Time and Eternity
Ecclesiastes 3:1-15

We're looking at Ecclesiastes - in which the author, the Preacher, undertakes this relentless investigation of life 'under the sun' - of the meaning of life in a secular world where this life is all there is.

And today, we're looking at chapter 3 and this passage on *time*. It's the most famous part of Ecclesiastes. Now, I know this is before most of us were born, but in 1965, a song which is basically this passage set to music, made it to no.1 in the US charts. But it's also famous because it's the kind of passage that gets read at funerals.

And it's that fact of death that the Preacher wants us to face, because he's putting life, and the fleetingness of life, the can't-quite-get-a-good-grip-on-life-ness of life, in the face of death under the microscope. And as he does that he turns to this issue of *time*.

But what is time? St. Augustine wrote: 'What then is time? If no one asks me, I know what it is. If I wish to explain it to him who asks, I do not know.' In other words, we all know what time is… until we have to explain it, or understand it.

The one thing we understand though, is that we all want to be in control of our own time.

Masters of our Time
Just think how much of life is about time. The alarm goes in the morning, telling you, it's time to get up. Your phone vibrates in your pocket, reminding you your appointment starts in one hour. The contract you sign tells you how many hours you're employed for, or how long you've got to deliver the goods. Your supervisor tells you - you've got until this date to submit your paper. You plan a trip on Saturday and go to Google maps to work out how long it'll take you to get there. You become interested in that special other and they ask you, how old are you? You decide to marry, so you set a date. You start a family, and you're asked, how many weeks till the baby's born?

Life's all about time. And in v1-8 the Preacher gives us the whole span of life and the individual seasons of it. And he does it in 14 pairs. And in each pair, each season of life is the polar opposite of the other: breaking down and building up, weeping and laughing, mourning and dancing. And if 7 is the number of completeness, and he's giving us two lots of 7 pairs, he's saying, this is life in *all* its personal and relational complexity. Verse 1, 'For *every*thing there is a season, and a time for *every* matter under heaven.'

But he starts with *the* key events of life: v2, 'A time to be born and a time to die.' There was a time when you entered the world and there will be a time when you leave it. But in between there are seasons, creative and destructive seasons of life: v2-3, 'A time to plant, and a time to pluck up; a time to kill, and a time to heal; a time to break down, and a time to build up.' There are seasons in our emotional lives: v4, 'a time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance.' There are times when we're enjoying friends, or facing enemies: v5, 'A time to cast away stones, and a time to gather stones together; a time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing.' Now, you might think, what has casting stones go to do with friendship? Well, in our village, when the farmer ploughs his fields he piles all the rocks he's brought to the surface in the corner of the field. But what would he think if I went out and threw all those rocks back in the field? Would he

consider me a friend, or an enemy? And the Preacher's saying, there are seasons in life when all friends abound, but there are also other times when it feels like people are throwing stones in your field or you're doing that to them.

Then there are times when you're taken up with possessions - with getting, or getting rid of: v6, 'a time to seek, and a time to lose; a time to keep, and a time to cast away.' And it's not just about our attitude to stuff, but to life itself, v7, 'a time to tear' - your clothes in mourning - 'and a time to sew' - to re-sew those clothes and re-enter the life of the living. 'A time to keep silence, and a time to speak.'

But finally, there are times when it's our attitude to others that sets the season: v8, 'a time to love, and a time to hate; a time for war, and a time for peace.'

But you know what's remarkable about this passage? It deals with the whole span of life and its seasons, and there is zero mention of God. Why? Because in a life 'under the sun' you don't have to entirely erase God, you just have get on with life without him.

And if you think about it, that's how most people want it, isn't it? When I was appointed to my last post as a doctor I was offered a choice. I could either keep my own agenda, and decide who I saw when, or my secretary could keep it for me. It took me all of 3 nano-seconds to decide! Because why would I want anyone else telling me what I had to do when?! I wanted to decide that.

But we all do, don't we? We don't like the idea of someone else deciding how we use our time, or how we should live our lives. In the past, if your dad was a farmer, and he said, 'son, you're going to be a farmer' you'd go 'sure dad, where's the cow shed?' But now we'd go, 'actually Dad, there's this degree in underwater software coding I want to do.' And the Preacher says, v4, there's 'a time to dance', and we say, 'yes, and I want to set the tune.' We want to be the masters of our own destiny.

And the great promise of our age is that you can do that. Ralph Waldo Emerson, the American essayist, wrote way back in the 1800s, 'The only person you are destined to become is the person *you decide to be*.' Your destiny is in your hands. The seasons of life are for you to shape. Peter Drucker, the famous management consultant wrote, 'you cannot predict the future *but you can create it*.'

It's an enticing prospect isn't it? The power to shape the poetry, the flow, of your life. And I can decide when and at what I weep or laugh. It's for me to decide who I do or do not embrace, not some other authority figure. When it comes to my life, I'm the authority. And as for a time to be born and a time to die, we may not be able to control the time of our birth, but increasingly we want to decide the time of our death. Because what right has anyone else to say this season of suffering in my life must continue? It's my life, after all. Because life is about me as an empowered, free individual.

And yet, far from such a view of life being empowering, the Preacher sees it as an illusion.

The Tyranny of Time

Quick maths quiz. What is 1 minus 1? Zero. Look at v9, 'what gain has the worker from his toil?' You go through all these seasons of life, the Preacher says, but in a world where there is no God,

what do you have to show for them? They all cancel each other out, don't they. What's planted is plucked up. What's built is knocked down. And the Preacher's saying, that's the sum total of all our doing - zero. We congratulate ourselves on being free agents, unencumbered by the dictats of authority figures, but if there's no ultimate authority, if there is no God and no eternity, if this life really is all there is and death is the end, you haven't gained anything. You can live as varied a life as you like, picking your dream holiday destinations, changing your jobs, playing the market, but the time to die still comes. Sure you came, you saw, but you didn't conquer. Death conquered you. And the worms enjoyed the feast.

And besides, the Preacher is saying, the idea of us being in control *is* an illusion. Verse 2, there is 'a time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is planted.' So we might say, it's for me to decide when to plant. Sure says, the Preacher, go ahead. Try planting in winter and see what comes of your flowers. Try picking fruit before the blossoms have formed on the tree and see how your harvest goes. There are times for these things that you have no power over. So the seasons themselves are telling you, you're not in control at all. In other words, life's not like a car you're driving, it's like a river carrying you along.

You see, Peter Drucker can tell you the future is yours to create, but what control did Peter Drucker have over his DNA that determined his intellect and his success? What control did he have over the lives of those who intersected with his, and who helped make him who he was? And the Preacher's saying, far from you creating your future yourself, your future is formed by a succession of times that you have no way of designing.

And at least some neuro-biologists would agree, wouldn't they? The BBC recently asked the question, is there such thing as free will? No, the neuro-biologists replied. Your emotional reactions, your decision making, are merely pre-programmed neuronal impulses to external stimuli. So, in a secular, materialistic world, the influencers tell you, you're free, make your own decisions, create your own future, while all the time the neuro-biologists are whispering behind their hand, actually you're just a body carried along by predetermined chemical reactions, none of which you have any control over.

And meanwhile, the pendulum of time keeps swinging, back and forth across those 14 pairs, and your life slowly ebbs away. And you can't stop it. Dolly Parton once said, "People are always asking me, 'What do you want people to say about you a hundred years from now?' I always say, I want them to say, 'Dang, don't she still look good for her age?'"! More realistically, the actress, Jane Fonda, said, 'women are not forgiven for ageing'. But time and ageing are themselves unforgiving, aren't they? There's a relentlessness about them. As Chaucer said, 'Time and tide wait for no man.' The flow of the river of time may be gentle, but it's a gentle tyranny, gently carrying you to the cliff edge of death, bearing all before it. The seasons last, the Preacher says, v12, only 'as long as they live.'

I recently read an article by Tim Challies, a pastor whose 20 year old son died last year, just a few months before his wedding day. And he describes that heart-breaking moment when he visited the gravestone for the first time. And there, engraved on the stone, was his son's name, and underneath his dates of birth and death. And in between those dates was a line. And Challies asked, how long is that line? A few centimetres? But, like verses 1-8, that line represented the entire life of his beloved son. All his growing up, all his hopes, all his dreams, all his friendships, reduced to that line. How long is that line for any of us, he asked? And what will fill that line?

Verse 11, '[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.' So it's not just that there's no gain from life if death is the end; it's not just that the seasons of life are outside our control, it's that you don't know how long the line of your life is going to be. You can't see the end from the beginning. And that means, in a world without God, you can never know the point or the meaning of your life. You can never stand far enough back to see the full scope of your life - where it's all heading, what it's all about.

To do that you'd have to be able to step outside of time. But in an under-the-sun world, there is no *outside of time*, no eternity.

And yet you want to know what the meaning and the point of your life is. You want that *above-the-sun* view of your life. And you want that, the Preacher says, v11, because God 'has put eternity into man's heart.' That desire to know and understand, the end from the beginning.

But a secular, scientific materialistic world-view leaves you standing outside a locked door to a room which you know contains the meaning for all the seasons you go through, and it tells you, 'there's no key to the door. And besides, the room's empty.'

But what if there is a view to be had from above the sun? What if you *not* being in control could be a thing of hope, not terror?

The Lord of Time

Now, I don't know about you, but there's something beautiful about v1-8 and the pairings and repetition and cadence, isn't there?

But why do you think this or anything is beautiful? Where does your sense of beauty come from? Why prefer beauty to ugliness, or order to chaos? Can blind chance, and the meaninglessness of an under-the-sun world ever give you that? No, says the Preacher, even your enjoyment of this poetry tells you, there is such a thing as beauty, and it's pointing you to a higher beauty. Verse 11 again, 'He [God] has made everything beautiful in its time.'

And he's not just talking about poetry, but about the fittingness of life's seasons. That at various times somethings are just right to do and others are wrong. And you know what that's like. Someone suggests doing something and you go, 'no, I don't think it's the right time, maybe next year.' But in a meaningless world, why should any action have a right or wrong time? But instinctively you know they do.

So even the way you do life tells you, there *is* a way things should be. There's an order, a purpose, a poetry to life. And that tells you there must be a Poet, an orderer, an author of life. And the Preacher says, 'yes, and when you realise that it makes the span and the seasons of life make way more sense.' Verse 11 again, the seasons of our lives are '*what God has done*.' In other words, far from your life being under your own tenuous control, far from you being at the mercy of the tyranny of time, God's the architect holding the blueprint of your life. As David said, 'My times are in your hand.' (Ps 31:15).

And ask yourself, whose hands would you rather be in? Blind fate? Or a loving Heavenly Father who orders all things?

And what makes most sense of that sense of eternity in your heart? That this world is all there is and there is no eternity? Or that there is, and instinctively you seek it? What makes most sense of your interest in life after death, or the supernatural or even in movies about super-powers? That none of those exist, or that there is life after death and the supernatural and super-powers do exist?

'Sure' you might say, 'but if my life is in God's hands, how could he let stuff happen to me like he does?' Because, says the Preacher, we only get to see part of the picture. We stand in front of the tapestry of our lives that God's weaving, and all we can see is this little part that maybe looks like the sun's shining, but there's also this part which is all shadow and darkness. You'll only see the full picture when you can see it from his perspective. When you can stand far enough back. Until then, you have to trust him.

'But why should I trust him when my life seems more pulling up and weeping than planting and laughing?'

Why? Because God doesn't stand aloof and detached from what it means to live in time. Paul writes, '*When the fullness of time had come*, God sent forth his son, born of woman' (Gal 4:4). And all along Jesus knew he had come for a specific time, and it wasn't a time for dancing. Repeatedly he said, my time has not yet come. Until it did. And on the evening of his Last Supper, John writes, 'Jesus knew his hour had come' (John 13:1). And he said to his disciples, "*My time* is at hand." (Matt 26:18). And Paul writes, 'For while we were still weak, [while we were still sinners] *at the right time* Christ died for the ungodly' (Rom 5:6).

Now, who would you rather trust? Yourself? Knowing that in reality you have no meaningful control over your life? Blind fate? Or the God who loves you so much he would come and enter time and at the right time, when you could never save yourself, die for you? The God who sees your life in a centimetre, all those seasons you're ashamed of and those you should be ashamed of, and bears them all at the cross.

You see, in the last chapter of the last book of the Bible, Jesus says, 'I am the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end.' (Rev 22:13). You can stumble through life under the illusion of controlling everything. Or you can face the facts of an under-the-sun world and despair at the pointlessness of time. Or, you can look to Christ and find in him all your beginnings and endings, all your stories in his one great story.

Verses 12-13: 'I perceived 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.' You see, when it dawns on you, God is in control of all these seasons of my life, and all the details are his gifts to me - then you can begin to find joy in the midst of it all.

You'll become less stressed when things aren't happening in the time frame you want. And when you find yourself in a season you don't want to be in, you'll know that Christ loves you and is working this season for good, so you'll have peace. Plus, you'll be able to take and enjoy seasons of rest. Because when you know Christ died for you, at the right time, when you were still a sinner, you know God doesn't approve of you because you work so hard. He approves of you because of Jesus. Which means you'll be able to put your work down.

For Christmas Su gave me a book called, *Every Moment Holy*. It's a book of prayers for the mundane things of life. But when you realise all your seasons are God's gifts to you then not even the mundane ones are pointless. Suddenly every moment becomes holy. Even, the book says, changing diapers. And the writer, Douglas Mckelvey, says, 'Open my eyes that I might see this act for what it is *from the fixed vantage of eternity*, O Lord - how the changing of a diaper might sit upstream of the changing of a heart; how the changing of a heart might sit upstream of the changing of the world.'

And the Preacher would say, exactly: that's what you see when you step back far enough. That as you trust God, all these seasons can become heart and world changing - for you and those around you. And knowing that can give you a sense of security and purpose that a secular world-view never can: v14, 'I perceived that whatever God does endures; nothing can be added to it, nor anything taken from it. God has done it, so that people fear before him.'

Face the facts of an under-the-sun world and you'll either have to bury your head in the sand and try not to think too much about it, or you'll be consumed by despair or anxiety. But look to God, the Potentate of Time, the Preacher says, and fear him. He holds your times in his hands. He is in absolute sovereign control, and he loves you. And when you fear him, you don't need to fear anything else - not even time.