

## *He Has Done It*

A sermon preached by Dr. John Clayton at Covenant Presbyterian Church of Fort Smith, Arkansas on June 11, 2023.

For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven:

a time to be born, and a time to die;  
a time to plant, and a time to pluck up 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 together;  
a time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing;  
a time to seek, and a time to lose;  
a time to keep, and a time to cast 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 for war, and a time for peace.

What gain has the worker from his toil? I have seen the business that God has given to the children of man to be busy with. He has made everything beautiful in its time. Also, he has put eternity into man's heart, yet so that he cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end. 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. I perceived that whatever God does endures forever; nothing can be added to it, nor anything taken from it. God has done it, so that people fear before him. That which is, already has been; that which is to be, already has been; and God seeks what has been driven away (Eccles. 3:1–15).<sup>1</sup>

In the third chapter of Ecclesiastes, Solomon begins with an introductory statement followed by a poem of 28 topics, 14 pairs, comprised of multiples of seven, the biblical number of perfection or completeness, which Solomon uses to describe the seasons and times of this life we live “under heaven.” Each of the fourteen pairs is presented, line by line, using a poetic technique called a *merismus*, in which two opposites are coupled expressing both and everything in between.<sup>2</sup> For example, to say “a time to be born, and a time to die” is to say there is a time for beginning, a time for ending, and a time for everything in between birth and death. The poem is not Solomon's attempt at a comprehensive listing of everything we encounter in this life but a poetic elaboration on his introductory statement: “For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven” (3:1).

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<sup>1</sup> Unless referenced otherwise, all Scripture quotations are from *The Holy Bible, English Standard Version* (Wheaton: Crossway Bibles, 2001).

<sup>2</sup> Benjamin Shaw, *Ecclesiastes: Life in a Fallen World* (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 2019), 37.

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To read the poem, we immediately realize how perfectly it captures life. The seemingly erratic listing of each line of poetic verse is intentional. There are good times and there are bad times. There are times of clarity and times of ambiguity. There are times when life seems refreshingly simple and other times when it makes no sense at all. Life is a complexity of matters under heaven, all of which is under God's sovereign domain.

The Hebrew word translated in the ESV as "matter" may also be translated "purpose," as it is in Isaiah 46:10, in which God says, "My counsel shall stand, and I will accomplish all my purpose" (Isa. 46:10). God indeed establishes seasons and determines time, working providentially with purpose in all things. The Westminster Confession describes it this way:

"God the great Creator of all things doth uphold, direct, dispose, and govern all creatures, actions, and things, from the greatest even to the least, by his most wise and holy providence, according to his infallible foreknowledge, and the free and immutable counsel of his own will, to the praise of the glory of his wisdom, power, justice, goodness, and mercy."<sup>3</sup>

Therefore, the "everything" and "every matter under heaven" are included in all that God directs, disposes, and governs, including every season and situation, every time in totality, according to God's providential punctuality.

### **Providential Punctuality**

In the fifth chapter of Genesis we read of "the generations of Adam," which begins not with Adam but God:

When God created man, he made him in the likeness of God. Male and female he created them, and he blessed them and named them Man when they were created. When Adam had lived 130 years, he fathered a son in his own likeness, after his image, and named him Seth. The days of Adam after he fathered Seth were 800 years; and he had other sons and daughters. Thus all the days that Adam lived were 930 years, and he died" (Gen. 5:1b-5).

The list continues, from Adam came Seth and Seth Enosh to Kenan to Mahalalel to Jared to Enoch to Methuselah to Lamech to Noah (Gen. 5:1-31). The account is striking if not for the longevity of the listed then for their considerable progeny. We know nothing of their births but that they were born, little to nothing of their lives but for Enoch and Noah who "walked with God" (Gen. 5:24; 6:10), and nothing of their deaths but that they died except Enoch who was taken by God (Gen. 5:24). Yet, every one of them had a beginning and end, each lived a life full of years. Can you imagine the accumulation of life experiences if you lived to be 969 years old?

And while our lifespans are considerably shorter, you and I share this same life under the sun. Your mother gave birth to you, a day you did not choose, nor do you know the day of your death.

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<sup>3</sup> "The Confession of Faith" 5.1, *The Westminster Confession of Faith and Catechisms* (Lawrenceville: PCA Christian Education and Publications, 2007), 19-20.

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Generations precede you, all the way back to the first man and woman, who were created by God and made in his likeness. In every succeeding generation, children were and will be born in the likeness of their parents carrying forward the likeness of God. But we are not God, for we are born and die, times determined by God, and all of life in between, as he who is sovereign over time “from all eternity, did, by the most wise and holy counsel of his own will, freely, and unchangeably ordain whatsoever comes to pass.”<sup>4</sup>

God’s providential punctuality then is comprehensive, even down to a seed planted in the ground and the fruit that is harvested. I may know to plant my tomato plants in my garden after April 15<sup>th</sup> with a likelihood of tomatoes in July, but who determined these times? In God’s covenant with Noah, he promised, “While the earth remains, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night, shall not cease” (Gen. 8:21-22). And so, I plant, string, prune, fertilize, and harvest, not because I have determined when and how I will grow my tomatoes, but I recognize what God has given, respond according to his timing, and benefit from it, trusting in God’s provision.

As it is in life, so it is in death: “a time to kill, and a time to heal” (3:3). Murder is always sin, but there are legitimate times of killing. Sometimes justice demands it, as God said to Noah,

Whoever sheds the blood of man,  
by man shall his blood be shed,  
for God made man in his own image (Gen. 9:6).

Or, in the case of Hophni and Phineas, the unregenerate priests of Israel, who were killed in battle by the Philistines, the writer of 1 Samuel reveals that “it was the will of the LORD to put them to death” (1 Sam. 2:25). As in killing so also in healing. For example, in the ninth chapter of John, the man born blind was not blind because of his sin or the sin of his parents, but ultimately “that the works of God might be displayed in him” (John 9:3), and so they were, as he was healed and then worshiped the Lord (John 9:38). We must be careful to presume that we understand all of the complexities of why things happen yet that God’s purposes prevail.

In a world of constant change, there is a life cycle to everything. The projects that Solomon accomplished during his reign were remarkable, but how many of them remain today? There is “a time to break down, and a time to build,” destruction and construction. When I was a child puzzles frustrated me. Who wants to invest time in completing a puzzle only to have it taken apart and put back in a box? Once worked I wanted to shellac and frame it. I think it’s one of the reasons I loved seeing the rock walls across the countryside when Sydney and I were in Scotland; they’re rockwork puzzles that last. But there will be a day when those walls will fall, stones cast away.

But tearing down and building up is often not as trivial as a puzzle or a stone wall. Birth and death, sowing and reaping, killing and healing, all can involve the highs of highs and the lows of lows. And so, there is “a time to weep, and a time to laugh; / a time to mourn, and a time to dance.” I have wept to the point of no more tears to cry, and I have laughed so hard that my sides ached. I have mourned the loss of a loved one, and I have moved my body in celebration (in

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid, 12.

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something vaguely resembling dancing) when my children and grandchildren were born. And you have too (and some of you are better dancers than others), because that's life: laughing, crying, mourning, dancing, and everything in between.

Sometimes I need a hug, but sometimes I need to be left alone. Sometimes I am focused and in hot pursuit, but sometimes I can't find a thing I'm looking for. Sometimes I'm accumulating, but sometimes I'm giving away. Sometimes I know precisely what to say, but sometimes I need not say a word. Sometimes I'm as steady as a rock, and other times my emotions range from love to hate. Sometimes I'm a person of peace, but sometimes I'm armed and ready for war. And you could say the same, because we are all children of Adam, living men and women made in the image of God yet fallen in sin, living with its consequences.

But the same cannot be said of God, who is neither constrained to time and space nor knows sin but providentially upholds, directs, disposes, and governs “all creatures, actions, and things, from the greatest even to the least.” Charles Spurgeon said,

I believe that every particle of dust that dances in the sunbeam does not move an atom more or less than God wishes—that every particle of spray that dashes against the steamboat has its orbit, as well as the sun in the heavens—that the chaff from the hand of the winnow is steered as the stars in their courses. The creeping of an aphid over the rosebud is as much fixed as the march of the devastating pestilence—the fall of ... leaves from a poplar is as fully ordained as the tumbling of an avalanche”<sup>5</sup> (Piper, 35).

And so we must learn to trust God in birth and death, in planting and plucking, in killing and healing, in breaking down and building up, in weeping and laughing, in mourning and dancing, in casting away and gathering, in embracing and refraining, in seeking and losing, in keeping and giving away, in tearing and sewing, in silence and speaking, in love and hate, in war and peace, and everything else. We must learn to trust him in every season and time with “every matter under heaven,” and in so doing gain a providential perspective.

### **Providential Perspective**

Solomon asks, “What gain has the worker from his toil?” (3:9). It's a rhetorical question. Here the worker's toil is the business of life, which Solomon has described as “vanity,” or a “vapor,” and “a striving after the wind” (Eccles. 1:14). But though a vapor, it is not without meaning and purpose. By God's design, “He has made everything beautiful in its time” (3:11), which is not to say that everything in life is beautiful, but the design and order of God's providence is. Everything in life may not please us, but we can find beauty in the pleasure of God.

For, we were created in his image and therefore eternal beings. And though death is a reality of this life under heaven, there is a heavenly reality beyond this life. Which is why there can seem a discontinuity between our perception and expectations in what we encounter in this life. “If I find in myself,” C.S. Lewis said, “a desire which no experience in this world can satisfy, the most

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<sup>5</sup> Charles Spurgeon, “God's Providence,” quoted in John Piper, *Providence* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2020), 35.

probable explanation is that I was made for another world.”<sup>6</sup> Lewis came to realize what Solomon says, “[God] has put eternity into man’s heart” (3:11).

We know intuitively there is more, but our creaturely being and fallen state cloud our perspective and distort our judgment. We “cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end” (3:11), and this frustrates us all. If only I knew the day of my death, I’d skip it; the time to kill, and I’d heal it; the time to break, and I’d build it; the time to mourn and weep, and I’d miss it; and so on. How can I live in a world with so many uncertainties, so many things outside my control?

I love the way David Gibson answers this:

...part of growing up in the world is learning to grow small. God intends us to be like children who trust their parents to know best because they can see what the children can’t see, and they know what the children can’t see, and they know what the children are not yet able to know. And here’s the thing—the relationship of trust is built on the character of the parents. If the parents are good and wise and kind, then the child who cannot see the end from the beginning has nothing to fear.”<sup>7</sup>

My daughter tells me not to leave the bread knife on the edge of the counter, because my granddaughter could reach up, grab it, and hurt herself. The bread knife will never be near the countertop edge in my house because I love my granddaughter. How much more so for the children of God, whose heavenly Father is wise, powerful, just, good, and merciful, and who loves us so much that he gave his only Son.

I don’t have to know the beginning from the end if I trust my heavenly Father, who not only knows it but ordained it. I can live with joy today, because my Father holds tomorrow. I can forgive those who hurt me. I can do good, even to those who hate me, because I am loved with an everlasting love by my Father who forgives and is always faithful (Jer. 31:3). In the providence of God, I can enjoy the simple pleasures of life, good food, good drink, good friends, for “every desirable and beneficial gift comes out of heaven” (James 1:17 MSG). And in all of this, we know that he is at work in all things for our good and his glory, according to his providential purpose.

### **Providential Purpose**

We are born, and we live our lives. Though we will not reach the magnitude of Solomon’s wisdom and works, we all seek to make our mark, to leave our legacy, but it will not last. Everything you and I do will be forgotten one day, nothing we do will endure. But this is not the case with God: “whatever God does endures forever.” You may consider yourself a partner in what God is doing, and it is true that God makes use of “means,” but he is “free to work without,

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<sup>6</sup> C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2001), 137.

<sup>7</sup> David Gibson, *Living Life Backward: How Ecclesiastes Teaches Us to Live in Light of the End* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2017), 58.

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above, and against them, at his pleasure.”<sup>8</sup> Truly, “Our God is in the heavens; / he does all that he pleases” (Ps. 115:3).

Therefore, what God does is according to his purpose, and his ultimate purpose, from beginning to end in “every matter under heaven” and above, is *his glory*. For, he is God, and we are not. I may look through our family photos and lament the days gone by, or I may hold my granddaughters and rejoice in the day he has given. But God neither looks back nor forward but declares “the end from the beginning and from ancient times things not yet done”; his counsel shall stand and his purpose prevail” (Isa. 46:10). Solomon says, “God seeks what has been driven away,” or what has “been pursued,” meaning he continues to pursue his ends, working out his purposes in all things, which should trouble the proud and reassure the humble.

We were created not to know it all, but to worship him who does. Our purpose then is to respond, to fear him, to worship him with reverence and awe, which he enables by his grace through faith in Christ, the fulfillment of his promise, to redeem us to himself. And so, he has. All glory be to God, for he has done it.

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<sup>8</sup> “The Confession of Faith” 5.3, *The Westminster Confession of Faith and Catechisms* (Lawrenceville: PCA Christian Education and Publications, 2007), 21-22.