

All About 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: 07 September 2025

Preacher: Ali Sewell

[0 : 0 0] Killer poem, isn't there? Sort of GCSE English style by pulling it apart and dissecting it so much.! In some ways, the extreme nature of them are there to encompass everything that comes in between.

So verse 4, there are a range of emotions between weeping and laughter that life includes them all. Or again, as an example, verse 8, there are a range of ways people relate to each other between love and hate.

Those kind of are the extremes. But we see everything in between that in the world around us. So what we have here is a picture of life.

From the good times, times of healing, times of dancing, times of love, right through to the bad times. Times of death, times of losing, times of war.

And including, as well as that, I think the kind of the indifferent things or the things that depend on the situation. Embracing or not embracing. Silence or speaking.

[1 : 2 6] It's not that one there is better than the other. But it's that there will be time for both of those and everything in between that will come into our lives. So this poem is a picture of our lives.

And yet I think the key that really opens up this poem and the chapter that follows is this, that it is not given to us as a list of instructions or as like a recipe for us to follow.

And this is not a poem so that we can wake up tomorrow and say, should I make today a time to weep or a time to laugh? Or is today a day for me to be keeping or should I be casting away?

I think the point of this poem is that these are times that come to us rather than being times that we choose. The message of Ecclesiastes and the reality of our existence that we live in is that life is something that happens to us far more than something we are in control over.

Maybe you don't like to think of it this way, but if you think of an example, we can labor and strive and set our goals and achieve them. But then suddenly a piece of news or a situation or a diagnosis or the actions of others kind of can arrive in our life.

[2 : 4 8] That life we thought we had such a good hold of that we tried so hard to direct in a certain way. And that external thing can change everything. It can make everything that we've been giving our energy to suddenly feel incredibly insignificant.

Things happen to us and we are not the masters of that. And so this poem lays out the makeup of our life. And all of us will have different mixtures of these different elements.

We'll have different experiences and pathways. But really the point is we are not in charge of that mix. However much we like to think that we could or that we do, ultimately we don't hold the instructions or the recipe to choose the different elements that go into our life.

Perhaps there's some here thinking of things that way. Perhaps that's not really something you've thought of much before. Perhaps that's hard to hear. That's often very different from the message that our kind of culture surrounds us with where we're told, you know, we have to be the boss, you have to grab life by the scruff of the neck, you can do anything you achieve.

Perhaps this sounds like a very different approach to life than it is. Perhaps for others here, this lack of control over life will be only too clear and obvious and perhaps painful through the experiences that you've been through.

[4 : 13] That we know all too well that we live in a life where we are not in control. And that life has taken us down various paths that we have never chosen.

But the encouragement to all of us this morning, however we hear this message, is that this passage is telling us that God is in control of every aspect of our life.

That God shapes the seasons of our lives, those seasons that this poem speaks about. And more than that, not just that he shapes them and has control over them, but have a look down at verse 8.

He has made everything beautiful in its time. That God will use all of these things, all of the twists and the turns of our life, ultimately to make something good.

The picture that's so often used by people here, and I think it's used because it's such a good picture, is the idea of a tapestry with lots of different colours, lots of different threads, different aspects being tied and woven together.

[5 : 20] And it's as if as we stand in our lives, in our time, we see the back of that tapestry. We see kind of the knotty bits. We see the tangled bits. We see the confused bits or bits where things overlap.

We see the parts of our life where we think, you know, I'd rather just erase that area. Or our life would be better if that bit just wasn't there. And yet God sees that the front of the tapestry.

And God is weaving that together. And ultimately, in his eternal timescale, is creating something magnificent where nothing is wasted. Where all the mess on the back makes sense in the beauty in the front.

Where everything has a purpose. Where everything is, again, as verse 11 says, is beautiful in its time. And perhaps in places in our lives, that's kind of easy for us to recognise.

We feel that we can see the image, or we can kind of see maybe what God is doing here. We can see the purpose, even though we're looking from behind. It's easy to think that way, isn't it? In times of laughter, in times of embrace, in the times of love.

[6 : 26] At other times, the message of this poem is that it will be impossible for us to see what God is doing. And it will take all of our faith and dependence on God simply to hold on to his promise that he will make all things beautiful.

because to us, and from where we're standing, it just seems like, and feels like, and looks like a mess. And yet that is what the Bible promises. Turning to the New Testament, the Apostle Paul writes how affliction is producing for us an eternal glory that is far beyond comparison.

That actually to make sense of our time, to live in light of reality, to make sense of our existence, we need to recognize, first of all, that God shapes the seasons of our lives, but that he is doing that to make something beautiful.

Not that everything will be resolved next week or next year. Not that we might ever see the results of all of these things that happen under heaven, as it says in verse 1.

Remember, that means kind of in our world, in our time. But the God who is over all things, who is above heaven, who is beyond time, is working out something beautiful in the lives of his people.

[7 : 48] And we'll come back at the end to see how one day we will truly be able to see that and appreciate that. Okay, so God shapes the seasons of our lives.

He shapes them into something beautiful. Beautiful. The rest of this chapter then, as I said, I think really gives us some extended applications of that truth.

If that is true, if we grasp that, then how does it affect how we live and how we spend our time? I think it enables us to see and understand three Ps we've got here.

Three Ps, our purpose, our place, and our prospects in this world that God has created. So let's have a look through those. First, our purpose in God's creation.

Now what difference does it make to know that God shapes the seasons of our life when we come to think about our purpose in that life? What we're to spend our time doing?

[8 : 50] I think this is one of the key points of application the preacher is getting at here. And the headline really is this, our purpose then, if this is true, God's shaping and control of the seasons of our life.

If that is true, our purpose is not to try and control everything. And our purpose is not to try and manage our lives in every minute detail.

Our purpose, as we see in verse 9, is not toiling for gain. There's Ecclesiastes words we've heard again and again. It's not our job to try and kind of make something of our lives as if it all depends on us and if we just get it right the path will be smooth and there'll be this kind of gain at the end something for us to take away with us.

Rather our purpose, in light of God's sovereign control, we see down in verse 12 and 13, 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. Again, this kind of overarching theme throughout Ecclesiastes, this point that the preacher keeps coming back to where he says, get real with life, face up to reality, you're not in perfect control over things and yet what we might hear is kind of bad news and negative news.

[10 : 17] He tells us how positive that is, knowing God is in control, knowing that on God's eternal timescale he is making something beautiful out of all the twists and turns of life that he leads us down.

That frees us, the preacher says, to be joyful, to rejoice in the things that God has given us and more than that, to do good, to fear God, that is to live in line with his perfect will, to accept and give thanks in life as God has given it to us.

A couple of examples of this where we see this played out in real life. Last year, the author Jonathan Haidt wrote a really significant book. Some of you might have read it, The Anxious Generation, it's called.

He argues there that the huge rise in mental health issues among young people can be tied pretty directly to the rise of the smartphone and social media in particular on smartphones.

I find it a fairly convincing argument that he lays out. One of his points, he's kind of highlighting the danger, is this, that social media, he says, takes people out of reality.

[11 : 30] He doesn't put it this way, but the idea is that the profiles presented to people 24-7 do not have the full roundedness of life shown in verses 1-8 of Ecclesiastes 3.

These feeds do not have mourning, they do not have losing, they do not have hurt. Rather, his point is they project perfection, they invite comparison, and they result in a desire to control every aspect of life to try and reach the standards that are being celebrated.

And the kind of idea of the whole book is to say that as young people try to grasp after that, it is doing them huge harm. It is causing real pain, it is robbing them of their joy, ultimately because what we're saying here, they've got their purpose in life all wrong.

They're trying to control everything rather than recognizing God's control and the freedom that that brings. There's one real kind of practical outworking of this.

Another one, I think, if we get this right, it really helps us if we get our purpose in line of what God has done and his control. It helps free us I think as well from a life full of regret and disappointment.

[12 : 49] If only this had happened, if only it hadn't happened that way, if only things had ended up like this rather than that. How often are we tempted to think that way? How often do we hear those sorts of words?

Again, verse 14 reminds us whatever God does endures forever. Nothing can be added to it nor anything taken away from it. Rather than live a life of regret, we're encouraged to live this life of rejoicing because we know God remains in control of our past, our present, and our future.

We are not designed then to control life, but to enjoy the gifts God has given. When times are hard, as they will be, and as the preacher knows full well, and as we know full well, knowing God's control helps us to continue to do good, knowing that still God has us in his hands, and that still he has control of our lives.

So there's the first piece of kind of wisdom applied to this passage, our purpose, not to try and be in control, but to trust in God's control, and in that to find our peace.

So there's number one, our purpose in the world God has created. The next aspect, and this is all related, but I think it's helpful for us to see that the next kind of application of what the preacher says here, he applies to our place in the world God has created.

[14 : 18] And we're given here two kind of boundaries, really, I suppose, within which we're to understand our place in the world. And we see this particularly in verse 11, but it's expanded a bit in the last section of the chapter as well.

Do have a look at verse 11, that the first boundary there corrects against a view of humanity, a view of our place in the world, that says, you know, we are basically just animals.

We are not important, there is no grand purpose in anything. When we ask the big questions in life, people say, no point asking that, we are simply born, we live, we die, and that is it, that is all.

No, verse 11 tells us, well, God has put eternity into man's heart. Why do we wrestle with the big questions of life? You know, what are we here for?

Where are we heading? What is the purpose in all of this? You never see like a dog with existential dread or anything like that, or a monkey writing a poem about the meaning of existence.

[15 : 23] Why is it only humans who have these thoughts about life and how to make sense of this brief time that we have? Well, the Bible tells us here in black and white, it's because God has put eternity into our hearts.

We recognize we are made for more. We recognize there's more than just life under the sun. And that's why our world is constantly struggling and striving and asking these big questions, saying this cannot be all there is, this doesn't make sense.

the preacher says that's because God has put eternity in the hearts of men. There's one kind of boundary, there's one guideline. We are not simply animals, we are hardwired as it were, to look for the significance in the events and the seasons of our life.

The other kind of boundary of verse 11 reminds us that we are not animals but neither are we gods. He has put eternity into man's heart yet so he cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end.

And then verse 18 onwards, if you kind of cast your eyes down that bit, they remind us really starkly that when it comes to it we perhaps have a lot more in common with the animals than we might like to think and we'll come back to those verses again soon.

[16 : 45] But our place in God's creation, we learn from this passage, is not that we're simply animals here and gone. No, we have eternity in our hearts. We are full of wonder and seeking and questions and yet actually we are still limited.

We don't know the end from the beginning. We don't know all that God is doing. We're not God. And again, the preacher's application here, we keep coming back to this in Ecclesiastes, is that the key to a life well lived is not to be constantly fighting against or trying to break through the limitations of reality and those boundaries that God has set on his creation.

Rather, the key to being able to rejoice is to living contentedly within them. And so it's to have that sense of wonder, but also recognize there will always be more that we don't quite know.

Our girls recently, in light of something we read, started asking all sorts of questions after tea to do with God being eternal. How does that work? Where did he come from? What was before that?

And suddenly my lack of knowledge or the limits of my knowledge were very quickly exposed. I can't answer that question satisfactory. I don't think any of us can. We want to recognize the limits of our understanding but we also don't want to say, don't ask that.

[18 : 11] That's a silly question. You'd never understand. We want them to grow in a wonder of a God of all creation but who is beyond our comprehension.

Or similarly when a situation completely takes us by surprise particularly when that is something that is hard and we don't know what to do with it when life takes any number of those twists and turns that we didn't expect or that we didn't want.

We don't want to say well you know what that's just life. Life is just random. There's nothing behind it all. You just have to get on with it. Suck it up. No we need to see that things come from God.

We can cry out to God. We can wrestle with God. We need to keep God in the picture and yet we also need to recognize we are not promised this God's eye view of all things.

That we don't have God's eternal perspective. We can know that God is in a situation without knowing what he is doing through that situation.

[19 : 15] Again one really practical outworking of that then I think when people are suffering and struggling and going through these confusing times don't tell them one day they'll look back and it'll all make sense.

Don't try and work out for them why this thing that is really hard and painful is actually really good news because it might never make sense to us. It might never be understandable in our time here on earth.

You know recognize our limitations. We are not God but do sit with them do pray with them do remind them of God's control and presence with them even in the darkest of times because we are people with eternity in our hearts who recognize that we are made for more.

Remember our place in God's universe. We are not simply animals nor are we gods with all the answers but the key to living wisely and making the best use of our time and the situations God brings into our lives is to remember our place and rejoice in the God who is over all things.

To embrace the limitations God has put on us in time and recognize that he is the God who is outside of time but who is at work in our lives. So our purpose, our place, finally our prospects.

[20 : 34] Once you've got two words starting with P it's hard not to try and find another. But in this world, in this time, in these seasons, Ecclesi is laying out for us, thirdly, finally, with God over all things, as we close this chapter and look forward, what are our prospects?

What comes next after this breath of life that Ecclesiastes is investigating? Because this chapter, as with a few chapters we've seen in Ecclesiastes so far, it feels like a fairly somber end, doesn't it?

Again, Ecclesiastes is not afraid to kind of, well, it doesn't pull its punches. It's kind of sharp. It reminds us how death will come to us all, to man and beast alike.

And we can read there in verse 20, all go to one place, all are from the dust, and to dust all return. Who knows whether the spirit of man goes upward and the spirit of the beast goes down into the earth?

That would be a kind of a nice verse for a tea towel to have. You don't see that on many things. But it's a great question, you know, what are our prospects? How do we make sense of our time on earth in light of this eternity, this eternity we have in our hearts and yet we can't fully grasp, we don't know all the answers to?

[21 : 53] Ultimately, the preacher's question here is, you know, who does know what happens after we die? And actually, this passage is already given as a pointer toward that, toward what happens when our finite lives end and we meet face to face the eternal creator.

Verse 17, I said in my heart, God will judge the righteous and the wicked, for there is a time for every matter. And the point is this, that ultimately at the end of our lives, our prospects will entirely depend upon God's verdict on our life.

How have we used our time? How have we responded to the seasons of life he has brought into our path? How have we accepted our place in his creation?

In the New Testament, the book of Hebrews sheds further light on the same point. The author there says, it is appointed for man to die once and after that comes judgment.

And yet that can be a terrifying prospect, can't it? Because who of us can honestly say, oh yeah, I've used all my time wisely. Yeah, I've responded so well to all the different situations that have come into my life.

[23 : 16] I've accepted them graciously. No, we've all in various different ways tried to break out of the limits that God has placed us in. We've all in various different ways and different times been dissatisfied with what he has given to us.

We've all in different stages tried to make ourselves the controller and the ultimate ruler of our lives. And that is God's place and God's place alone.

If that is something we've all done, how then can we stand in this judgment which is to come and this judgment which is promised? Well, the book of Hebrews continues in the very next verse of chapter nine.

So Christ, having been offered once to bear the sins of many, will appear a second time, not to deal with sin, but to save those who are eagerly waiting for him.

The full picture of the Bible, when we ask that question, what are our prospects? It is that Jesus has taken the penalty of our sin in all its fullness.

[24 : 24] The consequences of our rebellion, of our wickedness, has fallen on him that means that on that day of judgment, when our time on this earth, when our breath of a life is extinguished, that actually if we trust in Jesus, we will be welcomed into eternity with our heavenly Father.

And that is when we will see that whatever twists and turns our life takes, the weeping, the laughter, the tearing, the sowing, the war, the peace from our time to be born until our time to die.

That whatever route that path of life has taken, we can be confident that if our trust is in Jesus, God will have made something beautiful. And that is the point when we will enjoy that and truly understand that and grasp that as we spend eternity with him.

Our prospects, for want of a better word, are certain and perfect for eternity if our trust is in Jesus. And it is resting in his perfect control of all things, both now and into the future, that enables us to rejoice and find joy in all God gives us in the present.

As we spend our times, as we spend our days seeking to do his will, as we live his people striving after his glory, secure it in his control, that God controls the seasons of our lives.

[25 : 57] That might seem confusing at times, our knowledge is limited, and yet that is the truth for us to hold on to, and the truth of his promise that he is making them into something beautiful.

And one day when through Christ we are welcomed home to him, we will see that beauty in full display, and we will fall on our knees and worship God for his goodness to us and his glory.

Let's pray together. Heavenly Father, we thank you that you are the sovereign God who is over all things, and that we are not products of random chance stumbling through a blind universe, but we are children of the king being led every day of our lives.

Lord, often that is difficult to understand, because in this fallen world, in this world marred by sin, we go through and we look back on so many stages of life where we struggle to see your hand at work, where we don't understand why you allowed certain things to happen, where we can't see how you could possibly turn our suffering into something beautiful.

But Lord, we ask that you would help us to trust in your promises, that you will make all things beautiful in its time, and that one day we will see that beauty as we are brought into our eternal home with you.

[27 : 29] If our trust is in Jesus, who went to that place of judgment on the cross for us, that we might be free, that we might be forgiven, that we might be with you for all eternity.

Lord, as we live in light of that truth, please help us not to try and control our lives in every detail, but to rest rather in your control. Please help us to keep you in the picture in all things while recognizing that still we can't see the whole image.

Please help us to live in light of the reality that this is your universe, and that in light of that we would spend our days depending on you, that we would give our time to seeking your glory, and we would await with joy the time when Jesus will return, and we will see you face to face.

We pray all of these things in the precious name of Jesus Christ. Amen.