

Control, Comprehension and a Sovereign God

Ecclesiastes 3:1-15 *To everything there is a season, A time for every purpose under heaven: A time to be born, And a time to die; A time to plant, And a time to pluck what is planted; A time to kill, And a time to heal; A time to break down, And a time to build up; A time to weep, And a time to laugh; A time to mourn, And a time to dance; A time to cast away stones, And a time to gather stones; A time to embrace, And a time to refrain from embracing; A time to gain, And a time to lose; A time to keep, And a time to throw away; A time to tear, And a time to sew; A time to keep silence, And a time to speak; A time to love, And a time to hate; A time of war, And a time of peace. What profit has the worker from that in which he labors?*

¶ I have seen the God-given task with which the sons of men are to be occupied. He has made everything beautiful in its time. Also He has put eternity in their hearts, except that no one can find out the work that God does from beginning to end. I know that nothing is better for them than to rejoice, and to do good in their lives, and also that every man should eat and drink and enjoy the good of all his labor -- it is the gift of God. I know that whatever God does, It shall be forever. Nothing can be added to it, And nothing taken from it. God does it, that men should fear before Him. That which is has already been, And what is to be has already been; And God requires an account of what is past.

Not too long ago, Richard Dawkins released his book *The God Delusion*, in which he seeks to overturn all belief in any god of any sort. The book was very popular, and Dawkins has gone on to spread his gospel of atheism through talk shows, websites, interviews and other places. This is a quote from one of Dawkins' books, and it reveals what Dawkins sees when he looks at the world: "The universe we observe has... no design, no purpose, no evil and no good, nothing but blind pitiless indifference."

When Dawkins looks at what goes on in the world, he views it from under the sun. He views it as pure materialism. When Dawkins is provoked to consider reconciling the suffering in this world with the God of the Bible, it fills him with rage. He says this about God, a quote I'm almost sorry to voice in church: "The God of the Old Testament is arguably the most unpleasant character in all fiction: jealous and proud of it; a petty, unjust, unforgiving control-freak; a vindictive, bloodthirsty ethnic cleanser; a misogynistic, homophobic, racist, infanticidal, genocidal, filicidal, pestilential, megalomaniacal, sadomasochistic, capriciously malevolent bully." Those are the words of a man being skewered by one of God's goads. Richard Dawkins is a man who does done a lot of thinking. But his thinking has been guided by perverse pride. He has started with the belief that all that is, is what we can see and observe, therefore a life that includes good and evil is absurd if there is a God behind it all. And the goad that was meant to push him to faith has become a pin cushion he sits on.

Solomon has finished goading us about pleasure and worldly philosophy. He pricked us with the pointlessness of it all. We saw that to pursue pleasure is empty. To pursue mere human knowledge doesn't change anything. But then he nailed into the ground a tent-peg from the Shepherd. Life is a gift. And only if you receive it humbly from the Giver, will the gifts activate and bring you joy. If you seek the components of life as the meaning of life, they turn to gravel in your mouth. If you will humble yourself, realise God is the Giver, and submit to Him entirely, you will find God giving you the gift of joy alongside the gifts.

Now, he is going to turn his attention to even bigger topics. He's going to look at things like why life doesn't make sense, why things seem out of control, and what it all means. Remember, he speaks in two voices - the goading, pricking voice of the man under the sun who denies God, and the stabilising, permanent tent-pegs of the Good Shepherd Himself.

He begins with one of the most well-known passages in the entire Bible, partly because of a group in the 60s who made a song using these lines. In verses 1 through 8, Solomon takes us through 14 events central to human life – birth, planting, healing, building, laughing, dancing, gathering, embracing, gaining, keeping, sewing, speaking, loving, and experiencing peace.

And for each one of those events, he gives us the opposite: dying, plucking, killing, destroying, weeping, mourning, casting away, refraining from embracing, losing, throwing away, tearing, and keeping silent, hating, and experiencing war. He tells us that for all of these things, there is a season. And he keeps repeating, a time for..., a time for...
What is he getting at?

Well, if you take 14 positive things, and 14 negative things, and put them together, what do you get? Zero. Fourteen minus fourteen is zero. And trapped in the middle of this see-saw of life is man. Man is like a sea shell at the mercy of the tides, the wave of death pushes him out, the receding tide of death, pulls him back. The wave of sorrow at a funeral is cancelled out by the joy of a wedding. The push of building, the pull of destroying. Man is like a helpless creature on the beach, with the tides of life pushing him and pulling him, back and forth.

When you think about it, we don't choose very many of these events. We don't choose to be born. We don't choose to die. We don't choose a time to mourn; it comes to us. We don't choose a time of war, nor can we simply control things into a time of peace. We don't control if we gain, and we don't control if we lose. We cannot choose to plant at just any time in the year, nor can we choose what season to harvest.

Here is his first goad for us. This is the first painful point for the man living under the sun.

I. Life is Beyond Our Control

We love the idea that we are truly the decision makers of our lives. We love the idea that we have unqualified free will. We are autonomous captains of our own fates. We choose. We decide. We are masters of our own destinies. But Solomon is goading us, by saying – you don't choose most of what happens to you in life. You choose certain responses here and there, but you are, in fact, caught in a cycle of life over which you have no final say. You don't choose your parents, your eye colour, your nationality, or your abilities. You don't choose catastrophe, disaster, tragedy or problems. You might think you do, but you also don't choose blessings, gifts, peace, health and security. Man thinks he is living a life of free will until that view of life is shattered by events beyond his control. It is a tide of events – which move us one way, and then the opposite.

So, in verse 9, Solomon stops to ask the man under the sun, “What profit has the worker from that in which he labors? “ What's the point of living life if you get blown around like a paper bag caught in a dust-devil? Why try to make progress if we are actually like insects crawling up wet windows- get up, slide down, get up, slide down?

Now, the reason this is painful to us is because man wants control. From the cradle to the grave, we want to be in control of our lives. Just think about the language that comes out of our lips:

“I won't let that happen to me”. No one is going to treat me like that. I won't allow someone to speak to me like that. If I can't do it the way I think it should be done, then I won't do it at all. People always mess things up, so it's best to do it yourself. I must have a clean house at all times. I must keep the kids on a strict schedule for everything from their wake-up time until bedtime if I am to develop responsible character in them. I must make sure my children behave in church or people will think I am not a good parent. I must go over my bank statement repeatedly to make sure nothing is amiss. I must make sure I only eat the healthiest foods, and keep a strict accounting of how much fats, carbs or preservatives I eat. I must spend a minimum of two hours with the children every day or they will grow up thinking I didn't love them. I must do my devotions everyday or God will judge me for unfaithfulness”

Do you know what all that is? It is the pride that lusts for control. It thinks that if it can eliminate uncertainty, get everything in a predictable, scheduled, neat, organised form, then life will be more controllable. No surprises, no upsets, no deviations from the plan. That way, life works. Do you know how that looks to God? It looks like man building a little Tower of Babel. I will make life work on my own by controlling everything.

Why does man want control? Because he has 'eternity in his heart'. God has made man in His own image. Man has something of God in him, but it is corrupted by the fall. Man was created to take dominion over the earth. Part of our design is to seek to order and arrange creation. But sin has perverted the desire to take dominion into a desire to control life. But sin has corrupted that, and man wants far more than stewardship. He wants supremacy. He wants sovereignty. He wants to be God. In his pride, man wants to control all of life and not live under God's hand.

So to goad him back to humility, God booby-traps the one living under the sun with all sorts of things which are beyond our control, beyond our power, beyond our understanding.

I have seen the God-given task with which the sons of men are to be occupied.

It's God-given. God does this, because God wants men to be broken out of the dream world that they control life. He uses things small and big, any item you cannot obtain, or a sickness or disability, an interrupted nap time for the kids, or a tragedy in your family, a disobedient child or a burst water geyser, an irritating neighbour or a lost pension fund, a lost ID book or a stock-market crash, a killer toothache or a house-flattening earthquake. God will not allow man to think that he can control life through trying to make it work his own way.

When you think about it, is not all your frustration linked to a desire to control? Doesn't it all come back to that? You are frustrated, angry, upset or miserable, because you are sure that the only way life could work would be if you could make such-and-such happen, and it isn't happening. God is goading you.

The truth is, no one can live like that without becoming a tyrant towards others. What happens to a human who tries to be God? Who tries to control all things? He or she disintegrates over time. You cannot try to be God, and not collapse under the strain. You meet people who are determined to throw more intensity to the problem of gaining control over everything in their lives, and you are meeting people whose bodies soon start to show the strain of trying to be God: panic attacks, ulcers, sleeplessness, intestinal cramping, muscle cramps, teeth grinding, nervous tics, heart trouble, muscular tensions and so on.

Their minds show the strain as well: panic attacks, depression, irritability, phobias, eating disorders, compulsive behaviour, boredom and so forth.

An aside to parents: if you are this kind of person, don't be surprised if you children pick up on it, and express it their own way. They are learning from you that the way to make life work is to eliminate all uncertainty and to control every variable. They'll pick up on that and learn to handle life the same way. So don't wait till they are teenagers to deal with the problem of lusting for control. It seems small and innocent to you now, but unchecked it develops into a life-attitude of controlling life through my own actions. If you see you child tantrumming – they are saying – the only way life works for me is if I get this thing that I am demanding. And you need to break them of that early – teach them that this is not the world they have been born into. That is a fantasy world

that your sinful nature is constructing. The real world is a world made by God and ruled by Him, and if God wants to throw a curve-ball into your life, you need to accept it, deal with it and be sweet about it.

I enjoy God's sense of humour. While writing this message, my computer, by itself, switched off. There was no power-out – only my PC switched off, and I lost about an hour's worth of writing. And when I stepped back, it seemed to me, the Lord was saying – you're about to teach this stuff, how does it feel when it happens to you? You didn't control that, now did you? How does it feel? And I repented of frustration and thanked God for the reminder.

You see, you can go two ways with this goad. You can become someone who kicks against the goad of losing control and becomes miserable - a person with whom it is very hard to live, or you can consider the existence of a controlling power and design far above and beyond yourself.

Verse 1 tells us that there is actually a purpose for everything under heaven. *Purpose* speaks of design, of things carefully arranged to bring about a desired goal. Who is doing that?

Verse 11:

He has made everything beautiful in its time

God presides over all events. It is not blind fate or chance ruling our lives. God is conducting all of life's events, down to the movement of the atoms, up to the direction of the galaxies, down to an end twitching; God is guiding, moving, sustaining and leading everything to a final purpose. Trillions upon trillions of events and processes will blossom and ripen at the right time, contributing to the final, overarching, grand masterpiece. It will be beautiful in His time. We inch along like near-sighted people trying to view a tapestry, but only God knows the big picture.

But there is a second goad in this passage, for the ones living under the sun, those trying to make life work their own way. Flowing right out of the desire to want to order and control and make things predictable, is the desire to find meaning or patterns or answer in it all. Why does it happen like this? Where is it all going?

Look in verse 11.

Also He has put eternity in their hearts, except that no one can find out the work that God does from beginning to end.

What does that mean, 'He has placed eternity in their hearts'?

Man has a capacity for eternal things – that's what differentiates him from the animals. He thinks about death, eternity, purpose. He wants to understand the beginning from the end, he thinks about the future, he seeks to understand the big picture – that which transcends and explains our time-based existence. He wants comprehension. But being proud, he doesn't want to get that understanding from someone else, like God. He wants it on his own.

So what does the verse say God does? No one can find out the work God does.

II. Life is Beyond Our Comprehension

Once again, man was made to seek out the many secrets of God. But sin has perverted that into a proud desire to know everything. Just like he wants control without God, so he wants comprehension without God. He wants to know everything and leave God out.

Does man want to know everything?

Well, once again, think of the things which we say: I must know what is happening in the world

right now. I must know what people are saying about me – if they're talking about me, I want to be there. I must know the full ingredients and components of everything I eat. I must know where my children are and what they are doing every moment of the day. I must know what will happen after the elections. I must know what will happen in the future. I must know where to place my money. I must know where the safest place to live will be. I must know what is going on in everyone's life at church. I must know who is friends with whom. I must know the answer to any possible question that a sceptic could ask me. I must know in advance what might happen to me in any situation. I must know how the end times will unfold, and what the mark of the beast will be. I must know what people think of my appearance. I must know what the best deal is every time I shop. I must know why catastrophes happen. I must know why disasters occur. I must know why criminals get away with violent crime. I must know why little children get cancer and die. I must know why evil men get into power. I must know why Christians suffer.

Do you know what that is? That is a desire to be omniscient. It is a desire to know what only God knows. It is a desire to live without the humility that a creature needs, that is to say, the humility which says:

Deuteronomy 29:29 *The secret things belong to the LORD our God, but those things which are revealed belong to us and to our children forever, that we may do all the words of this law.*

I cannot know everything, only God does. I will be content with what He lets me know.

So what do you think God is going to do to proud creatures who think they can make life work without Him as if they know everything? He is going to shatter their little world with things like suffering, disaster, cruelty, tragedy, and catastrophe.

An interesting phenomenon occurs when God throws a brick through an atheist's window. He rushes up to the window and starts shouting, "God, how could you do this? How could you let this happen?" When tragedy, crisis, or disaster occurs, atheists everywhere are demanding God's appearance in court to be tried for His management of the world.

The shouted question "Why, God?" reveals something. If God wanted man to just get on with things and ignore his Creator, how would He do that? He would make sure that there were no tragedies, no violent storms, earthquakes, tornadoes, volcanoes. He would prevent maiming or fatal accidents. He would remove cancer, AIDS and all debilitating and deadly diseases. He would restrain the hands of violent criminals or warring nations. He would prevent drought, famine, flood, or pestilence. He would prevent miscarriages, childhood deaths of any kind, and all forms of deformity.

And when he had done all that, sinful man would turn his heart up to God and thank Him, right? Sinful man would turn around and say, now that life is problem-free, we believe in you, God, right? No, sinful man would feel more justified in his sin. He would feel more at ease to pursue his sin. He would dismiss the thought of God entirely, and live his problem-free life under the sun. He would enjoy his rebellious life and forget God all the days of his life.

If you've ever wondered why God leaves Himself open to so much questioning, the answer is, because He wants to! He wants man to say, "Why God?" He wants sinful man to reflect and be stung and be disturbed by the inconsistencies of life. God is not annoyed when a sinner asks, "If there is a good God in control of everything, why is this happening? God perhaps smiles to himself and says, Ah, you're feeling the point of my goad, aren't you? Hurts, doesn't it?"

Sometimes this happens in the life of Christians, too. Some Christians have been saved for some

time, and they believe that they have edged their way into the inner circle of God's secret councils. They know how God does things; they know how to predict the hand of God. All too often, something very painful and quite inexplicable comes along. If we are like those Christians, we feel wounded; we feel God has tricked us and slighted us.

In fact, you can think of a very godly man in the Bible to whom this happened: Job. Job was a devout believer, who lived righteously. But once God allowed the painful and the inexplicable into his life, Job revealed that he had expected God to behave one way, and the reality turned out different – and the gap between Job's expectations and reality was Job's misery and frustration. In the end, God confronts Job with His greatness, showing Job that the predictable, comprehensible God he had in his mind needed to be supplanted with a view of the supreme, incomprehensible and absolutely sovereign God. God deliberately goaded Job, using Satan, to prick him out of his complacent view of God and the world, where he thought he understood everything and could control everything.

Do you know that those nations where people want to go and live – those supposedly idyllic nations called First World Societies, they are in fact, attempts to produce a life where people hardly ever ask, Why God? It is man's attempt to insulate himself against God's goads. It is man's attempt to produce a society without danger, without crime, without food shortages, without ravaging sickness, without problems. And what is the usual spiritual temperature of such nations? Are those people seeking after God as a result of seeing so little of life's incomprehensibility? No, they are shielded from the big questions. They can remain hidden from the deep problems, for the most part. The one thing which such nations can never stop is death. That's why the older people are separated into places, where they become more and more invisible to the rest of the culture which is amusing itself and having a great time.

Why does God first make man with a desire to control and to comprehend and then take those things away from him - because in their perverted form, man remains proud and resistant towards God? So God fills life with a sense of futility and incomprehensibility. If a man insists on living under the sun and ignoring God, life becomes more and more painful – because the more he looks for solutions under the sun, the more absurd it becomes. The more he looks for control under the sun, the more it eludes him.

Look at verse 14:

Ecclesiastes 3:14 *God does it, that men should fear before Him.*

Why? That men should fear before Him, and live a life of dependent joy.

Here comes the nail of divine truth. Here is God's grace breaking in again, and giving us light in the darkness. Here is the solution to the futility and confusion of life lived under the sun.

III. The Shepherd's Solution: Submit to a Sovereign God and Enjoy a Humble Life

The solution is very simple: Come to God and acknowledge Him. Repent of living life your own way and receive forgiveness through the Lord Jesus Christ. Then live life dependently and submissively. With that attitude, you can enjoy life. It is God's gift:

Ecclesiastes 3:12-13 *I know that nothing is better for them than to rejoice, and to do good in their lives, ¹³ and also that every man should eat and drink and enjoy the good of all his labor -- it is the gift of God.*

Full control over life and full comprehension of life are attributes that belong to God alone. You don't have to control it all. You don't have to know it all. You do have to submit to the one true God, and enjoy life humbly. Enjoy it as a gift. Accept the knowledge He gives you, and learn more humbly. Seek to order your life under Him, not control life through your plans, routines, schedules and disciplines.

The happiest human is the humblest human. The interesting thing is this: The same things which frustrate and goad man can be the ground of his joy and security. That lack of comprehension that angers the man striving for knowledge becomes a source of joy for the humble believer: I don't know everything, but God does. What I need to know, He has told me, or will allow me to find out. I can rest in that and enjoy one day at a time. God is not going to tell me all the whys. He wants me to be more interested in the 'whats' – what do you want me to do Lord? What must I think, feel or do about what you have revealed?

That lack of control which makes life miserable for the man striving to make life work through his plans, schemes and other means becomes a source of joy for the humble man: I don't have to control it all. God controls it. In fact, verses 14-15 tells us how delightfully He does control it.

Ecclesiastes 3:14 I know that whatever God does, It shall be forever.

What God does is permanent. No last minute changes or bumps. God does it.

Nothing can be added to it, And nothing taken from it.

What God does is effective and complete. He does not miss a step.

Ecclesiastes 3:15 That which is has already been, And what is to be has already been; And God requires an account of what is past.

God is in control of these cycles. He is not letting it slip away. That last phrase is difficult to translate, but likely means God, as the judge, keeps track of all things. Nothing is slipping by Him or happening just by chance.

Now if someone like that is running the universe, why would I want to? Everything He does is permanent, effective and complete and totally secure, so why would I try to do his job for Him?

You are offered a life that is joyful but not self-sufficient. You can be your own worst enemy, if you insist upon trying to make life work your own way by controlling it, or trying to comprehend all of it.

So here's the big reality check:

There is a loving and good God who controls the universe and knows everything. You are not Him. If you try to be Him, life will frustrate you and antagonise you, like it does Richard Dawkins.

Stop trying to control all things, and stop trying to know all things.

Repent of seeking sovereignty.

Repent of seeking omniscience.

Humble yourself to accept God's ultimate control of events, and submit to it. Rest in it.

Humble yourself to accept God's knowledge of the answers and His right to withhold them. Rest in it.

Enjoy God's gifts to you and do not frustrate yourself with what is not given to you.

Enjoy life humbly under the omnipotence and omniscience of God.