

Ecclesiastes (9) 3:16–22

1. A Time and a Season

In our previous sermon from Ecclesiastes, we examined 3:1–15 and reflected on what the Word teaches concerning time and season. There is a time for everything, and a season for every matter under heaven. Yet it is God who appoints and governs that time. Not we ourselves. Therefore, there is an appointed time governed by God for everything, and a season ruled by Him for all things under heaven. This, we are told, is the wisdom of God that we must hold fast.

The Preacher calls us to acknowledge God's sovereign decree, providence, and will, and within that to look to the time and season that God ordains and accomplishes, living in the fear of God. Though we do not know what tomorrow will bring, we are to trust the God who governs all times. From birth to death, we are to receive everything given within that span as God's gift and enjoy it with thanksgiving. All times and seasons are gifts from God; therefore we are to use them gratefully. Within the time and season granted by God, we are to rejoice in the fruit of our labor under the sun. Furthermore, within the time and season God gives, we are to do the good that pleases Him.

This Word teaches that God Himself must be at the source of all the joy we experience while we live. If God is not the source of our joy, then all the pleasures we enjoy through our labor during the time and season given to us become our boast, our idol, and even our addiction. They will never truly satisfy us; we quickly lose them, and they grow into covetousness and lust. We arrogantly claim that we obtained everything by our own wisdom and toil at a time we ourselves controlled. We turn it into our own glory, and in the end we seat ourselves in God's place and oppose Him. This is the image of the foolish sinner who does not rightly understand time and season.

But the wise man acknowledges that it is God who appoints and governs time and season. During the time and season given by God, he regards eating and drinking and finding joy in his toil as gifts from God. He rejoices in them, does the good that pleases God, and lives accordingly. This is called the wisdom of God.

Yet the wisdom of God that we must hold does not end here. If it ends here, that too is hebel—vanity—because in the end everything would conclude with death. Therefore, there is a further and true wisdom of God we must grasp. In verse 11, we are told of the wisdom of God concerning "Eternity". Sinners long for eternity but can neither accomplish nor enjoy it. Yet God is the One who governs every time and season in the history of redemption for that eternity.

Scripture reveals to us the redemptive history that God has appointed and fulfilled. Thus, true wisdom is to discern and live according to the saving time that God has made known in His Word. After Adam's sin and fall, throughout all the times of the Old Testament, God caused His people to point forward to and testify of the coming Redeemer, Jesus Christ. And when the fullness of time had come, Christ came and delivered us from all sin and death, granting us eternal life and rest in the kingdom of heaven.

To view our time in Him—that is the true wisdom we must hold. Even the time of our death must be viewed in the grace of salvation accomplished by Christ. Death is not the end. Rather, the time of death becomes the moment when our souls are made perfectly holy and enter heaven. And on the day when Christ returns, our bodies also will be raised like His, brought to glory, and we shall live with Him in everlasting joy. We live in hope of that day.

With this wisdom concerning God's time, we pass through this temporary period of hebel under the sun. Moreover, even as we pass through this season of hebel, we believe that God has made everything beautiful in its time. As we saw previously, "made beautiful" does not mean that everything goes well. It means that God causes everything to happen fittingly in order to accomplish His will. That is, God sovereignly governs every time of our lives, working all things together for good, so that we persevere in faith to the end and are conformed to Christ. Nothing occurs in our lives apart from what God permits. Indeed, for those whom He loves as His children, He governs all times and makes them beautiful.

Therefore, even if we cannot understand our entire life, by this faith we live day by day fearing God, abounding in the work of the Lord, trusting that through momentary affliction He is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory. Whether we live or die, we seek to honor the Lord, persevering in hope as we pass through the times under the sun. This is the life of believers who possess the wisdom of God.

Then is everything settled? Yet here a problem arises. Though we know all this, are we truly living by faith, acknowledging God's time in our actual lives? We are not. For when we look at what happens in our lives and at the condition of this world, questions still arise, and many matters remain unresolved. We feel a great gap between the truth that God makes everything beautiful in its time and governs all things in righteous sovereignty, and the reality of hebel under the sun. Is that not so?

If God governs all times, why does He not resolve certain matters? Why does He leave others untouched? Does it not sometimes seem as though God is not involved in our lives, as though He watches this world from afar? Doesn't He seem powerless? Does He truly love those whom He has made His children? If He loves us, why does He not deliver us from suffering and trial? We know the truth in our heads, yet to live under the sun acknowledging God's sovereign time is exceedingly difficult. But this is not our problem alone, nor is it necessarily a sign of unbelief or apostasy. Such struggle and anguish have come even to believers. In the Psalms and in Job, we see that many saints wrestled with these very questions. God's people living under the reality of hebel have struggled with them. The Preacher addresses this issue in today's passage, verses 16–22. First, look at verse 16:

Ecclesiastes 3:16 — "Moreover, I saw under the sun that in the place of justice, even there was wickedness, and in the place of righteousness, even there was wickedness."

The Preacher says that the reality of hebel under the sun is filled with evil—as though God were not governing time, not ruling, not involved, not powerful, even as though God did not exist—though in truth He is the One who governs all times and seasons. In the very place where evil ought not to reach—the court of justice—there is wickedness. In the place that ought to uphold righteousness, there is wickedness.

The "place of justice" refers to earthly courts that should be most fair, yet even there are corruption and injustice. The "place of righteousness" may point to the temple where God, the righteous Judge, dwelt; yet even there were corruption and evil. Was not the temple repeatedly defiled and corrupted in the history of the Old Testament? Did not our Lord Jesus call it "a den of robbers" in the New Testament?

Thus not only the world but even the visible church is stained and corrupted by sin. In every age there is no place untouched by evil. This too is the vain reality under the sun. Therefore all men under the sun groan and sigh. Even God's people find it difficult to accept that God governs all times and that all things occur fittingly in His time to accomplish His good will. When we examine our own lives, is this not true? We believe in God, yet things do not unfold as we desire, nor in the time we desire. We pray, yet it seems that what we ask is not fulfilled in the time we expect. Thus anguish and conflict remain.

Why does this happen in our lives? Why at this time? Why is it not resolved? If God loves us, why does He not deliver us now? Why does our life seem unchanged—or even burdened with greater trials? Sometimes we suffer unjustly and yet God appears silent. Is God truly the One who governs all times and makes everything beautiful? Certainly, Scripture teaches that all things occur within God's sovereign decree and according to His purpose. Yet when we confront the reality that we cannot fully know or understand all things with our limited wisdom, it becomes very difficult to accept that God governs every time and works all things together for our good.

Knowing this, the Preacher cries out that everything under the sun is vanity. Under the sun everything—even the places that ought to be most just and righteous—is filled with absurdity and injustice and evil. The Preacher himself wrestles and confesses this anguish. In such struggle we too cry out to God: “Why?” “For what reason?” “How long?” Yet is such anguish wrong? Is this the path to unbelief and apostasy? No. The Preacher himself wrestled in this way. The call is not to run elsewhere with our anguish, but to come to God. To cry out before Him, “Why?” “For what reason?” “How long?” And to hold fast to the wisdom God gives.

In the Psalms, the psalmists cried out in the same way. Job also, in the midst of suffering, cried to God in anguish because of the limits of his wisdom. Yet he held to God's wisdom, trusted Him, praised Him, and waited patiently for God's time. So too, through this process of wrestling in the reality of hebel, God causes us to cling more firmly to His wisdom, to endure, and to trust Him. Then what is the wisdom of God that we must hold fast in the midst of all our anguish and struggle? The Preacher first speaks in verse 17:

2. The Time of God's Judgment

Ecclesiastes 3:17 — “I said in my heart, God will judge the righteous and the wicked, for there is a time for every matter and for every work.”

If under the sun we cannot find justice or holiness—neither in earthly courts nor even within the temple—then where must we look? We must look to heaven and to our God who is in heaven. There is a heavenly court and a heavenly temple. There sits upon the throne the holy God who rules all things in righteousness and judges man according to his deeds. There is a true Judge. The day will surely come when God, the righteous Judge in heaven, will judge both the wicked and the righteous according to what they have done. This is the wisdom of God that we must hold fast. The book of Ecclesiastes repeatedly teaches this.

Ecclesiastes 12:13–14 — “The end of the matter; all has been heard. Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man. For God will bring every deed into judgment, with every secret thing, whether good or evil.”

Even if the whole world under the sun—and even mankind itself—is filled with injustice, corruption, wrongdoing, and sin, we must still lift up our eyes to heavenly Zion. There sits God upon His throne, ruling all things according to His sovereign will and appointed time. There is certainly a time when He will judge in His righteousness. To believe this and persevere to the end—that is the wisdom of God we must grasp. When we struggle and wrestle in the evil reality of hebel surrounding us under the sun, we must lift our eyes and cling to the God who judges all things in His righteousness.

Psalms 121:1–2 — “I lift up my eyes to the hills. From where does my help come? My help comes from the LORD, who made heaven and earth.”

Even if we do not fully understand God’s times and seasons, we must trust to the end His holy, righteous, and good character—He who loves His people and shows them mercy—and cling to His faithful promises. Thus the life of a believer is a life of persevering faith. This is the wisdom to which the Preacher leads us.

Thus the fruit borne in the life of those who hold fast to this wisdom is “Endurance”. There is certainly a day of God’s judgment. Though now we do not understand everything, we entrust all righteous judgment to God and live to the end fearing Him and walking according to His good pleasure. Even if we suffer unjustly, even if we face wrongful death, we believe in the God who judges righteously and hold fast in faith that His good will shall surely be accomplished in His appointed time. Why is this a wise life? Does it truly seem wise? Yes—it is the wisest life. For the life of the most wise One was like this. The wise path we must hold is, in other words, the path He Himself walked before us.

Dear saints, there is One who, in this unjust and sinful reality of hebel under the sun, held fast to God’s wisdom, entrusted all judgment to God, endured unjust suffering—even unto death—trusting God and walking according to His good pleasure. Who is He? It is our Lord Jesus Christ. Our Lord Jesus Christ, the holy Son of God and true Wisdom Himself, became man like us and passed through this evil reality under the sun. Though sinless and perfectly righteous, He was falsely accused in the very earthly courts and temple that ought to have been most just and holy. He endured the most unjust, unreasonable, incomprehensible, and unrighteous trial. Though His life was not delivered from evil, though He seemed powerless like a lamb led to the slaughter and was handed over to death by sinners—even to the place of being forsaken by God—He endured to the end, trusting in God’s righteous judgment, and was crucified and killed.

Did He experience anguish and struggle? Certainly. Though without sin and therefore different from us, He nevertheless wrestled in deep agony. Yet with that anguish and struggle, He went to God and wrestled with Him. In Gethsemane, His sweat became like drops of blood as He prayed that this hour might pass from Him and that the cup of God’s wrath might be removed. On the cross He cried out, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” Even then God seemed silent, as though nothing were being accomplished. Yet Jesus trusted to the end in the God who judges righteously. He prayed, “Not my will, but yours, be done,” and obeyed the Father’s good will unto death.

And what happened? Did God remain silent and accomplish nothing? By no means. God was actively fulfilling His ordained purpose. He did not spare His own Son but gave Him up, accomplishing His gracious will to save us from all our sins. Therefore, when we cry out, “Why? For what reason? How long?” we are called to come with our anguish and struggle to Jesus Christ at the cross. We are to look to the path He walked and follow Him. The crucified Christ is the wisdom of God that we must hold.

1 Peter 2:21–25 — “For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you might follow in his steps. He committed no sin, neither was deceit found in his mouth. When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten, but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly. He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed. For you were straying like sheep, but have now returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls.”

Dear saints, here is the wisdom of God that we must hold fast. We look to Jesus at the cross and follow the path He walked. He Himself experienced that in the place of justice there was wickedness and in the place of righteousness there was wickedness. He was falsely accused, unjustly tried, and crucified by evil men in a place filled with unrighteousness. Though He died unjustly and was not delivered in that moment, though He cried out in anguish and sorrow to the very end, He trusted in the God who judges righteously and obeyed. Through this, not only was the salvation of sinners accomplished, but He also showed the path that believers must walk as we pass through this evil world under the sun.

Therefore, even though we do not now understand all things, even if things we do not desire continue until the day we die and are not resolved in our time, we live by faith looking to the day when God will judge and when our salvation will be completed in the kingdom of heaven. On that day, those who have believed in Christ and have already died and been judged with Him will be delivered from all condemnation and enter eternal life in heaven. But those who do not believe in Christ will fall into eternal punishment in hell.

And on that day we shall understand how God's sovereign decree and appointed will—though hidden from us—were beautifully accomplished in His time, and how He worked all things together for good. Then we shall render to Him all worship, praise, thanksgiving, and glory, fearing Him forever.

Therefore we must not judge God by our limited wisdom, but acknowledge His unsearchable wisdom and live accordingly. The life of the wise saint who follows the path Jesus walked is portrayed in the book of Revelation as follows:

3. The Life of the Wise Believer

Revelation 6:9–10 — “When he opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slain for the word of God and for the witness they had borne. They cried out with a loud voice, ‘O Sovereign Lord, holy and true, how long before you will judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth?’”

The saints who have already been saved and have died are in heaven, enjoying rest in God. Yet even there they cry out to God and pray—the same kind of prayer as the saints still on earth. What is the content of their prayer?

“How long, O Lord, holy and true?”

They cry out: When will all sin, injustice, and evil come to an end? When will all enemies and this evil world be judged? When will all the saints be fully saved, delivered from hebel, and live forever in the kingdom of heaven?

Does this cry of “How long?” sound strange to us? Does it seem odd that there would be such a cry even in heaven? Does it sound like a complaint, as though they still do not understand God's wisdom? As though they are urging God not to remain silent but to act quickly?

It may sound that way to us, but that is not what this prayer is. The holy saints who have already been glorified in heaven do not pray in grumbling or unbelief. They know that God is actively working. This prayer is a petition that, according to God's good pleasure, the day of final judgment—the day of Christ's

return—would come quickly. They are asking that God's righteous judgment would come upon the whole earth so that His name may be fully glorified.

We, together with the saints in heaven, pass through this period of hebel praying this same prayer. In a world filled with sin and injustice, where God's name is mocked and despised, we cry out with righteous longing, "How long?" Our prayers must have a clear direction. Yes, we may pray "Why?" "For what reason?" "How long?" But we must cry out looking toward a definite time. What time is that? The day of Christ's return. We pray that Jesus would come quickly and that the final judgment would arrive. For the world it will be the day of final judgment, but for us it will be the day of final salvation. On that day, God's righteous judgment will come upon the whole earth, and the glory of His name will be fully revealed.

Yet here also there is a difficulty. For two thousand years, saints who possess God's wisdom have earnestly prayed and watched for Christ's return, yet He has not come. It may seem as though He is delaying, as though the promise of His coming is not fulfilled, as though God does not hear our prayers. But that is not so. There is a clear reason. God is actively working so that that day will come swiftly in His appointed time. Yet He is also waiting. What is He waiting for? Here again is wisdom we must hold.

Revelation 6:11 — "Then they were each given a white robe and told to rest a little longer, until the number of their fellow servants and their brothers should be complete, who were to be killed as they themselves had been."

2 Peter 3:9 — "The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance."

To saints who cry, "How long?" and struggle because Christ seems slow to come, God reveals His will. He is patient because He desires that sinners come to repentance. He will lose none of His elect but will save them all. Therefore, we are told to endure until the full number of His chosen people is gathered. Knowing God's gracious purpose in His patience, we are to wait for His time and pray with endurance. Whatever the appointed time may be, we entrust it to God and devote ourselves to the work of the Lord. Whether in season or out of season, we are to use every time given to us to proclaim the gospel and make Christ known. We participate in God's saving work, by which He seeks and saves every one of His people without losing a single soul. And at last, not one of our prayers will fall to the ground. According to our prayers, Christ will return, all the saints will be saved, and final judgment will come upon the world.

Revelation 8:3–5 — "And another angel came and stood at the altar with a golden censer, and he was given much incense to offer with the prayers of all the saints on the golden altar before the throne, and the smoke of the incense, with the prayers of the saints, rose before God from the hand of the angel. Then the angel took the censer and filled it with fire from the altar and threw it on the earth, and there were peals of thunder, rumblings, flashes of lightning, and an earthquake."

Our prayers, united with Christ, rise like incense before the throne of God. And in accordance with those prayers, the final judgment will come and Christ will return. In God's sovereign time, His ordained will shall surely be accomplished. Astonishingly, it will be accomplished together with our prayers. We must remember this. God is not distant or uninvolved in our lives. He hears our prayers and works out His will. Even our feeble prayers, offered in Christ, are received as the prayers of Christ Himself. God delights to accomplish His will in His time through our prayers. Therefore, those who believe in God's sovereign time are not passive people who merely wait without praying, dragged along by time. Rather, believing that God's time is fulfilled together with our prayers, we actively pray and watch for His coming.

Do you remember? When Judah was taken into exile in Babylon, God promised that after seventy years He would restore them and bring them back to the land. Though God declared that He would surely accomplish it, He also said that His people must pray. God would fulfill His appointed purpose in His time through the active prayers of His people. What astonishing grace and privilege!

If it is God's will that our brothers and sisters, our family members, our children believe the gospel and be saved, then it will be accomplished in God's time—and our prayers will be part of that fulfillment. Therefore, in whatever circumstances we face, we must not lose heart. With endurance we pray and seek God's time. This is the life of wise believers who acknowledge God's time while passing through hebel under the sun. Finally, let us briefly look at verses 18–22 and conclude.

4. Conclusion

Ecclesiastes 3:18–22 — “I said in my heart with regard to the children of man that God is testing them that they may see that they themselves are but beasts. For what happens to the children of man and what happens to the beasts is the same; as one dies, so dies the other. They all have the same breath, and man has no advantage over the beasts, for all is vanity. All go to one place. All are from the dust, and to dust all return. Who knows whether the spirit of man goes upward and the spirit of the beast goes down into the earth? So I saw that there is nothing better than that a man should rejoice in his work, for that is his lot. Who can bring him to see what will be after him?”

First, when it says that man is no different from the beasts, it means that in death, in the returning of the body to dust, there is no difference. The Psalms say the same:

Psalms 49:12–13 — “Man in his pomp will not remain; he is like the beasts that perish. This is the path of those who have foolish confidence; yet after them people approve of their boasts.”

Fallen mankind, like the beasts, dies and returns to dust. Yet there is a decisive difference: the spirit of man goes to stand before God. Before His judgment seat, God will judge between good and evil. The righteous will enter eternal life, and the wicked eternal punishment. In other words, those who believe in Jesus Christ and are saved will enter heaven; those who do not believe will face the judgment of hell. Thus, though the world under the sun appears filled with evil and that evil seems to continue unchecked, there will surely be God's righteous judgment. Even now, through the work of the gospel, He is accomplishing the final judgment and final salvation in history.

Therefore, God calls His people to remember these things and to rejoice in all that He gives during their days. We are to give thanks for every gift of common grace, yet remember that these too are hebel—like the wind, quickly passing away. At the same time, we are to rejoice far more in the special grace given to us in Christ, enjoying by faith the glorious realities of salvation and the kingdom of heaven that belong to us in Him.

The latter part of verse 22 says, “Who can bring him to see what will be after him?” That is, no one can know beforehand what will happen after his life ends.

But we know. Jesus Christ Himself has shown us through His own life. Those who believe in Him, those united to Him, are enabled to see what lies ahead in Him—because the path He walked has become our path. Therefore, we cannot say we do not know where our lives are headed. In Christ, what do we know?

Above all, we know that death is not the end. Beyond death awaits the eternal glory of heaven, into which Christ has already entered before us. In order to lead us there, God has made all our days beautiful in their time. This does not mean our days will be comfortable, free of difficulty, or without trouble. Even if we cannot understand everything, even if our lives are marked by suffering, struggle, and cries of “Why?” “For what reason?” “How long?”—still, God works all things together for good. He preserves our faith and gathers us safely into heaven. Following the path Christ has gone before us, we shall surely arrive in the kingdom of heaven. There we shall glorify God and enjoy Him forever. The life of Christ is our clear evidence. The love of God revealed at the cross is our certain assurance.

Therefore, believe this. Comfort brothers and sisters who are struggling in present afflictions. Bear one another’s burdens. Whether we live or die, let us honor Christ alone and run the race of faith together.

Philippians 1:19–21 — “For I know that through your prayers and the help of the Spirit of Jesus Christ this will turn out for my deliverance, as it is my eager expectation and hope that I will not be at all ashamed, but that with full courage now as always Christ will be honored in my body, whether by life or by death. For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain.”