



Speaker:  
**Paul Forrest**

## Christ and the Times of Man

Series: Ecclesiastes · 4 of 4

1/30/2023 (MON) | Bible: **Ecclesiastes 3:1-8; Job 14:13**

This poetic section of Solomon's book is one of the most well-known in the whole of Scripture.

A while back, a female cousin of mine rang me up with some awful news. Her boyfriend had collapsed in the street and was in hospital. She wanted me there not just as a relative but as a Christian. He'd suffered a brain haemorrhage, and it was likely he was as good as dead before he hit the ground. He was in a coma, and we were all gathered around. My cousin asked me to read some Scriptures and pray, which of course I did. And I chose these powerful yet beautiful verses to read. And they gave me the opportunity to explain them to the family in terms of God's perfect timing. Neither my cousin, her boyfriend, or any of my extended family are disciples of Jesus Christ. But I was able to pray with them that every one of us might submit ourselves to the Providence of an all-wise God.

Even though this book is God centred, these particular verses have so impressed people that we find them used in the secular realm too. Some of you will remember I was at a funeral last year. It was my friend's son, who was only thirty years old. It was quite natural for the family, who are ardent atheists, to opt for a secular funeral. There was to be no Christian content at all. No Bible, no prayers, and no hymns.

The woman at the front was what's known as a humanist celebrant. They advertise themselves as those who'll conduct funeral services with no spiritual references. Yet the first thing she did when she got up was to read these first eight verses of Ecclesiastes.

In the mid-60s, a band called *The Byrds* released a song based on these lines. And what both of these examples show is even those who don't belong to God derive some comfort from this poem.

People can see these verses include so much of the human experience. There are things outside our control, things we feel and things we do to other people. Yet they're all part of real life. The passage is attractive to all humanity.

Yet it's those who do belong to God who are able to read them properly. We understand something of how they fit in to the bigger picture, something the world cannot see. Atheists will get some vague comfort from believing there's meaning in this universe. Some who believe in God will deceive themselves into thinking God is looking down favourably upon them, kindly arranging the details of their lives.

Students of the Bible, however, with the aid of the Holy Spirit living in them, see something more. Not only do we see the governing hand of God in our lives, but we know God personally. He is our Father.

I thought I should make some comment on the structure of this poem. We have seven verses—verses 2 to 8. Each verse has two lines. And each of those lines contains a contrast. Take the very first line which speaks

of birth and death as an example. We're meant to understand that birth, death—and everything between—happens according to the good timing of God in heaven.

As we read this, you may have noticed these lines are in pairs. So v2 is one pair of statements, verse three has the next two, and so on. Both statements in each of these pairs says the same thing but in a slightly different way. So in v2, say, we should be able to see both birth and death, and planting and reaping, are talking about the natural cycles of life.

Like with all passages of Scripture, they can be preached on in 101 different ways. This is why, on the Internet, there'll be thousands of sermons on the same portion of Scripture but by different men, and every sermon will be different from the others.

My method today is to take each verse in turn. In other words, we'll be looking at each pair of statements, one by one. I'd like to summarise what each pair is about. And using this, I want to say something each time about Jesus Christ.

If you're wondering why I decided to relate these to our saviour, I'll tell you. If they apply to mankind, they apply to Jesus of Nazareth, because in his incarnation he became a true man. But because he is also truly God, we're to remember he is the very God who *ordains* all these experiences in our lives. In other words, **he has both experienced these things and causes them to be experienced by us.**

Let me emphasise: I'm not claiming today that any meanings I attach to these verses are what they are all about. Not at all. I'm simply giving examples of what they might remind us of. To be honest, I'm doing all this as an excuse to speak more about your Lord and saviour Jesus Christ—to remind you about aspects of his person and his work.

## Verse 2

With that all said, let's begin by looking at our first pair of statements as found in v2. I've already mentioned these couple of lines are about the natural cycles of life. In this, we share the experience of Christ. He was born in the normal way people are born.

And just like all of us are going to die, he too was destined to experience death. His, however, was unique. In the face of sins committed by us, the God of all justice demanded a penalty be paid. For some in this world, they will forever pay the penalty in their own bodies. For others, the penalty for their sin was experienced by our wonderful saviour.

And when he died, it was timed to the exact second by God.

## Verse 3

In v3, we see the next theme. We have breaking down and killing compared to building up and healing. I propose we think of the overall picture as *destruction* verses *construction*. We can see an example of this in the way the Son of God destroys works which don't honour him and builds his church elsewhere.

In the book of Revelation, there are individual messages from Christ to seven churches in Asia Minor. It's pretty obvious we're meant to look at what he said to them to see if any of it applies to us. The

congregation at Ephesus were good in terms of doctrine and in contending for the faith, but they lacked love.

So after a commendation from Jesus, they received a rebuke. Jesus told them they needed to repent because of their lack of love. If they didn't repent, Jesus warned them, he'd remove the lampstand from them. And this lampstand represented Christ's presence with them. He was prepared to remove himself from the congregation. It's a terrifying thought.

The point for us today is Jesus has in the past, and will in the future, withdraw from individual churches. They won't know it's happened. They'll think they're doing just fine. But such unrepentant congregations are being destroyed.

Each congregation is prone to think they're needed by God. But if the Lord Jesus Christ thinks it necessary, he'll leave a disobedient church to its own devices and raise up a work elsewhere—a place where the people honour him. By abandoning a body of people, he demolishes the work. And by making himself present somewhere else, he builds his real church.

## Verse 4

Let's move onto v4. This set quite clearly describes both sadness and happiness. We're all acquainted with both. I'm guessing most of us would say there's not a week goes by where they're not affected by sadness.

*Jesus* understood sadness. A good example was when he prayed shortly before his crucifixion. He knew it was close. I hesitate to say he knew what it was going to be like, because nothing like this had happened before. But I am sure he knew the torment would be off the scale.

In a prophecy about the suffering Messiah, the psalmist tells us his sweet soul was pulverised by the Father in heaven. And the very knowledge this was going to take place caused extraordinary sadness and anguish in the heart of the Son as he prayed before the event.

I'm not aware of any reference in the Scriptures to Jesus Christ laughing. We're not to think this proves he never laughed or smiled. If he did, it's not recorded.

In the second Psalm, it talks about God's enemies conspiring against him. The fact they think they can have any success taking on God is laughable! And this is no doubt why the psalmist chooses to present the picture of God sitting in the heavens *laughing* at these people.

Christ, as God, blessed for ever, rules this world. He may not be literally laughing at his enemies right now. But it's a great picture to show his contempt for their ridiculous efforts to oppose him:

- When you hear scientists declare this created world made itself, Jesus laughs.
- When the authorities clamp down on Christian activity, Jesus laughs.
- And when savages kill believers thinking they can resist the advance of church of God, Jesus laughs.

All the sophisticated schemes of this world to oppose God's purposes will fail. And whereas our future will see increased happiness, their future is one of sorrows which will never end.

## Verse 5

Verse 5. This couple of lines has been something of a headache to commentators down the years. People can see the general idea in these pairs of statements. The first line in the verse is obviously related to the second line.

But this one might seem a bit strange. The first line in v5 is about throwing stones away or collecting them. But the second line is about hugging people. There seems to be no connection.

We know Solomon was a very wise man. It's very doubtful he structured this section the way he did then stuck an awkward bit in the middle. We assume that, if the other verses have a pattern, this one should.

I read somewhere about a traditional Jewish understanding of this verse. They tried to make out this business with the stones was a veiled reference to intimacy between a man and his wife. No. It might fit with the embracing stuff which comes after it, but I don't buy it.

When I stood back and looked at these lines, what struck me was the gathering of the stones and the embracing of the person. This is why I interpreted them as speaking of including or excluding. Gathering in or keeping at a distance.

This could speak to us about a whole number of things. But, as an illustration, I thought I'd mention how Jesus set us the example. Think about Peter. Jesus brought him in to his inner circle, a place of great honour.

But all of a sudden, we see Jesus speaking harshly to Peter, even hinting he was like Satan himself! There was inclusion, then there was exclusion.

One of the sermons I preached on the letters of John was called *How to be Inhospitable*. Now, John's letters are saturated with references to love. Not just how much God loves his people but how important it is for us to love his people. By seeking fellowship with the other people in this church, we embrace them as brothers and sisters in Christ. We gather them to ourselves, if you like.

But John's letters also contain warnings. One warning is about people who come preaching a false gospel. John urges believers to have nothing to do with those people. He wants us to shun them.

In one of Paul's letters, he talks about avoiding *fellow Christians*. These are those who are walking disorderly. If a believer in this church was involved in, say, sexual immorality, and was boasting about it, it's the duty of everyone else to exclude them from worship. To avoid going for a coffee with them. To not even visit them.

The purpose of this type of shunning of a fellow believer is to shock them and shame them. The hope is God would use their banishment to bring about repentance. And if that happened, we would rejoice and heartily embrace our returning brother.

## Verse 6

Have a look at v6 now. Looking for something and keeping it as opposed to throwing another thing away or losing it. It seems to be about things of different value to a person. You could be digging for gold, but any fool's gold you find is just discarded.

In the same way, Christ Jesus attaches different value to different people. For example, think about how he sought out his disciples—in particular, the Twelve. He prayed to his Father one day and mentioned how he'd rounded up the group the Father had entrusted him with. He looked after them all. He valued them.

But there was one exception. There was a traitor among them. The man Judas was planted there to bring about the assassination of Jesus of Nazareth. *I've lost just this one*, Jesus said. He knew this was how the prophecies about his death were going to be fulfilled.

Think about the new gospel card I had made recently. *The Two Crosses*, it's called. The scene is Calvary's hill. Jesus is flanked by two criminals. Both are guilty before God and deserve his wrath. Their only chance is a work of God the Holy Spirit to open their eyes so they can both see their sin and see the man next to them is the Saviour *from* sin.

God the Holy Spirit does this—but only to one of them. And out of nowhere, he has a change of heart and repents. Jesus, as you know, acknowledges it by promising the man a gift belonging only to God's saved people: fellowship with him in glory.

The other one is left in his sin. **It isn't that he's a worse sinner than the other.** God simply decides to give spiritual life to one and not the other.

The judgement day will show just how keenly Jesus Christ values some people and not others. The ones who, during their lives, were sought out by Jesus and lovingly held will be raised from the dead in a state of glory. The ones who he had no interest in, who he just did not value, will be raised only to be judged and imprisoned.

If you find yourself today in the kingdom of God, a true disciple, remember the reason you trusted was not because you are less wicked than anyone else. It's all down to the mercy and wisdom of God.

## Verse 7

Let's move on. Tearing or sewing, keeping quiet or speaking your mind. Again, there might not seem to be much of a connection at first glance. I put being quiet as equivalent to sitting peacefully in a chair, sewing. And being vocal would tie in with tearing stuff.

Remember, I'm aware of many different understandings of these verses. But, for what it's worth, I'd say the verses are referring to being subdued versus being outspoken. We can think of examples in our own lives where we've exercised each of these. But what about Jesus?

The classic example has to be his interrogation. When he was being questioned by the Council of Jewish religious leaders, he at first kept silent. *Don't you have anything to say in your defence?* Caiaphas said.

The high priest persisted, and eventually Jesus gave him an answer. Among other things, he was showing us it's sometimes appropriate to hold your peace—to keep silent. When Jesus was later interviewed by Pilate, Jesus's silence was so surprising it says Pilate was amazed.

You'll remember another occasion when Jesus marched into the temple and started shouting at people. He knew when to use his words to tear things down, things which were objectionable to God. And he knew when to use his words to repair that which was torn down.

In our own congregation, we should pray for wisdom to know whether to keep silent or speak out. And we should be aware if we say what we're thinking, our words can cause damage or they can repair. God promises to give us the wisdom to use our words in a godly way if we ask him—so ask!

## Verse 8

As we go to our final verse, we'll hopefully agree it's speaking about both hostility and peace.

In the Scriptures, Jesus Christ is portrayed as one who crushes entire nations but also one who gives nations seasons of great peace. We know the Lord has an attitude of hatred for some and love for others.

The biggest war in history is the one being carried out by God. It's a war which spans the centuries and involves all nations. The centre point of this whole war was the era when the Word became flesh and dwelt among us in the person of Jesus Christ.

Calvary was a master stroke. The great Messiah had been arrested and treated brutally. After an unjust trial, he was condemned to die. And there we see him, dying a painful death, just like a common criminal. Had he failed?

It was no doubt a day of great rejoicing for Satan and his angels. The evil one had possessed the heart of Judas to carry out his clever plans, and everything seemed to have come together.

It was also a time of rejoicing for those who had Satan as their father. That crowd of people in Jerusalem effectively bullied Pontius Pilate into killing Jesus of Nazareth.

**But every thought and act of wickedness in the hearts of men and angels had been fulfilling God's purposes rather than theirs. Because when Jesus suffered and died, he provided salvation for all his elect people so that, at the last day, he would give them life eternal.**

And what of that marvellous resurrection of Jesus from the grave? In this, he dealt an almighty hammer blow to the kingdom of Satan. In this, he won a victory over Satan, the one who it's said had the power of death.

And now the ascended Captain of our salvation rules on high. The devils know they have very little time left. And even as they try to cause as much trouble as they can to God's kingdom before he has them transported to that Lake of Fire, they still fulfil his will. In their great defeat, as they hope to cause at least some disruption, God will deprive them even of that small consolation.

And what's the result of this great victory of God's? **An explosion of love.** A love of God for his children which can't fully be described. A strange type of love in the hearts of believers who show charity towards their enemies as well as their friends.

And our Lord and Saviour also fills us with his peace. The indescribable peace of God is shared with us, his people. But more importantly, **there is peace between us and God.** He remains on a war footing against all those who oppose him in this world. But to us who are now on the Lord's side, we are fellow soldiers of Christ and all the brethren.

AND WHEN THIS WAR IS OVER, WE SHALL SEE THE KINGDOM OF GOD COME IN ALL ITS FULLNESS, ON EARTH AS IT IS IN HEAVEN!

Everything which happens in your life takes place at an appointed time:

- There was a perfect time for you to come into this world
- According to this perfect timing of God, you have been sent a mixture of blessings and trials.
- And finally, no matter how your exit from this world takes place, no matter how uncomfortable it might be, you should make every effort to rest in the knowledge there is also a time for you to die.

And what then? Might God forget us? I'll let Job reassure you:

*Job 14:13—Oh that you would hide me in [the grave], that you would conceal me until your wrath be past, that you would appoint me a set time, and remember me!*

Yes friends: there is even an appointed time in which God will raise you to life eternal.

As you try to find your way through life, I pray you lay these Scriptures to heart and allow them to remind you that God is sovereign.

Amen.