

In Awe before the One who Sets the Times

Eccl 3:1-15 (text)

27 December 2020, Reformed Church of Wainuiomata 16:30 p.m.

Intro

My brother & sister in the Lord Jesus Christ,

I will forever remember those few yet wonderful times when my family & I used to drive through South Africa's Kruger National Park – a game park of nearly 20,000 square kilometres – i.e., two-and-a-half times the size of the larger-Wellington area!¹

You see, as we were driving at a maximum speed of 30kmh, we kept our eyes peeled to see who could first spot one of the so-called Big-Five animals: Elephant, Rhino, Buffalo, Lion, Leopard!

And do you know what was the secret to spotting them in the dense bush & tall grass?

Well, the secret is to not focus your vision on the bush itself, but to rather focus through the bush – as if you're looking *way further* than a particular bush/shrub/tree.

Yes, only if you could manage to focus beyond *what first meets the eye* – only *then* would you be able to see the animals hiding in/behind the foliage.

Why am I telling you this?

Well, because our text encourages you & me to, in similar fashion, not so much focus on the *incidents* in our lives – the times/seasons – but on the *One who has ordained* these times.

You see, our text wants us to see *Him* – and then, when we see Him, to revere Him; yes, to go “Wow!” before Him who will ask of us to give account for how we have lived the times & seasons which He has so graciously allowed for us here on earth!

And our sermon has three points...

- God Rules the Times & Seasons
- So that We Should Reverence Him
- Also the Times of Christ!

God Rules the Times & Seasons

Verse 1 says, “There is a time for everything, and a season for every activity² under heaven.³”

What *are* these God-appointed times;⁴ seasons?⁵

Well, v. 14 ascribes these activities/times to God, and says that they have been fixed by Him – nothing can be added to them or taken from them...!⁶ In other words, you &

¹ The Kruger National Park covers an area of 19,485km² (<https://www.google.com/search?client=firefox-b-d&q=how+big+is+the+kruger+national+park%3F>), and New Zealand's larger-Wellington covers an area of 8,049km² (<https://www.google.com/search?client=firefox-b-d&q=how+big+is+the+larger+wellington+area+nz%3F>).

² Yes, תִּשְׂמֶה does mean “delight, pleasure” but BDB (mng 4, Logos 5) also says that, at a very late stage (Mishnah), תִּשְׂמֶה also had the meaning of “matter, thing.” And BDB specifically translates our phrase (and 3:17 as well as 8:6) as, “time for every matter, affair.”

³ תַּחַת הַשָּׁמַיִם

⁴ זְמַן appointed time; time (Arabic زَمَانٌ (*zamanun*), Ethiopic ገደም (*zaman*) Biblical Aramaic זְמַן, but Syriac ܙܒܢ (*zabno*), Mand.. זיבנא, Mand.. זבאן, v. Nö^M 152; on OPers. origin v. Biblical Aramaic Sam. זבנ (*zbn*), Palm. זבנא, cf. Reckendorf^{1888, 394})—sg. זְמַן Ne 2:6 Ec 3:1; sf. זְמַנִּים Est 9:27; בְּזְמַנֵּיהֶם v 31 (on Dagh. cf. Ges^{20. 2. c}).⁴

⁵ עַת proper, suitable time (BDB mng 2b, Logos 5)

I are not able to make our nice seasons last longer, neither can we make our seasons of hardship shorter!

God has fixed these times & seasons for us – as well as their durations!

Really? Also the events/times in *your/my* life – even our times of testing & trial?

Indeed!

You see, going by v.2,⁷ for each one of us God has ordained a time to be born and a time when our days on earth are over!

And that’s in sync with Ps 139:16 which says, “*All the days ordained for me (!) were written in your book before anyone of them came to be!*”⁸

My brother & sister, before you & I were born, the Almighty & Sovereign God had set your/my date of birth and the date of your/my exit from this world!

And who could dare say that this is not true!?

I mean, did *you/I* decide *when* we would be born – even *that* we would be born at all?

Do you/I know exactly when our days on earth will be over?

No!!

These two times have been set by God – for each one of us!

But not just *these* two times; no, going by the whole list of things mentioned from v.2 up to v.8, God has also ordained everything else that happens with you & me in between these two dates!!!

This is indicated by the format used by the Ecclesiast (Teacher): he uses 7 pairs of times, i.e., complete number, indicating the complete number of happenings/times in man’s life! And, of course, this is also in sync with Eph 1:11 which says that God *works out everything in conformity with the purpose of His will!*⁹

How mind-bending! And yet, how comforting! Human life is not *haphazard*! Nor are you & I *alone* at the steering of our lives! Not only the *length* of our lives had been fixed, but *everything*, yes, however hard it may seem at times, *everything* else in-between – yes, also the tough times – are in the hands of our loving Father who knows best!

Now, you & I should not stare ourselves blindly at the list in vv.2-8, and e.g., say, “Ah, but I don’t kill and then heal!” “And I don’t scatter stones and then gather them again!”

No, you see, the times/events listed in vv.2-8, are a mere example of events that could happen in the lives of some people on earth; just an example from which you & I can then go and make our own tailor-made list of things that have really happened (are happening) just in *your/my* life!

And yet, although not all of the times/events listed in vv.2-8 may exactly apply to you & me, they nevertheless deserve our (quick) attention....

Here’s the first one: planting & harvesting!

Now, I think you would agree that no human being controls the time to plant nor the time to pluck up plants. For example, we plant our seasonal flowers in spring and then we pluck their remains up in autumn! And if we’d try to *plant* them at the time when

⁶ cf. v.14a-b “*I know that everything God does will endure forever; nothing can be added to it and nothing taken from it...*”

⁷ As seen within the context of the passage.

⁸ Thus the NIV84 for Ps 139:16b,c,d. The Stuttgartensia Text says, וְעַל־סִפְרֵי־כָּל־יְמֵי־יָצְרוּ וְלֹא־אֶתְדָּבַרְתִּי:

⁹ Eph 1:11-12, *In him we were also chosen, having been predestined according to the plan of him who works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will,*¹² *in order that we, who were the first to hope in Christ, might be for the praise of his glory* (Emphasis mine).

they should be *plucked up*, that would be foolish – against the *God-ordained* laws for times & seasons!

See who's in control of times & seasons!?

And regarding v. 3: You & I cannot just kill anyone anytime. Yet, to defend ourselves & our family members against an aggressive and heavily armed intruder in the night – or in time of war – although we now hate the thought, *that* might be an appropriate time to kill!

Another example – building & demolishing: You will remember how the great Kaikoura earthquake of 14 November 2016 did extensive structural damage to many buildings here in Wellington! And they had to be demolished! At the Queen's Gate Mall, too, the cinemas and a large part of the carpark had to be demolished! And so, not just at war-time but also after natural disasters, there is a time in which buildings get demolished. But then there comes a time to rebuild – and these are all in God's will!

What about throwing and collecting rocks? Do you & I do that?

No, but in times of war in the ancient Middle East where there were (and still are) plenty of rocks, it was the custom to throw lots of rocks on cultivable fields to render the fields useless!¹⁰

Look, is not that what the Lord, through Elisha, once ordered the Israelites to do against the Moabites (2 Kings 3:19): "...*Every good piece of land you shall ruin with stones.*"¹¹ Then we read, "...*and each man threw a stone on every good field until it was covered.*"¹²

Well, at the end of the war those rocks & stones had to be cleared again from the fields before anyone could cultivate! So, see? There's "*A time to scatter stones and a time to gather them!*" (v.5).

Then, according to v 6 there's a time to search and a time to give up on your searching simply because you could not find!

Then, in those days (and in that culture) when a loved-one died from an illness or in battle, it was time to tear one's clothes! But, later on, those same clothes had to be mended again (– poor person who had to do the sewing)!

"A time to tear and a time to mend" (v.7).¹³

My brother & sister, as said before, the times/seasons/events listed in vv.2-8 of our text, are just examples of God-ordained events of what happened in the life of an ancient Israelite – yes, between two very important dates in his life: his date of birth and his date of death!

¹⁰ cf. GREIDANUS, Sidney. 2010. Preaching Christ from Ecclesiastes: foundations for expository sermons. Grand Rapids, MI : Willaim B Eerdmans. p. 81.

¹¹ 2 Ki 3:19c תִּקְעוּ בְּכָאֲבוֹתַי וְכָל־הַתְּלָקָה הַטּוֹבָה תִּכְאָבוּ בְּכָאֲבוֹתַי (תִּכְאָבוּ) Hif'il jussive 2 m pl of כָּאֵב "Qal = "be in pain;" Hif'il = "pain, mar, ruin;" תְּלָקָה "portion of ground, field" sometimes in parallel with הַשָּׂדֶה "the field")

¹² 2 Ki 3:25b וּמִלְאָהּ וְיִשְׁלִיכוּ אִישׁ־אֲבָנָיו עַל־הַתְּלָקָה הַטּוֹבָה (Pi`el perf 3 m pl of מָלֵא with pron suff 3 f s)

¹³ cf.e.g. what Reuben did when he thought that his younger brother, Joseph, had been killed (Gn 37:29, 34). See also, 2 Sm 1:11; 3:31; and 13:31.

Well, looking at your/my past, particularly at this past year (2020), what have been some God-ordained times/events in your/my life?

For all of us, it was the year of COVID 19 – a time & season we had little control over (only God had!); and which we will never forget!

For some others in our congregation, it was ...

- a time to finish their school career – forever! (And perhaps they rejoice in this!)
- or a time of study at University or at Weltec!
- or a time when they lost a much-loved job!
- or a time when they got married (Liam & Gaby)!
- or a time when they had their first (or another) baby (Arno & Natalie; Johan & Xiaocun; Stan & Anne-Marie)!
- or a time of migration to New Zealand (Johan & Heleen and Leah & Esme; and Johan & Xiaocun)!
- or a time to move house!
- or a time to celebrate a milestone-wedding anniversary!

Would you say these times were outside of God's hands?

Not at all!!!

Also, remember some other times & seasons in your life...

- the time when your first child left home and got married!
- the time you lost a wonderful job-contract!
- the time you retired from work – age 65/70!
- the time you got diagnosed with a serious illness!
- the time of an accident!
- the time when... you farewelled a loved-one!

Were also these times in God's hands?

According to our passage: yes, they were indeed!

Well, here is a question...

When you & I look at events in our own lives – our birth, our death, and all seasons in between – what do we see?

Don't we see one generation being born, then grow up; then another generation born, then grow up?

Don't we see one generation in the season of getting married and having (& bringing up) children; then another generation getting married and having children & bringing them up?

Don't we see one generation... yes, dying; then another generation dying?

And when you/I look at times listed in our text, is it not as if the one *cancel*s out the other? A time to plant & a time to uproot; a time to weep & a time to laugh; yes – a time to be born & a time to die?

Don't they cancel one another out?

Look is that not why v. 9, in as many words asks, “But what is the gain? What's the advantage? What is the point of all these cycles – even cycles of generations through all the ages & millennia?”¹⁴

¹⁴ v.9 says, “What does the worker gain from his toil?” (NIV). (Stuttgartensia =: הוא עמל: = מה יתרון העושה באשר הוא עמל:).
יתרון = advantage, gain, profit (only Ecclesiastes)

What's then the use of living?

Well, the teacher of our passage gives a rich answer – which brings us to point 2...

So That We Will Reverence Him!

Says he, “*I have seen the task God has laid on men to task with – yes, the occupation¹⁵ God has laid on men with which to occupy¹⁶ themselves*” (v. 10).

And what did the teacher see about that?

Well, that...

God has made everything beautiful, i.e., appropriate¹⁷ for its time;

Then, quite stunningly: apart from giving man *these events* – all in *time*, God has also given man something which He has not given to the animals – i.e., *a sense of eternity!* That means: not only a sense of the *past* and a sense of the *future*, but also the sense of *eternal life*; yes, an awareness that there *is* a God; that there *is* life after death! So, God has blessed man with more than just time-related things; He has given man an awareness of eternity!

Does that mean man understands God – can grasp God; fully comprehend God & His plans?

No! (cf. v.11b).

So, if man cannot fully fathom God & His plans, and generations (in all their times) just come & go, what's the use....?

What's the purpose of it all?

Well, look at the last part of v.14... God has ordained all these times in your & my life – yes even eternity in our heart – ***so that... you & I will revere Him***; stand in awe before Him;¹⁸ go, “Wow, my God, You are wonderful beyond comprehension!!”

My brother & sister, can you see God in your times – also in the things that happened in your life during 2020?

Yes, are you able to do what the nature-lover does – focus further than what meets the eye, and spot God's hand in your times & seasons?

Yes, can you see past the times/events of 2020, and see the hand of God?

Who can see His hand best?

A young person, looking through a telescope at the stars & planets, getting totally “blown away” by God's awesome handiwork?

And older person wiping away a tear as he pages through the long-gone years in the photo album on his lap?

Well, I pray that when you reflect upon the events of 2020, you can go, “Wow, God, You are beautiful beyond description, and I trust that You are working out all things for my eternal good!”¹⁹

¹⁵ עֲנִיּוֹן occupation, task (only Eccl)

¹⁶ לְעִנְיֹת Qal inf constr of II עָנָה “be occupied, busied with (ב)”

¹⁷ יָפֵה beautiful (suitable = NRSV; appropriate = NASB)

¹⁸ וְהִאֲלֵתֵימ עֲשֵׂה שְׂרָאָה מִלְּפָנָיו

¹⁹ Cf Rm 8:28 ***And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.***

Our text says, God ordained a time for every single under heaven!
Well, this brings us to the last point...

Also The Times of Christ!

- My brother & sister, God has also set a time when Jesus would be born...
The Apostle Paul writes, “***But when the fullness of time (!) had come, God sent His Son, born of a woman, born under the law, in order to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as children***” (Gal 4:4-5). (And this is exactly what we celebrated a few days ago, at Christmas!)
But may we also remember what Christ said at the beginning of His ministry: “***The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news***” (Mk 1:15)!

Yet, look! Our Lord also knew that God had set the time for His *death*! You see, shortly before His death, Christ told His disciples, “***Go into the city to a certain man, and say to him, ‘The Teacher says, My time is near; I will keep the Passover at your house with My disciples***” (Mt 16:18).

Indeed, at the God-appointed times, Christ died and rose again from the dead!²⁰
I mean does not God’s word say, “...***at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly***”?²¹

Again, when Christ was about to ascend into heaven, what do we hear the disciples ask?
Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?”

And, here in the spirit (Spirit) of our text is Christ’s powerful answer: “***It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority...***”²²

See? God has set/ordained the times, seasons, occasions – also in the earthly life of our Lord Jesus – *and Jesus knew this, and found great comfort in this!*

Well, what about *the time* when Christ returns? Is that God-ordained?²³
Indeed! Christ, in the flesh, told His disciples...

No one knows about that day or hour, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.²⁴

O, that we, like our Lord, would see our Heavenly Father in/beyond our times & seasons – and then trust Him!

²⁰ cf. Mk 8:31 ***He then began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and after three days rise again.***

²¹ Rm 5:6

²² *The Holy Bible: New International Version*. (1984). (Ac 1:6–7). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

²³ cf. 1 Tim 6:14b-15 ***I charge you ¹⁴ to keep this command without spot or blame until the appearing of our Lord Jesus Christ, ¹⁵ which God will bring about in his own time—God, the blessed and only Ruler, the King of kings and Lord of lords...***

²⁴ *The Holy Bible: New International Version*. (1984). (Mk 13:32). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

Why is it so hard for people to focus beyond the “bush” (i.e., the times in their lives and in the life of Christ), and spot God!?

Why can't the atheist see God's hand, at least, in something?

Why can't the natural scientist, looking at the symmetry and the perfect timing of planetary movements and the mind-boggling size of creation, see God?

Why is it that even, at times, the Christian – yes even the Christian theologian – does not stand in awe of God?

Why?

Pride & self-reliance!

And once you're in that state, it's hard to focus beyond the “bush” and see the God of all the times!

And so, we're just like ancient Israel at Mt Sinai: they saw the lightning and heard the thunder, and all the people in the camp were in awe of God (Ex 19:16). Yet, only a few days later, when the signs of God's awesome presence were gone, they instantly reverted to pride & self-reliance, and replaced God with an idol!

See how trials can cause man's focus to shift off God!?

My brother & sister, we want to conclude! So, hear again the purpose (the goal) for which God has ordained all the events in our lives – including the times of Christ (v.14): i.e., “...*so that all men will revere Him*” (NIV)!

May we then, in Christ-like fashion, with prayer and diligence, trust God who works all things for the eternal good of those who love Him!

AMEN (2740 words excluding footnotes)