from the Lord. The heart of man plans his way, but the Lord establishes his steps.

[47 : 00] These verses contrast divine sovereignty and human responsibility. Yes, it is our responsibility to make plans. The plans of the heart belong to a man, but the heart of man plans his way, but though man gets the first word in that planning, God gets the last word.

The answer of the tongue is from the Lord. We might plan, but the outcome is from the Lord. As Thomas Akempis put it in The Invitation of Christ, man proposes, God disposes.

As humans who inhabit fleeting time, we should fear God who inhabits eternity. But is there anything that will arrest this cyclicity of life?

Is there anything that can interrupt this round and round world and fulfill our longing for eternity, which God has instilled in our hearts?

Is there any way that we can, in some measure, find out what God has done from the beginning to the end? Yes, there is. It says in Ephesians 1.10 that God made known to us the mystery of his will according to his purpose, which he 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.

[48 : 25] There is a cyclicity of the times and seasons in our lives, but then there is also this fullness of time in which God's purposes for all creation and heaven and earth find their fulfillment and purpose in Jesus Christ.

Romans 5.6 puts it this way, For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. There is our time, which is cyclical, and then there is God's time, which is the right time when Jesus came and he died on the cross to save us from our sin.

And that's why Jesus announces in John 5.25, Truly, truly, I say to you, an hour is coming and is now here when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God and those who hear will live.

How welcome is that news that the hour is now here to people who have lived round and around generation after generation after generation.

for God so loved the world that he gave his only Son that whoever believes in him may have what? Eternal life.

[49 : 47] That's the fulfillment of the eternity that God placed in our hearts. I have images I want to show you.

Mariah actually shared this with me. It's a great image. The first one, this is what is known as the Tibetan wheel of life or the Buddhist wheel of life. This is their worldview, how they think the world works.

As you can see, there's this spirit that oversees it. They say that this is not an evil spirit, but to us that's very clear. That's the devil, the ruler of this world. And in the middle you see three animals that represent greed, greed, and anger, and there's one more.

Does anybody know? Greed, anger, and is it selfishness or lust? Maybe. It's like those animals represent sin basically that drives the world this wheel round and around in a cycle.

And then you see the different phases of life, different realms of the universe, and also different phases of life. And it's an endless cycle. And the dearest dream of a Buddhist adherent is to finally get out of that cycle with nirvana by reaching enlightenment.

[51 : 04] And that's what that picture of Buddha on the right-hand corner is supposed to be. But I can assure you that Buddha attained no greater wisdom than Solomon did. And Solomon tried all of this and he said it's vanity of vanities.

You don't ever get out of that cycle. That's the hopeless world view that millions of people in the world are living with.

And then you see the next picture which was made by a Buddhist convert, an artist, a Christian artist who transformed that wheel of life from the Buddhist culture. And here you see the cross at the center which has a tone for sin where sin used to be.

And then you see that ray of light coming down into a baby. That's Jesus, the eternal son of God being incarnate, taking on human flesh and being born. And then there's a cycle.

You see his life, his life, his death, his resurrection, and then his ascension breaking through this endless cycle of life to offer us hope for eternity, offer us salvation.

[52 : 16] Jesus, that Jesus is in his person, in his life, the moment when the eternal light of God broke into this cycle.

When eternity broke into our fleeting time in order to redeem us from it. Do you know this, Jesus? Jesus.

Jesus. Jesus. Jesus. Jesus. Jesus. Jesus. Jesus. Jesus. Jesus. Jesus. That's the ultimate hope that the book of Ecclesiastes points to.

Let's pray. Oh, Father, we were so lost without you.

We were dead in our sins. We were alienated from you and from your people having no hope. Stuck in this cycle.

[53 : 26] A fallen world. This sinful life. Marred by death. Apart from your gracious intervention.

apart from your greatest gift of your son, oh, Lord God, we would still be lost. Thank you for sending your son, Jesus Christ.

Thank you for breaking into our time and ushering us into eternity. Oh, Lord, help us to be bold and wisdom and win some witnesses of this amazing gospel truth that we might give hope to those who are lost in this cycle.

In Jesus' name we pray. Amen. Amen.