

The Times of our Lives

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[0 : 00] Well, in 1965, a band called The Birds, who I think are on the next slide, you've got to love their haircuts, they released a single called Turn, Turn, Turn.

I don't know if you remember this. Yes, yes. I must confess I don't. But it reached number one in the US charts and became internationally known.

Take a listen. Turn, Turn, Turn There is a season Turn, Turn, Turn And a time to every purpose Under every A time to be born A time to die A time to plant A time to reap A time to kill A time to heal A time to have A time to reap Do you recognise the words?

Yeah. It's quite moving with the pictures, isn't it? But as you've worked out, they're from the teacher in Ecclesiastes. Who would have guessed that he wrote an international hit 3,000 years ago?

But what did the teacher originally mean by it? Well, the clue, I think, is given in verse 1 in your sheets there. It's the phrase, under the heavens.

[1 : 42] This is different to the phrase we saw last week, under the sun. To live under the sun is to live in a fallen world, outside the garden, as we saw. Yet even outside the garden, we still live under the heavens.

That is, under God. Under God's sovereign rule. Under God's control. And so the teacher is saying, when it comes to the times of our lives, they're under God's control.

Under the heavens. Or put differently, this poem is not so much about the time we choose, to when to plant or uproot, even though we need to choose those times as well. No, the poem is more about God's sovereign control over the times of our lives.

And we know this because it's about a time for every activity, even the ones we have no control over. I mean, who here controlled the time of their birth?

We can't control that, and for most of us, nor our death. But God does control them. You see, it's God who sets the times and seasons of our lives.

[2 : 53] Every one of them, in fact, verse 1, there is a time for everything and a season for every activity under the heavens. Notice the repetition of the word every there.

And to highlight that God is in control of every time of our life, the teacher then lists these 14 pairs to capture our whole lives. And in each pair refers to both ends of the spectrum, if you like, which means it includes everything in between.

We do that as well with our sayings. Like we say people, both great and small, but we also mean everyone in between, don't we? Or places on both land and sea, but we mean all places in between, don't we?

And the first pair on the screen there, it really captures all of life, doesn't it? A time to be born and a time to die and every time in between.

That's all of life, isn't it? When it comes to the times of our lives, they're under God's control. He sets the times and seasons. And not only when we're born and die, but also when we plant or uproot.

[4 : 04] Now this could refer literally to the time we plant in spring or the time we harvest in autumn, like we saw in the video before. And God sets both those times because he sets both those seasons, doesn't he?

Spring and autumn. Or it could refer metaphorically to the time we plant new roots in a new home or a new job or something like that. And a time to uproot from an old home or an old place.

Either way, especially in this market, God provides those houses and jobs. God's in control. Or if the teacher is writing sometime after Solomon, which I think is the case, he may well have in mind the nation of Israel because Israel was called God's vineyard.

And so he planted them when he called them as his people. But then because of sin, he uprooted them and sent them to exile, didn't he?

Or it could refer to all of the above. Either way, the point is it's all under the heavens, all under God's control. And this is true for all the other pairs as well, like verse 3, a time to kill and a time to heal.

[5 : 20] A time to tear down and a time to build, to mourn and to dance. Well, I don't dance, but maybe there is a time for that as well.

The other time to kill could refer again to the time of exile when Israel was conquered by other nations. And a time to heal could refer to being brought back by God and restored to life with him, just as he promised.

So in Hosea, on the next slide, we see that if they return to God, notice he will heal them. Or it could refer to a time of our own history where soldiers are forced to defend their country and so are forced to kill.

And when war is over, there's a time of peace and healing, like we saw in the pictures from the video. Which suggests, by the way, that these times on view here are not just short periods of our lives, like our weeks or years, but they also can refer to longer periods of time, like our stages of life or seasons of history.

Perhaps in our season of COVID at the moment, we can relate to verse 5, a time to embrace and a time to, well, social distance. But again, the point is, all these times of our lives are under the heavens, under God's control.

[6 : 47] Not that we can then blame God for the bad stuff. Remember, we live in a fallen world, a world subjected to futility because of sin.

This life is outside the garden. The bad is already here. There will be death, disease and disaster. But God is sovereign over the times that they come.

Of course, we still have some control ourselves. We can make decisions. But in the end, like COVID has reminded us, we're not ultimately in control, are we? I mean, if people thought that, it only took last year to shake him out of it, for a moment at least.

God is in control. And he must be, if he's God. I mean, who wants to worship a God who's not sovereign, not in control? I mean, that's not much of a God. And what's the point of praying to a God who's not in control?

No, God must be. But if he is, then what's the point of all our work? What do we gain from all our labor? Point to verse 9.

[7 : 55] Notice what he says. There's the question, what do workers gain from their toil? Here, the teacher is saying, we can use our time to work hard and plan wisely.

But if we're not ultimately in control, then we can't guarantee our gain, can we? There's no guarantee our work will pay off.

For example, we can work hard to save up our super, but then the GFC hits and our super takes a hit. Or like many others, Michelle and I worked hard to save up and go overseas last year to see family.

But then COVID came and all our work went out the window. It was the same for many others. For one, that family, they actually won a trip overseas. The first time they've won anything in all their lives.

And it was cancelled and they don't get the prize back. For others, they just made it to see a newborn grandchild in the UK, only to be forced to leave early. And then all that money went out the window.

[8 : 57] I'm sure we've all experienced things like this, haven't we? When all we've worked for goes out the window or it just doesn't seem to last, like our health, even though we work hard to eat well and to exercise and so on.

But our bodies still break down. So what's the point of our labour? When you're not in control, so you can't guarantee your gain. There's a sense of frustration in this teacher's question, isn't there?

And if you're not sure, verse 10 helps us to be. Because he says, I have seen the burden God has laid on the human race.

A burden. First, because there's no guaranteed gain for all our work. And second, because the teacher knows God must have some big, beautiful plan, but he just doesn't know what it is.

Verse 11. He has made everything beautiful in its time. He's also said eternity in the human heart, yet no one can fathom what God has done from beginning to end.

[10 : 07] As a devout Israelite, he knows God has made everything beautiful or fitting in its time. God's timing and plan is just right.

A beautiful fitting is what he's saying. When I was younger, I used to watch this TV show called The A-Team. It was a bit of a kind of corny show, but I was a teenage boy, okay?

So, you know, though I must confess, I did watch the remake as an adult. But anyway, in this show, you've got the leader, who's actually Liam Neeson, there in the front of the picture, and he's called Hannibal Smith.

And he has this quote that he says almost every episode. He says, I love it when a plan comes together. And as a teenage boy, it was beautiful to see how all this action happened and this plan would just come together just right.

The teacher knows God has a plan. That brings everything together at just the right time. And it's beautiful fitting. And it's not just him who knows this.

[11 : 10] He also says all of humanity senses this. So, he says in verse 11 again, that God has also set eternity in the human heart.

That is, humanity has a sense of there must be something more, some eternal big plan for the time of their lives. Some rhyme or reason to make sense of their lives.

It's why humanity is so religious or searches for some divine force or destiny. Even in movies, I hear people talking about the universe is telling me this, or the universe is telling me that.

And they may not believe in God, but they sense there must be something more that makes sense of life. And yet the burden is, no one can fathom it, he says.

No one can work out what God has done or planned from beginning to end. Not even the teacher. Oh sure, he knows God's promises in the prophets, but as he looks around at life outside the garden, he cannot fathom God's plan to fulfill God's promises.

[12 : 30] And we can sometimes feel this burden too, can't we? I mean, have you ever asked yourself, what on earth is God doing in my life? Or why has God allowed this to happen?

Or how could this possibly be fitting and beautiful part of God's plan? And again, if the teacher is not Solomon, he could be looking around at his kingdom thinking, this is not the kingdom God promised in the prophets.

What is God doing? And so the teacher's conclusion to the times of our lives, well, enjoy life and fear God.

Verse 12. So firstly, to enjoy life. I know that there is nothing better for people than to be happy and to do good while they live, that each of them may eat and drink and find satisfaction in all their toil.

This is the gift of God. The best we can do, he says, is to enjoy the good times and seasons God gives us as gifts.

[13 : 37] Now there is wisdom in this, isn't there? Because it reminds us that when we enjoy things in this life, it's a gift, not an expectation.

You see, there are lots of things to enjoy in this world, a good meal, a glass of wine, if that's your thing, a good coffee, I had a really good coffee last Friday. But we shouldn't expect it to always be.

Remember, we live outside the garden. And God has said in Genesis chapter three, that it's going to be painful toil because of the fall, that our work will be by the sweat of our brow.

And so we should actually expect work to be hard. And we should actually expect life not to always go smoothly. And so when it does, when there is enjoyment, when there is a season of life that goes smoothly, it's God's gift to us.

For our times are under the heavens, under God. Of course, we are taught by the world that we are entitled to a good life, aren't we? That things should always go smoothly.

[14 : 47] But God never promised that. And we don't experience that, do we? I mean, does your life always go smoothly? Mine doesn't. You know, even little things, finding a car spot, remembering to get everything on your shopping list, or having doctor's appointments go smoothly.

They don't always do they. You see, God is much more realistic about life in this world outside the garden, which tells us it won't always go smoothly.

And so when it does, it's God's gift to us. Even this season where we've had so much religious freedom that's now changing, that long season is God's gift to us.

This new one, well, it's life outside the garden. And so when we do enjoy things, it should make us a whole lot more thankful than perhaps we are, shouldn't it?

I mean, when the electricity goes out, like it did in many suburbs last week, and the internet crashes, we may wrongly complain and rightly lament because it is painful.

[15 : 55] But are we then thankful for all the times the electricity works so well? I'm not. I take it for granted. And when we get sick, we may wrongly complain or rightly lament because it is painful.

But then do we give thanks for all the times we are so well? For the teacher, he's realistic about life outside the garden and knows when it's good, it must be a gift from God.

And so he has this thankful realism. But why then doesn't God give us good times all the time? Why does he allow us to suffer bad times too?

Well, because God will use them to bring people to him, to fear him. Verse 14. The second I know, says the teacher, 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 people will fear him. Whatever is in the present has already been.

[17 : 00] Whatever will be in the future has been before. And God will seek what has been driven away. Here the teacher speaks of God's sovereign control again, doesn't he?

And notice in verse 15 that what is now in the present, what's already been decided before. God's plan. And what will be in the future, what's already been decided before. And God will even seek what has been driven away such that even the past is not out of his sovereign reach, which is great news for those of us who are family or friends who have walked away from Christ.

Not even they are out of his reach if they're part of his plan. But the point is everything God does. Verse 14. Will endure. No one can stop it.

And his purpose in this is so that people would fear him. Would realize they're not in control and submit to God who is.

I mean, COVID has been painful for so many people. But he's also caused many to realize they're not in control for life and look for something or someone who is.

[18 : 13] It's why people have become Christians even through online courses during lockdowns. In fact, there's even a baptism today at St. John's of two people who've become Christians earlier this year.

As C.S. Lewis once wrote, God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our conscience, but shouts in our pains.

The pain is his megaphone to rouse a deaf world, to help non-Christians look to him, trust in him.

And so for the teacher, given he's not in control of his times, the best he can gain from all his labor is to enjoy life when he can with thankful realism and to fear God since God's the one really in control.

Now, despite the wisdom there is for us in this, the teacher still cannot fathom God's big plan. And so his thankful realism actually has a tone of resignation to it.

[19 : 20] The best he can hope for is a tough life with a few good gifts thrown in along the way. As he will say later on in chapter 5, you know, we just enjoy the few days God's given us.

This is our lot in life. It's this resigned tone, not a particularly excited one. And his fear of God has a tone of apprehension and uncertainty because if this awesome God is in control of his life, that's great, but he's not exactly sure what God's big plan is for his life.

What is God doing? And so it seems like a more frightful fear, which is why I think there's an even better conclusion for us in Christ.

Because in Christ, we can know God's big plan for us. And more than that, we can know his deep love for us in Christ.

Such that when it comes to the times of our lives, we can have more than a thankful realism, we can have even a thankful optimism and a fatherly fear of God.

[20 : 29] You see, we read in Ephesians 1 that God has made known to us the mystery of his will, his plan, if you like, in Christ to unite all things in Christ, that is, under his kingship and to grow us in his likeness.

That's God's big plan. And God used his sovereign control over the times and seasons of history to send his son to die for us. And so on the next slide, from Romans chapter 5, notice, at just the right time, the fitting, beautiful time, God sent his son to die for us, even while we were sinners.

Here is God's great demonstration of his deep love for us in Christ. And so knowing God's big plan and his deep love for us in Christ means that we can face the times of our lives with more than thankful realism.

We can have thankful optimism. Why? Well, because first, God will use his sovereign control for our good. I mean, that's something to be optimistic about, isn't it?

And we saw this in our second reading, didn't we? That in all things, on the next slide, in all things, God works for the good of those who love him, those who believe in him.

[21 : 59] But notice, the good is to conform us to be more like his perfect son, Jesus. That's part of God's plan, remember. To grow us and help us trust in God more and more, just like Jesus did.

Which is why working for our good doesn't mean always making our life easy. I saw this picture of a teenager trying to explain our plans.

Our plan is at the top, a nice smooth ride to the end of our life. That's what we plan for, isn't it? God's plan down the bottom has a few ups and downs, doesn't it?

Why? Well, to force us to look up, to trust in him more and more. I mean, if life was always smooth, always that top picture, do you think we would trust in God more or less?

Less. Because we wouldn't have any need to. And so God's plan and love means we can face the times of our lives, both the ups and the downs, with thankful optimism.

[23 : 05] First, because we know God is working for our good. We know more than the teacher does. God is working for our good at all our times to make us more like Jesus.

And second, because our glory is guaranteed. The teacher had no guarantees, but God has guaranteed our glory, which is another reason for optimism, isn't it?

In fact, it's so guaranteed that we heard in our reading, our second reading, that God has not only called and justified, here's his plan, he's also glorified past tense, even though it hasn't happened yet.

That's how guaranteed it is. Guaranteed because it's part of his big plan for us to call, justify and glorify. But also guaranteed, particularly because of his deep love.

As Paul went on to say in our second reading, if God did not spare his own son for us, but gave him up for us all, how will he not also give us all things we need to bring us home to glory?

[24 : 14] I mean, if God gave his son to die for us, but then didn't bring us home to glory, it would be a waste of his son's death, wouldn't it? And do you really think God would waste his only son's death like that?

Of course not. It's guaranteed. And so when it comes to the times of our lives, unlike the teacher, we can have more than a thankful realism. We can have a thankful optimism for God's big plan and deep love in Christ means we can know God is working for our good and has guaranteed our glory.

And so unlike the teacher's frightful fear, we can have a fatherly fear. One that still reveres God is in control, yes, but one that knows God as our heavenly father, whom we can confidently approach in prayer and confidently trust in life to be working for our good and guarantee our glory.

Let me finish by telling you about a visit I had last week. I was visiting a couple on Friday, I think it was, and the wife is still suffering from cancer.

She's been having different types of chemo for over a year now. It just reached the year anniversary, but she found out last week that none of them have worked. Yet they both continue to pray and trust in God.

[25 : 33] In fact, the husband said to me, we are in God's hands. It's an acknowledgement of God's sovereignty. And then the wife said, I'm 59 and if that's it, that's okay.

I'm thankful for the 58 years of good health God has given me and that I have somewhere really good to go. You see, even in this season of suffering, they both have a fatherly fear of God and a thankful optimism even in life.

Let's pray we would do the same. Let's pray. Let's pray.