

**“Control is an Illusion”**  
**Ecclesiastes: The Good Life**  
**Ecclesiastes 3:1-22**  
**04/30/23**

## Introduction

**Pray.**

**Control.** I thought we'd get started this morning with a little bit of a group confession. We value honesty and vulnerability here at Citizens so I'm going to lead the way in that, alright – ***I love control.***

I mean, I love control. If I could schedule out every single minute of every single day for the next 50 years of my life, that would be the dream. I love it. I love to be in charge of what my life is going to look like.

My dream world is one in which I'm in charge. And when I'm in charge, I could dictate how:

- Every single conversation was going to go. My jokes would always be funny.
- Every single decision was going to turn out.
- My kids' lives would end up with the perfect walk with Jesus, perfect job, perfect friends, etc. etc.
- I would only ever be happy and in a state of bliss and contentment.

*But I also care about you too, so don't worry, if I was in control...*

- Your life would always only be awesome too.
- The world would be full of peace.
- The stock market would always do well, mine and your financial investments would only ever be green.
- Everyone in Charlotte would come to know Jesus as Savior and Lord.
- And there'd be no problems or drama forever and ever amen.

**Doesn't that sound awesome?**

Now, maybe you're not quite as messed up, broken, and in need of control as I am, but chances are you'd like some control over your life too, right? **If someone handed you the road map to a stress-free, full of smiles, everything and everyone turns out alright life you'd probably take them up on it, correct?**

In fact, I would argue, a good portion of our energy as human beings goes to that very thing. We spend our days and our energy trying to exercise enough dominion and control over our lives to as much as possible buffer us from what is hard, painful, and sad.

**Being in control of our lives is an essential part of our vision of what the good life should be.**

**But here comes the Preacher...** once again, to deliver the honest reality that I want to help us spend our time grappling with this morning – **Control is an Illusion.**

We're continuing our series through the book of Ecclesiastes this morning and so far the Preacher has told us that everything is vanity (week 1) and that striving for more is vanity (week 2). And today what we'll see in chapter 3 is that **the desire for control is vanity.**

That's the Preacher's thesis in chapter 3 – Control is an illusion. You cannot control the seasons of your life.

And that, if we're willing to once again be sacredly honest – *is actually part of God's good design. Recognizing, admitting, and coming to grips with the fact that control will always be out of our reach frees us up to live the actual good life with God.*

That's where we are headed today, but to get there, we've got to be patient. The preacher is going to take us on this journey through a number of what we'll call **sanctifying challenges + gracious comforts**. And they're going to build on one another.

So I need you just to stay with me because he's building a case little bit by little bit. You're going to want a resolution and we'll get there, just stick with me ok?

### Challenge + Comfort #1

So let's jump in...

**Ecc 3:1-8 – 1 For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven: 2 a time to be born, and a time to die; a time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is planted; 3 a time to kill, and a time to heal; a time to break down, and a time to build up; 4 a time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance; 5 a time to cast away stones, and a time to gather stones together; a time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing; 6 a time to seek, and a time to lose; a time to keep, and a time to cast away; 7 a time to tear, and a time to sew; a time to keep silence, and a time to speak; 8 a time to love, and a time to hate; a time for war, and a time for peace.**

What the Preacher is doing here is using a tool in Hebrew poetry called a *merism*. A merism uses two polar opposites to make up a whole. So when the preacher says – “A time to be born and a time to die” – that is a merism describing the whole of human existence. When he says “a time to weep and a time to laugh” – that is a merism describing the full range of human emotion.

He's using polar opposites to capture the whole of life. This is the whole of human existence.

- We are born, and then we die.
- We dance at a wedding, and then we mourn the loss of the one we danced with.
- We start a business, and then the business closes down.
- We embrace and hug and welcome others, and then we refrain from embracing as relationships end and people move away.
- We laugh with friends, and then weep for what the people we used to laugh with have done to us.

These are the times and seasons of our lives. The preacher says for *everything* there is a *season*. The Hebrew word there translates as “appointed time”. Each season of our lives has its time to come and go.

**And this brings us to the first challenge of Ecclesiastes 3...**

**CHALLENGE #1 - We have no control over the seasons of our lives.**

Some of the seasons the Preacher describes can be extremely painful, can they not? Just look at this list – Killing, tearing down, weeping, mourning, losing – these are painful realities. These are not things most of us would choose if we were truly in control, right?

None of us are like – you know what sounds good this week, a little Thursday weeping session. That sounds good. How's your week looking? Good, got some tearing down to do on Wednesday.

Let's be honest – **If it was up to all of us in the room – our lives would be half of this poem.**

**It would read. For everything there is a season...**a time to be born, plant, heal, build up, laugh, dance, gather, embrace, seek, keep, sew, speak (or maybe for some of us only refraining from speaking), a time to live, and a time for peace.

And yet, if you just take 5 seconds to consider your life. The past week, the past month, the past year, the past few years you know this brutal reality – **We don't get to control which season comes when.**

Our lives are full of these appointed seasons. We're not in control.

*Then, if that's not enough, the sucker punch of v9...*

**9 What gain has the worker from his toil?**

What's the implied answer? **NOTHING**. In other words – Because there is an appointed time for everything and every season – joy and pain, life and death – what do you gain from all your work and effort, striving to only live the good stuff? Striving to only live the good seasons? You gain nothing. You can't control the seasons. You can't control the times. You can keep trying – it won't matter. The appointed season is going to come.

*That is the challenge.*

**BUT...there's a comfort here too. Look back at v 1...**

**1 For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven.**

Under what? Under **heaven**. Where has the Preacher positioned us prior to now in the book? Under what? Under **the Sun**. Meaning – life without God. Where are we now? **Under heaven**.

This is intentional. These seasons, these appointed times the Preacher describes, are not life without and devoid of God. They are seasons we live with God. He's not describing life outside of the presence of God, but life under heaven with God. These are not random appointed times by some ethereal force in the universe.

These are God's appointed times. He has set them over us **AND** He is in them with us.

This is what Solomon says in 3:10 – **10 I have seen the business that God has given to the children of man to be busy with.**

I've seen these seasons. These times of our lives we can't control – God is the one who has given them to us. He has appointed them and under heaven He is in them with us.

The Preacher says the same in 7:14 – **14 In the day of prosperity be joyful, and in the day of adversity consider: God has made the one as well as the other.**

And here's why that matters, v11 – **11 He has made everything beautiful in its time.**

We have no control over the seasons of our lives. Seasons you'd rather not come are going to come, but...

**COMFORT #1 - God is with us and making everything beautiful in its time.**

**In life with God, there is an appointed time for every season we walk through – birth, planting, laughing, loving and death, breaking down, weeping, hatred and war.**

God takes all of the seasons of our lives, every single one of them, even the ones we'd rather very much if it was up to us never go through, even the ones that feel like or are literal death – and in its proper time He makes everything **beautiful**.

**God has made** (the seasons you've been in), **is making** (if you're in it right now), **and will make** (the next time you go through them) **beautiful**.

Seasons you'd rather not come are going to come. You have no control over that. **But God is here and he's making it beautiful.**

**Beautiful – yaphah – “fitting and appropriate.”**

God is taking the seasons of our lives and making them all to be exactly what is needed and appropriate and fitting in the larger picture He is creating. That is what theologians call God's providence. It is not that He simply rules over all the seasons and times of our lives, but that they are fitting for us as His people.

Philip Ryken – **“God rules all our moments and all our days, and there is a definite orderliness to what He does. ...there is a ‘fittingness’ to what happens. God does everything at just the right time.”**

**Puzzle.** It's like when you're working on a puzzle, and you've got two big sections that just won't connect. And suddenly you find a piece you dropped on the ground, and it's exactly the right piece you needed to make the whole thing fit together. That puzzle piece was **yaphah**. It was fitting. Exactly what was needed at exactly the right time.

That's what the Preacher says God does with every season of our lives – He makes it fitting.

### **Challenge + Comfort #2**

**However, that leads to challenge 2. Let's keep reading...**

**11(cont.) – 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.**

**CHALLENGE #2 – We want to know what God is doing, but can't.**

He has put eternity into man's heart, the preacher tells us. Meaning – in the midst of living through these uncontrollable seasons, God has put something in us that makes us want to get out from under it, see the big picture, and know exactly what God is doing.

We want to know just what that “fitting” is – how does this make sense in my life...but we can't.

**Movie Endings.** I've shared this illustration before but anytime I sit down to watch a movie, there comes this moment like 30-45 minutes in where I just can't take it anymore and I have to know how it ends. So in the past, I've sneakily pulled out my phone and fun fact - wikipedia will tell you the whole plot, it's great.

Well I shared that and enough people made fun of me that I tried stopping, so instead I've just become the person who asks a bunch of questions. So a character will pop up on the screen and I'll turn to Lindsay - “Who is that?” - or some plot

point will happen or some twist and I'll be like "What does that mean?" Very obviously questions she doesn't know the answer to. So she politely asked me to start looking up the endings again.

I mean it's terrible. I'm a big Golden State Warriors basketball fan, and they're in the NBA playoffs right now, and a few nights ago I was watching a game, and it was really close, intense. And it was messing with me so much I decided just to turn it off and go to bed so I could see who won in the morning.

I just have to know how it will go.

And listen, that's a silly example but is that not in our hearts everytime we talk through one of these painful seasons? These questions rise up in our hearts and minds – "Lord, what are you doing? Lord, I don't get this. Why this? How does this make sense? Where is this leading? How is this a part of your plan?"

That, according to the Preacher, is from God. He has put eternity into man's hearts. But here's the challenge – *yet so that he cannot find out what God has done.*

**The Preacher is honest – there's going to be something in you that longs to know what God is doing in His providence in the seasons of life, but you're not going to be able to know.**

**But here's the comfort...Skip down to v14 – 14 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.**

**COMFORT #2 - It is God's grace that we do not know, because it causes us to fear Him more.**

God is writing this forever story. What He does endures forever, the Preacher says. It's a story bigger than us, more cosmic and global than us...Where we are not the main character – God is. And so this season is one small piece, of one small puzzle, in a giant cosmic masterpiece of redemption God is orchestrating. We can't understand it because it's much too cosmic for us – but God is making everything beautiful in it's time.

And he's done it, so that we will fear Him. That we will have appropriate, solemn, holy and utter reverence and awe for Him. That instead of us striving to figure out how the pieces all fit together we would step back and go – **Woah. I want to know why this season is here and I can't, but God knows AND is in charge? He's so much bigger than me. So much greater than me, surely I can trust Him.**

That's what the Preacher says God is shaping in our hearts.

**Carowinds.** "What's this ride going to do?" Just trust me, it'll be for your good. And I'm here riding it with you.

### **Challenge + Comfort #3**

So God is making everything, all of the seasons of our lives, beautiful in their appointed times. We long to control our seasons, live with only the "good" ones, we want to know what He's doing and how he's making them beautiful but we can't, and that's his design so we would fear and therefore trust Him more.

But there's one more challenge, and I think it may be the hardest one for us.

**15 That which is, already has been; that which is to be, already has been; and God seeks what has been driven away. 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.**

### **CHALLENGE #3 – “Beautiful” might not come this side of eternity.**

Notice in verse 16, we’re back under the sun. We’re back on this side of eternity. Under heaven, with God – He’s making it beautiful. But here under the sun, life here and now, life as broken people in a broken world – instead of justice, there’s wickedness. Instead of righteousness, there’s wickedness. Instead of resolutions, there’s questions. Instead of confidence in God, there’s doubts.

- I know God is doing something – but why did the person who hurt me get away without punishment?
- I know God is making it beautiful – but how is their beauty from death?
- Ok, I hear you God is making this fitting and appropriate for what I need – but right now it just feels like pain, when is it going to get resolved?

That’s challenging for us, is it not? Ok I can get behind the fact that painful seasons will come. I can get behind the fact I might not understand the why. But certainly God knows the plans He has for me right?

Romans 8:28 tells me that – **God works all things together for the good of those who love him.**

Yes and amen! Do you know what that “good” is according to the very next verse? That we would be made more like Jesus now and then be glorified into eternity.

That’s God’s time table. We want resolution here, now. Justice here and now. Relief here and now. But God doesn’t dwell under the sun. He dwells in eternity. He’s making everything beautiful in its time, but that time might not be this side of eternity.

Because notice the promise... **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.**

### **COMFORT #3 – God deals in eternity.**

I know God is doing something, says the Preacher. And here under the sun – justice seems to be withheld. Instead of righteousness, there was wickedness. What is God doing?

But then notice – I said in my heart – there’s a time coming of judgment. God deals in a much bigger scope than I do. A much bigger story than I can write. A much larger narrative of redemption than I can ever understand.

Remember v14 – whatever God does endures forever. The “making everything beautiful” is an eternity work. That’s God’s time table. We want it resolved now – God deals in matters of eternity and forever. Everything is pointing forward, just in different ways. Our joys point us forward to the greater joy to come, our sorrows point us forward to the justice and renewal that will come.

David Gibson – **“In my finite story I am often left grasping after several different threads and cannot seem to weave them into one coherent whole. My story has broken characters, jarring interruptions, unexpected joys, relationships caught up in unresolved tensions and difficulties. My life story has unexplained contradictions, I have plenty of unanswered questions, and, in God’s kindness and mercy, I have yet unfinished chapters. But my story is not *the* story. *The* story reveals that there will be a time of judgment, and believers trust that judgment will finally prevail.”**

So we receive that as a comfort. That one day God will judge the righteous and the wicked. One day, the Scriptures promise, every deed will be brought into the light. One day, the Bible assures us – He will wipe every tear from our eyes.

**So yes, the promise that this season will not last forever is true!**

**It just might take life outside the sun to make it true.**

### Summary Conversation

**Alright, that was a lot. Let me try to summarize so you don't miss what the preacher is doing.** Imagine that chapter 3 is a counseling session with the preacher. Here's how it would sound.

- Preacher, I'm going through a really hard season. I didn't expect this season to come, but it's so challenging. Full of tears and weeping. Tearing down and there's no comfort, no embracing. How do I get out of this season? Is it my fault? How do I avoid it next time?
- Well, I've got some bad news...The seasons of life are uncontrollable. Those seasons are going to come, they are a part of life. And that's so hard. But here's the good news – God is fitting all of the seasons together and making each one beautiful.
- Ok. I hear that that's good news. God is doing something. So like what is God doing in this season? How's this one fit?
- Well, see that's the problem. You want to know. He actually wired you to want to know. But you can't know. And that's actually a good thing, because it's going to make you think more highly of God and trust Him more. But you can trust that He's going to resolve it. He executes justice. It will be resolved.
- That's so hard I want to know. But I understand, I'm trusting He's going to make it beautiful. I just wish I knew when. Like tomorrow? Next week. A month, a year?
- Well, maybe. But it might take a lot longer than that. It might not get resolved until you're in eternity with Jesus.

### Three Invitations

#### **That's Ecclesiastes 3.**

You cannot control the seasons, you may not know why God has brought this season into your life, it may not get resolved until you're in eternity with Jesus – but you can trust God is making it beautiful.

**So let's consider once more those three sacred invitations of Ecclesiastes.**

#### **1. Sacred Honesty**

I think the first invitation is to stop rebelling against the season you're in, and instead learn what it means to live within the season where you find yourself. Learn to own and acknowledge the season.

You see Ecclesiastes 3 has to disciple us in 2 different directions. For some of us, we don't know how to cry. And for others, we don't know how to laugh. And so depending on where we are, the first step is to fully embrace the season and respond appropriately.

The preacher intends to mentor us into a way of being human before God that has a capacity to honestly recognize what is there and the grace to look for God in the midst of whatever season it is. But because we insist on fighting for a life of only half the seasons, we remain, in the words of one pastor - inflexible and unskilled in the wisdom of seasons.

So the Preacher teaches us sacred honesty – to name the season without denial. And then to yield to them and adjust our expectations accordingly when they rotate through our lives and the lives of those around us. Whether that season is one of joy or one of sorrow. Because you can miss it in either direction. **And the Preacher would say that makes us a fool.**

**Fools:**

- **Ignore seasons** – They don't want to ever feel anything "bad". They don't let themselves be disciplined by God into weeping when needed and laughing when needed.
- **Mistime seasons** – nothing is worse than a friend who laughs when it's time to cry. Or who fills up space with words, when it's time to keep silent. Trauma Dump.
- **Refuse seasons** – They spend all of their energy trying to work their way out of a season, rather than trusting that God makes everything beautiful *in its time*.

So the first invitation is to name the season without denial and to learn to live in accordance with what it calls for.

## **2. Sacred Mundanity**

In any given season, we are tempted to imagine, think, speculate, meditate on, worry about, and mull over everything that we do not know about the season where we find ourselves. So we get into a hard season, and that gets all of our energy, and all of our healthy practices go out the window, do they not?

We're too tired to show up to group, too sad to engage with close friends, too bitter or angry to pray, too overwhelmed to sabbath or to worship.

The Preacher says that the way forward in our seasons is not giving in to the pressures of the season or spending all of our time speculating over what we don't know, but rather remaining faithful in what we do know.

**St. Anthony.** There's a famous story in church history about St. Anthony, a Franciscan monk in the 12th century. And as the story goes Anthony was living in a difficult season. He felt dry spiritually, he was suffering. And he prayed - Lord, would you rescue me from this?

After a few weeks of praying this prayer with seemingly no response, Anthony had a dream. And in the dream he saw a man who was repeating a very strange pattern. He would sit down, do a little bit of work, then stand up and pray. Sit down again, do a little work, then stand up and pray. And in the dream Anthony hears the Lord say to him - "Do this and you will be cured."

**What Anthony came to understand was that what he needed in that season was not a way out, but a way forward. And that way forward was staying his course and attending to what he knew to do in front of him – the life of a monk – prayer and work. Prayer and work.**

That is our invitation in whatever season we find ourselves. That's what the Preacher tells us in chapter 3. Sandwiched in between him lamenting that eternity is in our hearts but we can't know what God is doing. And then reminding us that what God does last forever so we will trust Him, the Preacher tells us...

**12 I perceived that there is nothing better for them than to be joyful and to do good as long as they live; 13 also that everyone should eat and drink and take pleasure in all his toil—this is God's gift to man.**



What do you do when you're in that season you'd much rather not be in? The same faithful monotony you know to give yourself to in the good ones – Work and pray. Keep stepping into the mundane good life the preacher keeps pointing us to – **work to do, a place to belong, a people to love – in God's presence.**

### **3. Sacred Joy**

And while we're doing that we recognize – God is here.

**Here's the gospel hope and the gospel good news – eternity with Jesus is coming. For all who trust in Christ as Savior and Lord, we can trust that that day is coming, a day where everything will be made beautiful is going to arrive, and while we wait, while we give ourselves to the mundane work and place and people...we receive joy as we rest in the presence of the one well acquainted with our seasons.**

**You see as one who came from outside the sun to enter into life under the season, Jesus lived the seasons...**

- Jesus came as the prince of peace, but was born into a time for war. His family fled Bethlehem as refugees in the night to Egypt. Rome occupied and ruled his people and his land.
- Jesus lived a time to heal (as he cared for the sick, the lame, the blind) and a time to break down (as he drove out the money changers from the temple).
- Jesus lived a time to laugh as he often feasted and celebrated and a time to weep as those closest to him died or betrayed him.
- Jesus knew a time to seek (he came after the lost sheep) and a time to lose (as he spoke judgment on those who were wolves and false shepherds).
- Jesus knew a time to speak (he taught many things) and a time to refrain from speaking (as he silently bore the condemnation and lies of his accusers on the cross).
- And most of all Jesus knew there was a time to be born (that glorious night in a manger in Bethlehem) and a time to die (as he went to cross just as was planned and promised).

And so here's the good news part 1 – Jesus knows our seasons. In our pain and in our suffering we long for someone to speak over us with true empathy – “I know what you're going through”. And that is the call of Jesus. He knows what it is to cry, to be abandoned, to die.

But even better – good news part 2 – that He not only knows our seasons, but He reigns over our seasons. You see there was a place where only half this poem was true. It was called the Garden of Eden. Eden was a place of birth, planting, healing, laughter, embracing, dancing, seeking, sowing.

And though we live on this side of the Garden, where we feel the sting and death, plucking up, killing, weeping, mourning, casting away, breaking down, silence and war – we know Jesus entered once-Eden to recover what was lost, and one day He promises to return to usher in a new-Eden, a better Eden, a new heaven and a new earth where all who trust in Him will be with Him forever.

God is indeed making it all beautiful. Jesus will return.

**So control is an illusion. But when the seasons come, and they will come. And when the unknown of why they're here taunts your mind, give yourself to the next thing in the place you are. Work. Pray. Work. Pray. Eat. Drink. Enjoy your family and friends. Take a walk. Look at the sun. God is near and he's making everything beautiful in its time.**

**Let's pray.**