

**“ETERNITY IN OUR HEARTS”**

In the previous chapter, the Preacher told us about his three experiments in his search for meaning and how each of those experiments failed. And he then told us the conclusion that this led him to: that the best thing for man to do is to recognize the limitations of this life while still receiving it as a gift from God, a gift that is to be enjoyed but not made into an idol. That is a good summary of the message of the book of Ecclesiastes. It is a theme that emerges over and over again in these twelve chapters, and it is a theme that is at the heart of the passage we have just read. But it is not as though the Preacher is simply saying the same thing over and over again. Instead, he explores this theme inside and out, approaching it from a variety of angles. And his angle of vision in this passage is easy to see, because it is emphasized by the word that occurs thirty times in these fifteen verses: the word “time.” This passage continues to explore the frustrating nature of life under the sun by considering our experience as creatures who are bounded by time and its repeated cycles. The passage can be broken down into three sections: the poem about time and its cycles; the paragraph about the task that the Lord has appointed for man as he lives within the bounds of time; and the paragraph about how the work that is done by the Lord is not bounded by the limits of time. And the idea that ties these three sections together, as we will see, is that which is expressed in verse 11: the fact that God has put eternity into man’s heart.

We begin our study of this passage by looking at the poem about time in verses 1-8. This poem has been made famous in our culture by the hit 1960’s song by The Byrds,

“Turn, Turn, Turn.” I imagine that some of you cannot even hear this passage without starting to have that tune run through your head. The poem returns to a theme that was addressed in chapter 1: the endless cycles of the natural world. And as we saw there, these cycles are a source of frustration to man as he tries to see life as having some overarching purpose or goal. On top of this, the cycles of time frustrate us because they remind us of the fact that we are not really in control of things. As much as we try to impose our will upon the natural world, we inevitably find ourselves having to submit to its patterns and cycles.

The Preacher is not saying that these cycles occur on their own though. God is the one who appoints the times for every matter under heaven. This is evident at the start of the poem, where it says that there is a time to be born and a time to die. Who sets these times? God does, of course. God determines the time when we will come into this world, and he determines the time when we will leave it. And this is something that we should pause to consider. It is a sobering thought to know that the day of your death has already been established, to know that there is nothing that you can do to change that fact. The psalmist was right to say, “My times are in your hand.” [Ps. 31:15a]

The poem about time shows us that God has appointed a time for every activity under heaven. And many of the things that are mentioned here remind us of the fallenness of life under the sun. Among the things listed are killing, weeping, mourning, hating, and fighting. These are obviously not the kinds of things we would choose for ourselves. As we said just a moment ago, they remind us that we are not control. Furthermore, the

mention in verse 3 of “a time to break down” reminds us that all of the things that we build in this life, both literally and figuratively, will eventually crumble into nothing. The only building that is able to stand the test of time is the one that Paul mentions in 2 Corinthians 5:1, where he writes, “For we know that if the tent, which is our earthly home, is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens.” The only building that will last is the one that God is building, the spiritual house that is the true temple of God. We will return to that idea in a few moments.

Another reminder of the fallenness of this world is the mention in verse 6 of “a time to lose.” There are many things that we lose in this life that we would rather keep. We might think of the economic downturn that our nation is currently experiencing. People have lost their jobs, lost their homes, lost a significant portion of their retirement funds. This is yet another example of the uncertainty and instability of life under the sun.

The Preacher’s poem about time is followed by a paragraph in which he writes about the task that the Lord has appointed for man as he dwells within time. And much of what the Preacher says here has already been expressed in the book’s first two chapters. Verse 9 repeats a question that we have heard the Preacher ask before: “What gain has the worker from his toil?” And we know his answer to that question: the worker does not gain anything from his toil, at least not anything that will stand the test of time. And verse 10 brings to mind 1:13, where the Preacher said that God has given man an unhappy business to be busy with in this life. Yet there is something here that is a little

bit different than what he said earlier. The business that God has given us, the work that he has appointed for us in this life, may be unhappy when we try to find ultimate meaning in it, but is not entirely unhappy. This becomes clear in verse 11, where the Preacher affirms the goodness of life under the sun, just as he did at the close of chapter 2. He says that God has made everything beautiful in its time. In other words, the creation is good. God made it that way. He made it very good. And because of this, there is real beauty in this world.

But there is an important qualification to this truth, a qualification that the Preacher makes by using the phrase “in its time.” There is beauty and goodness in this life, but it is a beauty and goodness that is bounded by time. It does not last. And this is a source of great sorrow and vexation to us. We see this illustrated in the words of a dying character at the end of Wendell Berry’s novel *Jayber Crow*, where the character says, “I could die in peace, I think, if the world was beautiful. To know that it’s being ruined is hard.” [363] Life is beautiful. This world is beautiful. But its beauty withers and fades. It does not last.

And this leads us to the Preacher’s statement in the next part of verse 11, where he says that God “has put eternity into man’s heart, yet so that he cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end.” When the Preacher says that God has put eternity into man’s heart, he is saying that God made man with an innate sense that life continues beyond this world. He created us with a hunger and thirst for eternal beauty and significance. But this hunger and thirst cannot be satisfied by anything in this world.

This is even illustrated by our physical hunger and thirst. You do not eat one meal and then never have to eat again. You do not take one drink and never get thirsty again. We have an appetite that cannot be permanently satisfied. We have a thirst that cannot be permanently quenched.

God has made us with this thirst, this sense of the eternal, but he has also placed us within time. And because he has done so, we are unable to find lasting satisfaction in this life under the sun. That is the Preacher's point in the last part of verse 11. God has made us so that we are unable to find out what he has done from the beginning to the end. We are unable to see any goal or meaning to this life under the sun.

I want to call your attention to the significance of the phrase "what God has done" in verse 11. The Preacher is talking here about the things that take place within time, the cycles of life and the events of history. Yet he speaks of these things as things that God has done. Here is a good example of the Bible's teaching of God's sovereign governance of all things. God orders all things by his work of providence. The world does not keep on moving through its cycles on its own. Things do not happen by chance. God does everything.

The Preacher tells us that we are not able to discern what God is doing in his ordering of the events that take place in his world. There is much that we would like to know. There are questions we would like to have answered. Why did God bring that devastating earthquake upon the nation of Haiti? What is God's purpose in such things?

We do not know. God keeps many things hidden from us. There is a great deal about this life that we simply cannot understand.

So how are we to respond to the puzzling nature of life? The Preacher gives his answer in verses 12-13, and it is the same answer that he gave back at the end of chapter 2. He says that we should be content with the life that God has given us. We should be joyful and do good, living a productive life for as many days as the Lord grants us to live under the sun.

Yet that is not all that the Preacher has to say at this point. In the last paragraph in our passage, he points us to the one thing that is able to satisfy our soul's longing for the eternal. He points us to God. And in particular, he points us to God's work. He tells us that God's work, unlike ours, endures forever. It follows, then, that the only way for us to escape the vanity of this life, the only way for us to find meaning and purpose, the only way for us to satisfy our heart's yearning for eternity, is to come to have a share in God's work, to become a part of his program. If all of the things that we build in this life will eventually be broken down, then we need to become a part of the house that God is building. We need to be united to Jesus Christ, the one who is the true temple of God.

And the Preacher tells us how we can do this. He shows us how to become a part of God's redemptive program. He says that God providentially orders the world in the way that he does in order to cause people to fear him. What does the Bible mean when it speaks of fearing God? I came across a helpful definition recently while our family was reading John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* during our family worship. Bunyan writes,

“True or right fear can be known by three things. First, by what causes it: the right kind of fear is caused by a saving conviction of sin. Secondly, a good fear drives the soul to quickly lay hold of Christ for salvation. And thirdly, this fear begins and sustains in the soul a great reverence for God, His Word, and His ways. It keeps the soul tender, making it afraid to turn right or left from His Word and ways. It makes the soul sensitive to anything that might dishonor God, grieve the Spirit, or cause the enemy to speak against God.” [206]

That is a wonderful summary of what it means to fear God. And the Preacher tells us that the reason why the Lord makes life so frustrating for us is so that we will turn to him with that kind of fear. Our sin and rebellion has caused God to subject this world to futility, so that we might come to see our sinful estate and bow before him in hold fear. The proper response to life’s vanity, life’s disappointments, life’s inability to provide lasting satisfaction, is to fear God.

What about you? Does Bunyan’s definition of the fear of the Lord describe your life? Have you come under a saving conviction of your sin? Have you laid hold of Jesus Christ as your only hope for salvation? Are you living as one whose soul is sensitive to the things that might displease or dishonor God? That is what it means to fear God. And the only way your soul’s thirst for eternal significance can be satisfied is to live in the fear of the Lord. We have to accept the fact that God determines our times. We have to

accept that life is beyond our control and beyond our understanding. We cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end. We are not going to be able to see how all of life fits together.

But there are two things that we can know for certain, if we believe that God's Word is true. First, we can know that everything that takes place in this world is God's work. He is the one who is doing it. He appoints a time for every matter under heaven. He exercises his providential control over everything. And second, we can also know that the work that God does always reaches its intended goal. Everything that he does in this world is moving things towards that goal. And the goal, the purpose, of God's work is an eternal goal. His work endures forever. When you embrace these two truths, you will be able to do what the Preacher tells us to do in this passage: you will be able to rest content in the life that the Lord has given you. You will be able to be joyful and do good as long as you have life in this world under the sun. I cannot put this any better than Charles Bridges puts it in his commentary on this passage, so I will close with his words. He writes:

“If then we cannot alter the dispensations of God, let us set ourselves down to the more profitable work of altering our own judgment of them. A murmuring spirit subdued to quietness will be much to the honour of God. We shall soon pronounce our verdict - that ‘all the paths of the Lord are mercy and truth’ (Ps. 25:10) - all as they ought to be - all as we could wish them to have been, when we

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shall look back upon them in the clear light of eternity.” [Charles Bridges,  
*Ecclesiastes*, Geneva Commentaries, 74]