

The Tyranny of Time

Ecclesiastes 3

Do you ever wish you just had one or two more hours in the day?

I saw some guy on a YouTube advert saying if you could have one wish it would be to add an extra hour in the day. Don't you feel like that sometimes?

Sometimes all the jobs that need to be done just mount up, and explode in my mind, and I think "how am I ever going to get all these done"? Do you know that feeling? When there's just so much, and it feels overwhelming.

In the last few days it seems that all the people I chat with feel it...

- I've got to answer that email/txt right away
- I only get 25% of my to-do list done, I feel such a failure
- I just don't have the strength anymore, I'm not as young as I was.

Perhaps it's when you're trying to get things together and get out the door in time to get to your appointment? The time dwindles and dwindles; I don't even have any kids to get ready!

From one way of looking at it, time rules our society.

I mean, how many of you are wearing a watch? Or, use your phone as a watch?

I wonder how easy you'd find it get through a day without ever being able to check the time?

That's a funny thought isn't it! You can think of it as the tyranny of time ruling over us.

And people want everything instantly don't they – instant coffee, instant credit, instant communication! I know someone who says: "why can't people just slow down"?

Perhaps you're older, and feel like you escaped that world (where everything is in such a hurry). But for you, I think time can still bring tyranny – as you age, and perhaps even begin to struggle. No longer is it about time driving you *onwards*, but now it's the struggle of the plod, step by step, plod by plod – and wondering how much longer it keeps going? And where its' going?

Well, today, as we continue our series in the book of Ecclesiastes (strange book you might think to find in the Bible) we're thinking about 'the marching on of time': are we trapped by it? Is there any meaning? And does faith in God make any difference?

If you *haven't* been with us for the last couple of weeks, we are reading an astonishingly honest book from the Old Testament. It's written by/or about Solomon, a wise and prosperous King of the Jews from thousands of years ago.

I'll call him the Teacher, he's a believer! He trusts in God.

But he wants to address the hard questions of life, and he's got no time for easy or superficial answers.

He wants to ask things like :

- What is it all about?
- Does death steal the meaning from everyone's life?
- Why are things unfair?

And one of the words he comes back to over and over again is "meaningless" or "vanity" in the old translation. Is everything meaningless? He means, is everything insubstantial, of no consequence, basically irrelevant at the end of the day?

Dave helpfully explained how we should think about this word.
Now, it's freezing outside, and you've all seen that puff of breath when you breathe out.
Well, you can't grab the air can you? You can't grasp it?
Is our life just like the air? The things we do: like the breath?
You can't grab it, you can't grasp it, and after a moment it's gone!

It sounds all very negative. But the Teacher is a believer; we see that very clearly again and again in the book, not least today.

Today, the Teacher's focus is on the march of time,
We are going to (focus on v1-15) and think about what he says under three headings,

- 1) The rhythm of time
- 2) Our longing for eternity
- 3) The gift of God

So to begin with, have a look down, v1 he introduces his poem.

"There is a *time* for everything,
and a *season* for every activity under the heavens"

And then listen to these contrasts: 14 of them covering some of our most basic experiences and deepest emotions.

- ² a time to be born and a time to die,
a time to plant and a time to uproot,
- ³ a time to kill and a time to heal,
a time to tear down and a time to build,

It's a beautiful poem, you may know it as a song, the Byrds sang it in 1965, and you might want to listen on YouTube later!

It reflects something of the beauty of life – time isn't random and meaningless – it has beauty.

Just like seasons move from one season to the next, so do our lives.

And those seasons point to some kind of *order*, and meaning.

This world is *not* an accident; it didn't come together by chance; atoms just falling into place. The teacher is convinced this world was made by a loving creator, it is designed. Even though he has struggles looking for meaning, he is sure there is a God who made us.

Instinctively I think we know that!

Even Charles Darwin once said "I cannot believe with my mind that all this was created by *chance*"

One of the things which persuades the teacher that there is a creator, is the natural rhythms of life. He says v11

"God has made everything beautiful *in its time*"

So, thank God that it's not always winter, (and it's not always summer) what would British people talk about! (if the weather was just the same). We have the seasons!

⁴ a time to weep and a time to laugh,
a time to mourn and a time to dance,
⁵ a time to scatter stones and a time to
gather them,
a time to embrace and a time to refrain
from embracing,
⁶ a time to search and a time to give up,
a time to keep and a time to throw away,

(Can you feel the rhythm, the different seasons)

⁷ a time to tear and a time to mend,
a time to be silent and a time to speak,
⁸ a time to love and a time to hate,
a time for war and a time for peace.

There's no use resisting them:

No use trying to stay *young* all the time

No use trying to be *silent* all the time.

(When someone tells you their woes, don't just sit there silently, say something!)

But there *is* a time to be quiet: don't just keep talking, talking and talking, keeping people hanging on so they can't get away.

You can't fight this rhythm, these times – and wisdom is knowing what time it is:

So, don't sunbathe in December! That's madness! Know the season.

Don't wrap up in 5 layers in the middle of summer.

"There's a time to embrace" Don't embrace the wrong person! Don't give the person who serves you at the supermarket checkout a big hug and kiss. But don't just wave and acknowledge your closest loved one when you see them! Embrace them!

Don't crack a silly joke in the middle of a funeral.

Don't talk about death in the middle of a party.

There is a time to weep! Blokes (and everyone): Don't feel bad if you weep – there is a time(!), some things are truly heart breaking.

There is a time to dance, don't just hide in the shadows all the time, never having a go!

We see his point: there are rhythms, right times and wrong times.

Learn to recognise the time!

It's a beautiful poem, it speaks of the rhythm and beauty.

But, the teacher, and perhaps we, still have a nagging feeling...

v9 brings us back down to reality with a huge bump

⁹ *What do workers gain from their toil?*

¹⁰ *I have seen the burden God has laid on the human race.*

You see, bump. And we know it don't we?! We talk about how awful it is when someone dies *before* their time.

When someone is old, we might say, “they had their years” – but when someone dies young, we feel it’s wrong, the rhythm is broken... then, it’s a time to weep, a time to mourn.

We’ve come back to the beginning: this idea that we feel trapped and gripped by time. Rather than enjoying the beauty of the rhythm, we feel held captive and trapped by time’s relentless advance.

CS Lewis, who wrote the Narnia books and was a great Christian writer, said this: “We’re so little reconciled with time, that we’re even astonished by it: “how time flies” we say. As though the thing we all experience, again and again, was suddenly new to us.”

He says, it’s a strange as a fish saying “oh it’s wet again” in the sea. What a strange thing to say!

Unless... that fish were destined to become a land animal, in which case, the sense of strangeness about being wet, wouldn’t be weird.

He’s starting to say this: Wouldn’t it be strange for us to be unhappy in this world of *time* if we are only ever meant to stay trapped in time.

Think about it, British people are some of the richest in the world!

Throughout history, people have never had such nice food, such marvellous houses such incredible technology as we do now!

Yet, we’re unhappy. A modern writer has said “We have too much to live with, and too little to live for”

And that’s true isn’t it?

Some people have time but not enough money, some have money but not enough time.

Yet in all this, our land is full of not just poverty, or time poverty but spiritual poverty!

Everywhere!

Why, when we have so much: Because *this world is not enough*.

CS Lewis said more:

“Creatures are not born with desires unless satisfaction for those desires exists.

A baby feels hunger: well, there is such a thing as food.

A duckling wants to swim: well, there is such a thing as water. We feel sexual desire: well, there is such a thing as sex.

If I find in myself a desire which no experience in this world can satisfy, the most probable explanation is that I was made for another world.”

Could it be we were made to live forever, not trapped in time, but in an eternal relationship with God!

Yes, and the teacher explains **why** we feel trapped in time, why we long for eternity. (His second point)

Look at v11

“God has made everything beautiful in its time. He has also set eternity in the human heart”

God has put eternity in our hearts, that means, he has given us *longing for eternity*. We don't and can't ever feel completely at home trapped in time.

God has given us a desire beyond that.

Do you feel that? Do you feel trapped in the rhythms of time? Pushed around by the seasons of life, and not just free within them? Do you long for freedom from the pressures and the control of time. Longing to be somewhere where there is always enough time, where everything can be done properly and not in a rush. Longing for the peace inside which would come from having no pressure!

That's what my guy from the YouTube ad felt, when he said “I just wish there was another hour in the day”. He wanted to break out of tyranny of time.

And it's true. So much of our mourning comes because of the sadness that different seasons in life bring.

The pain of change. The pain of a broken relationship. And above all, the pain of grief. Time marches on, it takes us on its own course, we have no control, and we long to be somewhere perfectly good, where the rhythms are perfectly in tune with us and God's perfect will.

Friends we were made to be with God, in eternity, we long for it, and so we should – because God has put eternity in our hearts.

And not just Christians!

Everyone longs for this. Some with a clearer idea about it, some with less. But you try asking someone if they would like to be free from the pressures of time, and see what they say?!?!?

The teacher is a believer, and he's clear – **God** has given us a longing for eternity.

But that doesn't mean everything is easy. Remember, the Teacher is brutally honest and wants answers with depth, and often doesn't draw any firm conclusions... The very next thing he says is “yet no one can fathom what God has done from beginning to end”

So the last thing we'll look at, from v12-14, we're going to finish by thinking about something we can know: God's gift to us.

Because the Teacher does have a conclusion for us (even though he knows we can't fathom all God is doing). He does have a conclusion for us.

^{v12} I know that there is nothing better for people than to be happy and to do good (*lit: “enjoy good”*) while they live. ¹³

That each of them may eat and drink, and find satisfaction in all their toil— this is the gift of God. ¹⁴

This isn't "you may as well try and have a good time, because nothing matters". Rather, he says, as you go through the different seasons of life: seek enjoyment of all you're doing/all your work. And God is the one who gives us joy and satisfaction as we toil.

God doesn't simply focus on what comes at the end of life, but cares about our experience of the journey itself – God's gift to us is enjoyment, and we jolly well ought to seek that!

This is even more extraordinary when you think about what is in v14: God couldn't be more different from us – what *he* does lasts for eternity, and what we do, well, I guess it's a bit more like the breath <grab>.

But, despite that – we are trapped in time, God is not... Yet he gives gifts to us, gifts and care... into time.

God gives enjoyment of work/of life – and we should seek that! Not that our enjoyment gives eternal value to our work, but it's good, and it's from God! He thinks about the *journey* of life, and says enjoy it! You can, it's God's gift!

But we can go one step further than him.

In v19 he says

"Surely the fate of human beings is like that of the animals; the same fate awaits them both:

As one dies, so dies the other.

All have the same breath; humans have no advantage over animals. Everything is meaningless.

All go to the same place; all come from dust, and to dust all return. Who knows if the human spirit rises upward and if the spirit of the animal goes down into the earth?"

The teacher, honest, looks around critically evaluates, and says: "Who knows if the human spirit rises upward"

But... He hasn't seen the resurrection of Jesus Christ!

Who knows if the human spirit rises would? Well, we do.

Romans 6 in the New Testament says this:

"for if we have been united with him, by faith, in his death – then we will certainly also be united with him in a resurrection like his"

If you are a Christian here today, it's not only the gift of God to *enjoy the journey* of life, through all its seasons – but you can be certain: just like Jesus rose again after his death, you too will rise again, physically, after your death, and live with him forever in eternity.

The free gift of God is eternal life. In a place free from the tyranny of time, and the pressures of this broken world.

And God made us, to long for that!

The teacher's conclusion is to seek the gift of God – he knows that God gives enjoyment now, he longs for certainty about the next life – and because of Jesus Christ we can have it.

So I wonder, do you seek the gifts of God?

Lots of people *try* to enjoy life. We recognise that if you have a job that you enjoy, that is a wonderful and fantastic gift! Well Ecclesiastes says if you do, it is a gift from God.

We know that there's nothing better than to find enjoyment in whatever way doing: it's possible to do exactly the same job and for one person to be difficult and grumpy, and the other to really enjoy it. I wonder which you are?

Perhaps we need to pray "Lord thank you for this task, help me to enjoy doing it, with the right motives, looking to you, thinking of you, doing it for you (under your gaze)"

People are good at seeking enjoyment, but they're not good at seeking it *from* God. <<pause>> but he is the giver.

But worse than that, now (in our *time*), people just don't just seek enjoyment without looking to God, they don't seek God's ***eternal gift***. Have you even thought about what will happen after you die? I wonder if what we've seen in Ecclesiastes has led you to think that perhaps you were not made, simply to be trapped under the rule of time, but you were made for eternity.

It's something that if we're Christians, we should be thinking about, praying about, and learning from God about.

But it's something if you're not a Christian; that you simply *must* spend time thinking about. (I guess there's a huge irony that some people might feel like they're too busy) you simply cannot afford not to be.

Helping people to think about Jesus Christ, to look at what he teaches, and to understand the amazing gift he offers, is something that we at St Nicholas are committed to doing.

We want to do that in the way that is most helpful and is easiest for people to come to. And our identity course, which starts tomorrow, which Dave will say more about later, is one way we try to do exactly that.

Why not make the time and commit to coming along?

We've seen the teacher speak about time, its beauty and rhythms, but also its tyranny and rule on us.

He says we don't feel like we belong trapped in it, because God has put eternity in our hearts and a longing for more/him.

And we've seen that God loves to give us gifts: enjoyment during our life, and eternal life when we die, for those who trust in Jesus.

May the honest reality of his reflections, and the hope of his conclusions point us all towards seeking God. Amen.