

Ecclesiastes 3:11

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[0 : 00] Would you turn back with me to the first portion of scripture that we read together, Ecclesiastes chapter 3, and I'd like to focus our thoughts this evening around the words of verse 11.

Ecclesiastes chapter 3 and verse 11. He has made everything beautiful in its time. He has also set eternity in the hearts of men. Yet they cannot fathom what God has done from beginning to end.

Ecclesiastes is probably the most enigmatic book in the Old Testament, if not in the whole of scripture.

It teases us. It doesn't readily yield its meaning. It's saying to us, if you want to find out what life is all about, you are going to have to think long and hard.

Yes, it says some things are easily understood. But with a great many aspects of life, we have to wrestle with them before we can see the full picture.

[1 : 24] And as we look at this verse this evening for a little, we have presented to us here three fundamental scriptural perspectives.

This verse tells us who we are. It tells us something about who God is. And it tells us something about our destiny.

Who we are, who God is, and what our destiny will be. And firstly, in the middle of the verse, we are given a key biblical perspective into what really constitutes being human.

He, that is God, has also set eternity in the hearts of men. Literally, it's just their hearts. And the their refers back to the sons of mankind in verse 10.

The writer is saying, here is something that's characteristic of humanity. Here is something that comes down through the generations of the sons of men.

[2 : 37] Something that's placed deep within our constitution. Something that sets us apart from all we see around us in the created realm.

Eternity in their hearts. But what does that mean? Some eminent men supposed that the reference is to the human soul, which is immortal.

There is an aspect of the being of humans that is not subject to dissolution. And they felt that in this they had seen eternity in their hearts.

But while there is truth in that way of speaking, because there is an aspect of our identity that never perishes. Because there is an aspect of what we are, a body and soul together, that does not pass away when we leave this world.

Though that's true, it doesn't match up to the argument that's being presented in this particular passage. When the writer says eternity in the hearts of men, eternity in their hearts.

[3 : 56] He's pointing not to the soul of mankind, but to a divinely implanted sense of the long term overall destiny of mankind.

To that sense that's within each one of us of being part of a bigger scene where everything fits together.

Eternity in their hearts points to that irresistible craving deep within our inner beings to make sense of things.

We want to understand what life is all about. We want to see where each one of us in the particularity of our own individuality, our own personality, where it is that we individually fit in to the ultimate scheme of the universe.

You see, in one respect, Ecclesiastes does something rather unexpected in this verse, in introducing the concept of eternity.

[5 : 10] It doesn't flow out of the context. The teacher, the preacher, Ecclesiastes, has been setting out something of the structure of human life. And fourteen times at the beginning of the chapter, he's presented it in terms of pairs of times.

Time to do this and time to do that. Here is the framework. There is the boundary. Here is a pattern. This is the arrangement. Life and its possibilities, bounded here and bounded there.

Round and round it goes. Twenty-eight times a time occurs. Contrasting pairs, constituting a cycle that show life going on from one to the other and back again.

The ebb and the flow of various activities. A perpetual rhythm that doesn't resolve itself into indefinite answer as to why I am, or who I am, or where I'm going.

Bounce against that wall, bounce against that wall. Backwards and forwards we go. A time for this, a time for that. First one thing and then it's opposite. And if you look at life like that, if we scrutinize ourselves and our own lives, there's a voice within us saying, there must be more than all these details.

[6 : 47] There must be more than just a cycle of getting and spending and weighing laced our powers. Surely all this leads somewhere.

Surely we're not just hamsters. You know those toy globes sometimes with steps within them and the hamsters put inside? And it goes round and round and round.

A lot of energy being expended and never gets anywhere at all. Well, the hamster may be quite happy going round and round inside the globe. But we, as human beings, are not happy using up a lot of energy and getting nowhere.

Because we've got built within us this idea, this sense, this awareness, that there's more to life than just a sequence of events. And that's especially brought home to us in this world of toil.

Where events and happenings can so often become a burden, as the preacher says in verse 10. It's stressful being trapped in a web of happenings if they all don't add up to anything.

[8 : 05] It's stressful being buffeted from one event to another, one occurrence to another, if you can't see what the point of it all is.

The busy, tired workers left to ask, what gain have I got from all my toil? And that's not fundamentally an economic question.

It's not a question to be answered in terms of shekels or pounds. It's a basic question of meaning. All our activity leaving us dissatisfied because despite all the effort we've put into it, our questions are still not answered.

A fallen world does not readily yield its secrets to fallen mankind. Labor and life have been divinely subjected to irksome toil and fruitless endeavor.

But still, through it all, there we find the mark of what makes us human. because however incoherently we're asking these questions.

[9 : 22] We're not satisfied with going round in a circle. And we're dissatisfied with the answers that the philosophy of this world provides us.

When we ask, what is life all about? Who am I? Where am I going? Go and seek the counsel of this world from the gurus who set up their fashionable philosophies and religions.

Ask them, who am I really? Define me. And you'll get a motley mishmash of answers. For some, an individual is nothing more than a machine.

For others, not much more than an animal. marginally higher on the ascending scale of evolution. Some of them, some philosophies, just look in people as economic beings.

Those who produce so that they can consume. If you look around today, probably the prevalent assessment of humanity is that we're merely biological flotsam.

[10 : 36] on a universal sea of time and chance. There are those who would sum up humanity by saying, I was not, I am, I will not be.

The three tenses of human experience according to modern materialistic philosophy. I was not, I am, I will not be.

Nothing in the past, around for a brief moment, nothing in the future. And there's a voice deep within us that screams out, no, that cannot be.

And here, in the perspective of scriptural wisdom on the matter, we've got brought before us, why?

Mankind are those with eternity in their hearts. That's what corresponds to our own experience. They say, your feelings are nothing. They say, your thoughts are nothing.

[11 : 44] You're just an animal that's going to pass away. What does it matter who you are or where you go? And we each have within us this that says, no, I am something.

I am unique. I am significant. Even though it is in a minor way. We're innately aware that there's more to life than unending meaninglessness.

We refuse to be hemmed in by a philosophy that just says, you're matter and nothing more. No matter what the activity that we become absorbed in, sometimes we can become so absorbed in something we find it rewarding and for the moment it seems quite meaningful.

But no matter what we do, the time comes for it to be changed. Nothing of what we do lasts. The relentless calendar of events can become oppressive.

we feel trapped. We rebel. Oh, you can try to pretend it doesn't affect you. But deep down it does.

[12 : 56] We can be overwhelmed and perplexed by the details of this life where they don't seem to be going anywhere. And we feel that way precisely because built into us is this voice that says, yes, you're right.

There is a goal. There is a terminus. It is all leading somewhere. And so within us all there is this deep down drive to ask questions.

We've been made in such a way that there's an inner urge. An urge to appreciate the beauty of creation. An urge to understand the nature of the cosmos that we live in from the minutest level under the microscope to the vast recesses of the universe.

An urge within us to perceive our own destiny and purpose. We can ask aesthetic questions. We ask scientific questions. We ask philosophical questions about the world and about ourselves.

And we can't find rest. We can't find satisfaction until we get an answer that's true to what we know deep within ourselves we really are.

[14 : 17] So here we have the fundamental fact about humanity. Humanity has within its heart a sense of eternity.

A sense that life breaks out beyond the particular round of our daily lives that breaks out beyond the minutiae of daily living.

A sense that says I'm more than just something that's here for a moment or two and then passes back into being part of a vast materialistic universe.

Because deep within me there is this sense of something more. And that brings us to the second fundamental truth that's expressed in this passage and it concerns who God is.

It's there in the first part of the verse. He has made everything beautiful in its time. The sense of eternity in our hearts is part of what is meant and what is referred to in scripture as the image of God in which mankind were created.

[15 : 43] We cannot grasp who we are. We can't work out where we stand until we give due place in our thinking to the reality of God our creator.

And that fact, the fact that God is our creator, both answers why there is a meaning and a purpose and a terminus to life, and it also goes a long way towards explaining why there are so many perplexed and dissatisfied with all their attempts in the modern world to find significance for their own being and for humanity.

He has made everything beautiful in its time. That's the grand truth that Ecclesiastes has caught hold of. This is the theological light that's shined by the spirit into Ecclesiastes own thinking that enables him to see a little bit more deeply into the fundamental nature of things.

God is the creator. And if you read through Ecclesiastes, puzzling though it is in places, you'll find that one of the themes the writer keeps coming back to is asserting the significance of God's creation.

You see it there in his conclusion in chapter 12. Oh, remember your creator in the days of your youth before the days of trouble come and the years approach when you will say I find no pleasure in them.

[17 : 26] You find it again in chapter 7 where the writer records God made mankind upright, but they've gone off in search of many a scheme.

To understand who we are, we can't just look at ourselves. To understand the whole scheme of this world that we live in, this universe we live in, we must see ourselves as those who have come from the hand of God with potential and drive and significance implanted by God our creator, and yet at the same time as those who now live having come from dust and destined to return to dust because of God's decree.

But this verse here isn't particularly reflecting on the original account of creation.

You'll remember how in Genesis 1, the sovereign creator looked at each individual aspect of creation that he made, and the divine craftsman looking at his work saw that it was good, and ultimately he proclaimed it was very good.

Here the word's different, it's beautiful, and though that takes in the pristine glory of the newly created world, it's qualified in such a way as to indicate that something else is in view.

[19 : 08] He has made everything beautiful in its time, and that's very much a reference back to all those times mentioned in verses 2 to 8, the many times of human life, and then you say, but they're not all beautiful.

Look at what he said himself, time to die, time to uproot, time to kill, a time to tear down.

This is a toll of anguish and sorrow. How is there beauty? How can this be beautiful? Ecclesiastes isn't denying the sorrow and the grief and the anguish and the perplexity, but he's saying, look, these are from the hand of the Creator who is still at work.

These are from the hand of the Creator who makes everything beautiful in its time. They're not random. There's not fate. There's not just something that happens now for no reason at all.

Look at this world and see it from this perspective. It's all controlled, and it all fits into the sovereign plan of the Creator.

[20 : 43] Everything, the whole of reality in its totality fits into its appointed slot. There's a time and there's a place.

Oh, we may not see it now, but he says there is a harmony, there is a beauty, there is a coherence even in the most distressing of circumstances, there is a coherence even in the turmoil of the greatest change because the God who has set this world in motion is the God who still controls what is going on, and he's ruling and overruling everything to bring it to the end, the terminus, the goal that he has in mind.

Because there is a God, the Creator, because he has a plan that didn't just embrace the start of the universe, but a plan that embraces all that flows throughout history, because of that there is meaning, and because of that there is an answer to this inbuilt craving, eternity in their hearts.

There is a terminus that doesn't go away, there is a purpose and a coherence that gives significance to who we are because of what he is and what he is doing.

we can't see his purposes as clearly as once was possible, because no longer is this world very good, it came from his hand, very good, but it's been distorted and debased by the invasion of sin and its consequences.

[22 : 30] But even so, Paul can clearly assert fact, that since the creation God's invisible qualities have been clearly seen in the world around us.

There is testimony there, not as clear perhaps as it once was, but it is still there and it is still impressive. There is of course a bigger problem, not just with the quality of what's out there, the bigger problem is that we are no longer quite what we once were either.

we no longer have the capacity to assess the evidence that God provides. And especially that's true in our modern world where the reality of God the Creator is so ridiculed that the church prefers to keep quiet about it.

There are many who say they're Christians and you mentioned creation and they're immediately on the defensive because they know there is a hostility. They know there is opposition out there.

They know this is being ridiculed and denied. We must take care that we're not half ashamed about the clear testimony of Scripture to the reality of God our Creator.

[23 : 57] living in a world that denies there is a Creator is living in a world doomed to frustration when it comes to seeking meaning and significance.

In a world where the reality of God the Creator and the ruler of this world is no longer seen is no longer a thought that's acceptable to modern sophistication means that this world cannot rise to seeing that there is a whole picture and because of that there are lives lived in frustration in a frustration that often ends most tragically.

As we look within ourselves and see this deep seated need to find out about eternity which is another way of saying to find out this deeply about our own significance we find that the only answer Scripture presents is to look away from self and to look to God and see what he has done because who we are depends on who he is we can't get away from the fact that we are created beings and the only way we will have a coherent view of who we are and where we're going of our significance and of the terminus at the end of the road is by affirming the control and the reality of the God who is working all things well and that brings us thirdly to consider the destiny of mankind a little bit more because here we also have the words yet they cannot fathom what God has done from beginning to end now you can look at those words and say well that's just a fact you can't really work out what this world is about it just is and you have to accept it it's a brute fact that you can't do anything about that's life get on with it as best you can some will look at it and say well perhaps it's a limitation imposed from the fact of the finitude of our minds we can't work out eternity because it's too big for us to grasp but the thought that's being expressed here while at one level it's frustrating is at another level the entrance of hope because the thought here is not just that this is a fact that this is not just something that comes out of our finitude this is expressed in such a way as to indicate that

God has deliberately structured things this way so that fallen mankind can never clearly see yet they cannot so that they cannot mankind are brought by divine verdict into this situation this is divine imposition because of the sin and the fall of mankind it's not just that this world is topsy turvy because of the entrance of sin it's not just because our minds are dulled and blinded by our own sinfulness God has imposed on the perception of fallen mankind judicially that we are frustrated in our attempts to see how life and how all existence fits together but you say if this is what

God has imposed if this is God's sentence doesn't that add up to a message of utter frustration doesn't that add up to a message that the whole destiny of mankind is to be trapped in this situation of not knowing what is ultimately true not knowing what is ultimately significant perpetual and unending frustration but no the fact that God has imposed it that it's not in heaven and creation the fact that God has imposed it judicially is the very fact that opens up the way for it to be removed and that's why I read Romans chapter 8 let's just read again verses 19 to 24 the creation waits in eager expectation for the sons of

[29 : 21] God to be revealed for the creation was subjected to frustration not by its own choice but by the will of the one who subjected it in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God we know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time not only so but we ourselves who have the first fruits of the spirit groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption as sons the redemption of our bodies for in this hope we were saved but hope that is seen is no hope at all who hopes for what he already has what was Paul pointing to he was pointing to frustration throughout creation he was coming to the same verdict they cannot fathom what God has done from beginning to end leave mankind to their own devices leave human beings with all their aesthetic sensitivity with all their scientific achievement with all their philosophical insight and will they get the answer not at all the creation was subjected to frustration to groaning the weak almost inarticulate sigh of the oppressed and the suffering but Paul has deliberately added in an extra ingredient he's looking at the world not simply in the possibilities left to it in its fallenness but in the possibilities introduced by redemption he talks all the time even against the background of frustration he talks all the time of hope there is a hope that has been unveiled by the atoning death and resurrection of

Jesus Christ we're not where we once were we can see a little further death has been abolished and light and immortality have been brought to light through the gospel oh we're not at the destination yet we're still left with hope you don't hope for what you already have we haven't already got it but we can see what it is that is awaiting us the hope is made real and we can move forward with a confidence that ecclesiastes had in measure but which is made much more abundant and real for us as we consider the ministry of Jesus Christ there is the message the message that yes if you look at this world and try to find your significance only with the powers that this world can bring to bear upon the question you're left groaning and sighing you're left in the depths but if you see the potential if you realize what is available in

Jesus Christ then the appeal from our hearts I have an eternal destiny I have significance I want to go somewhere then that appeal can be answered by pointing to the life that's available in him and so the challenge is do not suppress that inner desire for meaning don't say life doesn't matter it doesn't add up to anything I can do whatever I want for a brief spell because that's all that I am a creature of a moment due destined to pass away deep within us the voice says you are eternal you are meant for something much more deep within us our spiritually starved and frustrated soul will cry out and force itself to be heard who am

I where am I going what is my destiny it can turn your life upside down as you wrestle with that and it will turn your life upside down if you wrestle with it without bringing into your thinking the reality of Jesus Christ we know in part we see in part we still left puzzled over many things but if we are awaiting the full out working of his provision if we see our lives as part of the overall plan that God has effected through the mission of Jesus if we know a relationship of life with him then we have meaning we have significance I am the one for whom Jesus Christ the Son of God has died

I am the one whom he is awaiting even now on his heavenly throne so that he may be with me and I with him throughout all eternity can you answer that yearning within can you see that the promises in Christ resolve the dilemma of sin ridden humanity and open up the vista of the wonder of God's provision all things are yours whether the world or life or death or the present or the future all are yours and you are of Christ and Christ is of God he has set eternity in the hearts of men and he has provided eternity through the love of Christ may we know it let us pray

[35 : 47] Lord the buffetings of this life and the problems that affect us so often leave us perplexed we can't see where we're going we hardly know where we've come from help us to rise above the mist that so often confuses and infiltrates our thinking help us to rise above the answers that this world gives to the pain and the grief and the sorrow that exists help us to see Jesus and in him see the one who is the sole answer divinely provided the answer of the father's love the answer that secures what we could never get for ourselves look upon us in our need provide for us in thy grace and enable us to have renewed strength and vision going forward not in the strength that is ours but in the strength that comes from on high to the glory of thy name and for praise that will never end in

Christ our Lord Amen Our concluding psalm is psalm 73a on page 95 of the psalm book psalm 73a the tune is even tight and we shall sing verses 21 to 28 when in my heart I was consumed with grief and when my soul was filled with bitterness then I was like a brute beast in your sight so full of ignorance and foolishness to the end of the psalm psalm 73a standing to sing