

“God Sets the Times, so We Should Fear Him”

23 January 2022 - Led by Rev. Sam Mawhinney

Introit: Only By Grace

Welcome & Call to Worship

Hymn of Preparation: Now Thank We All Our God

Prayers of Adoration & Confession

Reading: Ecclesiastes 3:1-15

Sermon:

It's the beginning of the end of the pandemic! The government has outlined a timeline for the easing of restrictions and probably like those of my age I am relieved and yet cautious. When the pandemic struck and we understood the fearful and deadly implication of having a worldwide new virus infect humanity our hope was that God was with us in it, Psalm 46:1 *“God is our refuge and strength and ever-present help in trouble”* that was and is true and we praise him for bringing us through.

There is a time for everything, a season, the season of Covid, and now it appears a season when the restrictions will be relaxed. There is a time for restrictions and a time for freedom. The new season will give us increased opportunities for fellowship, worship and prayer. We cannot get the two years back nor can we fully know what the future will be like, but we can continue to know God is present and has given us this time.

This is the topic that the Teacher addresses. In his brilliant way he teaches us about time and the times we live in, and how we should live within its bounds which God sets. This is his task, and his conclusion is that we should respect and revere God. *“I know that everything God does will endure forever; nothing can be added to it, and nothing taken from it. God does it so that humanity will revere him.”* (v14)

I. His Premise (v1)

His purpose as The Teacher (Qoheleth) within Israel is to arouse in them an awareness of the meaning of life. He does this by examining life under the sun, (Tahat Hassemes) that is confined to this world, to time, if even a day! So, it is not surprising that he tackles the concept of time, and he begins with a premise. *“There is a time for everything, and a season for everything under the sun.”* His premise is self-evident, there is a time or a season for every life event and he sets out his thinking in a wonderful poem in v 2-8. It is not the only place in Ecclesiastes where time is mentioned, we will come across further reflections on time as we read on in 7:17; 8:5-6, 9; 9:11-12; 10:17

II. A Poem (v2-9)

This is recognised to be a beautiful poem, a literary triumph and is read often in secular settings. The scope of time covered is from birth to death, it marks the length of our time on

earth. It is composed in classic Hebrew parallelism, in the perfect number of seven verses. Taking v2 as our example that born relates to die, opposites, and born relates to plant and die to uproot highlighting the intention of the verse to cover the beginning and the end of a person or plants life. The entirety of life is covered. There are a variety of life circumstances covered and there is a certain rhythm, even clock like way it can be read expressing the reality of time itself. There is no discernible logic as to the order of the things mentioned which reflects the unpredictable and haphazard nature of life.

It is great poetry. But is it true? I discovered the truth of “a time to plant” when I lived in Kenya. I had a small garden with my hospital house, called a shamba, when the spring came, I decided I would plant some vegetables as everyone did, and I had a Kenyan spade and I thought I would get ahead of everyone else. So, I tried to dig the garden and it was impossible, only a JCB digger or explosives could have dug the ground that had been baked hard by the sun, I gave up in frustration as the locals nodded their heads in mild derision at the foolishness of the Mzungu or white man! Everyone in Kenya knows that there is a time to plant and that is after the rains come, not before. It exposed not just my lack of knowledge but exposed an arrogance we have in the West that we do not need God to provide. Similarly in Ireland, which of us have not put out my plants too early in the spring and the frost hits them and stunts their growth? There is a time to plant.

You might want to ask yourself when is the time to kill? Or what is it about stones and their gathering and scattering? And what is he referring to when he says there is a time to tear and time to mend? The poem sets the extent of life under the sun, it portrays our time as rhythmic, varied, unpredictable and teaches the confines of time on life, this a time to plant and a time to uproot.

III. Problem (v9)

What I wondered most about was v9, the idea is not new to us, we have come across it before in 1:3 about the futility of toil, “*what does the worker gain from his toil?*” Initially it seemed out of place, what has a poem on time to do with work.

Firstly, the answer to the rhetorical question in v9 is Nothing and it appears he is reminding us of the never-ending extremes of life and its confines, so that in the end nothing is achieved. Each cancels the other out. When you look at the small vegetable patch in your garden, most likely because it's winter there is nothing in it. What has all the toil, a daily toil, achieved at this moment in time? Nothing. The premise is that everything has a time but, in the end, nothing is achieved within the confines of time.

IV. What the Teacher observes (v10-15)

In these verses of prose, we have his answer, to the meaning of life within the context of time. He tells us what he has seen and twice he tells us he knows. In other words, these are his observations, and this is his knowledge of what he has learned about time.

The burden of the business of busy lives (v10)

V10 *"I have seen the burden that God has laid on humanity".* ESV *"I have seen the business that God has given to the children of men to be busy with."*

He is acknowledging God as the one who puts the burden of time on humanity. The deadline of Sunday morning can be a real burden for the preacher, the exam timetable is burdensome for the student or being late for a flight at the airport is burdensome. How often do we think or say, "I wish I had more time?" The ESV translation points to the burden of frantic busyness, of too much to do, of too many choices and not enough time, of endless things to be doing, as any mum with children will testify too.

The beauty of life in its time (v11)

"He has made everything beautiful in its time."

So in the culture of the Middle East it was suitable, and a beautiful thing to tear your clothes as an expression of your sorrow and grief at the death of another and it was suitable and beautiful to mend them when the grief had eased.

It was right to gather stones in a time of peace so that agriculture could happen and right to obstruct your enemies by covering the productive fields with stones so your enemy would be hindered, and life would be difficult for them, giving them a reason to retreat.

The time of your birth is a beautiful time for your parents and one that is celebrated annually, and the time of your death a great sadness but when you are old and worn out it is not inappropriate, or if extremely ill and wracked with pain, the phrase RIP, has a certain appropriateness to it. A time to be born and a time to die.

Yet this is a statement of faith, and acknowledgement that God determines the time for us, not you, *"he has made"*. Your birth, its time, its place, your parents, your gender, you do not choose. Yes you can rail against it but the teacher tells us that if the time is accepted as from God as God then everything is beautiful in its time and that there is a purpose in everything. This is very clearly seen in the way the scriptures speak of the life of the Lord Jesus and the way he sees his life at every stage.

"He is subject to guardians and trustees until the time set by his father." "When the time had fully come God sent his son, born of a woman..." Gal 4:2,4

"The time has come" he said, "The Kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news." Mark 1:15

"He began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things....he must be killed and after three days rise again." Mark 8:31

"I tell you I will not drink of this fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it anew with you in my Father's kingdom." Matthew 26:29

God has made everything beautiful in its time.

The frustration of eternity and not being able to grasp it (v11)

“He has also set eternity in the human heart, yet they cannot fathom what God has done from beginning to end” We are meant to acknowledge the frustration in this statement. Humanity has an inkling of something beyond being under the sun, of infinity, as we gaze at the stars on a clear evening, when we see an unbelievable magic trick and wonder what is going on, of a desire for the supernatural, of the universal desire for worship of something or someone better and bigger than us and yet a frustration that we do not see the big picture. A common picture used to describe this is being short sighted and only able to see part of a beautiful tapestry; we appreciate its quality and beauty but long to see what the whole picture is. The question is why has God done this? Why not give us the whole picture? Is he being cruel and toying with us? I don't believe so! To see the whole picture we would be God, it would overwhelm us, we could not cope with the responsibility and burden of holding everything in its complexity and completeness.

V. What the Teacher knows (v.12-15)

Enjoy life as given by God in its time (v12-13)

There is nothing better, or the best thing to do, because God is God and sees the whole picture; is to enjoy life (*be happy*) and (*do good*) *“while we live”* as a gift of God. It is a repeat of the conclusion he drew in his search for meaning in education, pleasure, wisdom and folly. In this context of time, we are to see that life is full of good and joyful moments, which he has listed for us, of birth, planting, healing, building, laughing, dancing, hugging, gathering, mending, speaking, loving and peace and there are times when life is hard and tough, death, uprooting, killing, weeping, mourning, distance, giving up, throwing away, ripping up, silence, hating and war. In all of them we see that God has given them, gifted them for a purpose that we do not see or fully understand. We look to him as the provider and as sovereign and we praise him or lament.

A friend of mine and Karen who is the leader of OMF in the Philippines writes about what she learned from the Filipino Church in these words. *“I had to learn what the gospel has to say about suffering, about endless oppression and inequity. I had to learn to lament and pray the Psalms. I admire the resilience and tenacity of Filipinos everywhere in the face of tremendous hardships.”*

We need to learn that life is not always easy, there is a time for everything, both good and bad, happy and sad, God has gifted it to us, and we are to live in the moment with a confidence of his presence and control because he is God and sees the big picture and we do not.

Fear God (v14-15)

“I know that everything God does endures forever; nothing can be added to it and nothing taken from it. God does it so everyone will revere him.”

The Bible is clear that the pinnacle of God's work on earth is humanity made in his image. God has created us with an eternal soul that endures forever.

The argument is what God does is eternal, we cannot add to it and cannot take away from it. He is above all things, controls all things and is sovereign over all things for all eternity. We are locked into time. When we look at the past, we might want to change things or relive them, but we cannot. When we look ahead, we do not even know how the rest of this day might work out, we cannot control the future or alter it. The Back to the Future movies, which I watched over Christmas, are fiction, because of eternity in our hearts we appreciate them, but we are not God.

Not only are we locked into time, unable to change the circumstances or outcomes, we are told that God will call us to account for the lives we have lived. It is a scary reality to have your past in every detail replayed before a holy God. Last week I spoke about Ashling Murphy, and her death. This week God reminded me of some of my past and incidents of sinful thoughts and behaviour as I thought about this whole issue. The shame and guilt of that was very real.

Where did I find help for my past failings, by recalling the gospel, by accepting his grace? I might be able to recall past sin, but this is not the reality for God as the Psalmist acknowledges. *“If you O Lord kept a record of sins, O Lord, who could stand? But with you there is forgiveness; therefore, you are feared.”* Psalm 130:3-4

Here is the answer to why God has set the times as he has, that we might fear him. To respect and revere God means acknowledgement and obedience in relationship. If a person disrespects a court for example, they refuse to recognise it and obey its rulings. How often do we do that with God?

God has placed us in time so that we might acknowledge and reverence the one who placed us in time. God is himself beyond time, sees the whole picture, is eternal and will call us to account. God does it so that humanity will enjoy life as given and will fear him.

Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us be thankful, and so worship God acceptably with reverence and awe, for our “God is a consuming fire.” Hebrews 12:28-29

Praise: Beautiful Saviour

Announcements

Prayers for Others

Closing Hymn: What A Faithful God Have I

Discussion Questions:

Describe in your own words the Teacher's view of time, both for us and for God.

What things do you seek to control? What might it look like to surrender control?

What conclusion does the Teacher reach about why God sets the times? What might this look like displayed in your life this week?