

Men *of the* **Word**

Searching for Significance

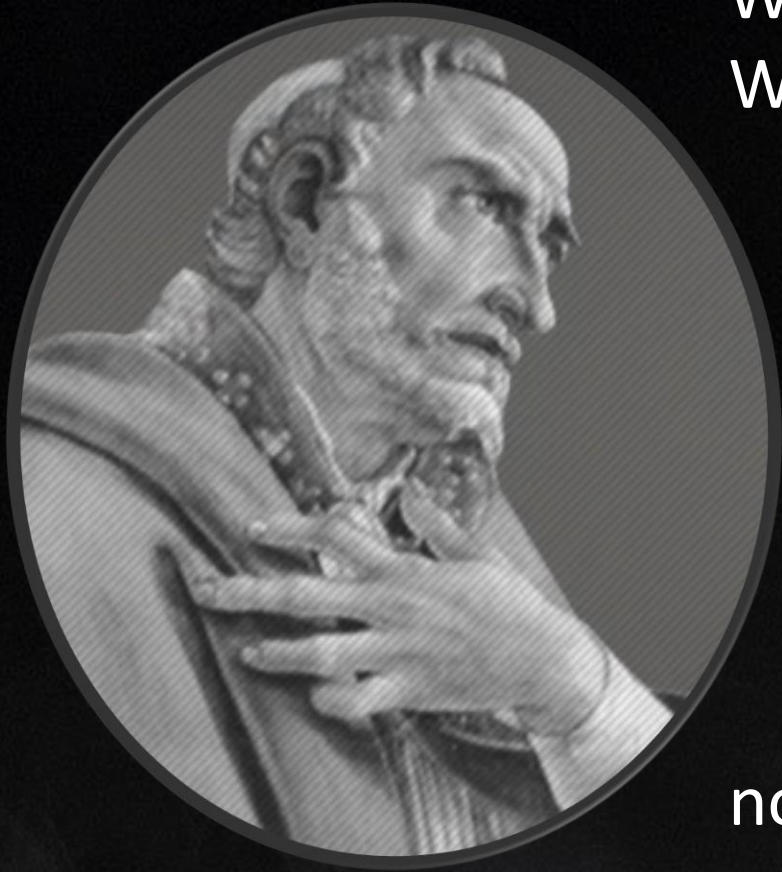
A Study in
Ecclesiastes

Wednesdays, 7–9 pm
Worship Center

The Sands of Time Are Sinking

Ecclesiastes 3:1–22

What is time?



“What is time? Who can explain this easily and briefly? Who can comprehend this even in thought so as to articulate the answer in words? Yet what do we speak of, in our familiar everyday conversation, more than of time? We surely know what we mean when we speak of it. We also know what is meant when we hear someone else talking about it. What then is time? Provided that no one asks me, I know. If I want to explain it to an inquirer, I do not know.” —Augustine, *Confessions*, 11.14.17

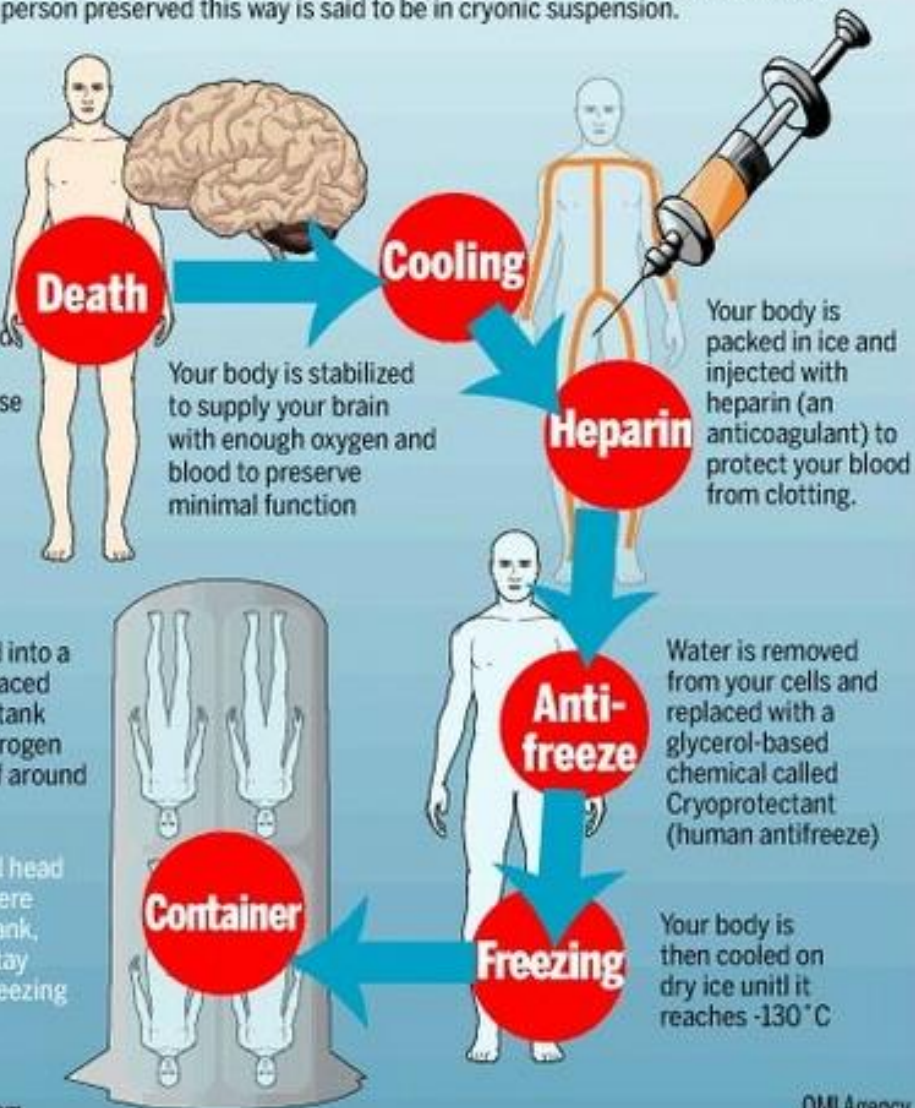
Frozen in time

What is Cryonics

Cryonics is the practice of preserving human bodies in extremely cold temperatures with the hope of reviving them sometime in the future. The idea is that, if someone has "died" from a disease that is incurable today, he or she can be "frozen" and then revived in the future when a cure has been discovered. A person preserved this way is said to be in cryonic suspension.

How Cryonics works

Immediately after you are pronounced legally dead, an emergency response team step into action.



Men of the Word

“The precise quality of man’s rebellion lies in his supreme aspiration to make nature and history serve and glorify man. To accomplish that goal he must have the absolute lordship of time and its content.”

—Michael Kelly, *The Burden of God*, 84



I. God's Control over Time Is Comprehensive

Ecclesiastes

3:1–8

*"There is an appointed
time for everything."*



“There is an appointed time for everything. And there is a time for every event under heaven” (Eccl 3:1).

- Solomon introduces his poem (3:2–8) with a comprehensive assertion.
- The assertion is a special rhetorical device—a *chiasm*—which places emphasis on the words of “time.”
- The first word for “time” emphasizes that it has been “appointed” or “determined.”

A For everything
B an appointed time
B¹ a time
A¹ for every event

- The second word for “time” is the common word.
- Solomon does not mention the one who “appointed,” but the context makes it clear: it is *God*.

**“a time to give birth and a time to die;
a time to plant and a time to uproot what is planted.
A time to kill and a time to heal;
a time to tear 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 throw stones and a time to gather stones;
a time to embrace and a time to shun embracing.
A time to search and a time to give up as lost;
a time to keep and a time to throw away.
A time to tear apart and a time to sew together;
a time to be silent and a time to speak.
A time to love and a time to hate;
a time for war and a time for peace” (Eccl 3:2–8)**

- A rhythmic pattern that creates the idea of the changing of seasons.
- 14 pairs of opposites, including everything in between.
- “Time” mentioned 28 times.
- Emphasis: all-inclusive foreordination.



- Solomon is now at the end of his life, having returned to the Lord after years of disobedience (1 Kings 11:11–43).
- He already received the prophecy of God's discipline on him and his kingdom.
- Adversaries now challenged his rule, he would soon die, the kingdom would be divided, and his wealth dispersed.
- Despite Solomon's failures, God's control over the circumstances remained comprehensive.

“What is the point of this description of time-oriented events?
It is that nothing happens haphazardly. No chance, no fate
governs the things that happen in the lives of God’s people.
He controls all events.”

—Barrick, *Ecclesiastes*, 62

II. God's Control over Time Is Appropriate

Ecclesiastes
3:9–13

*"He has made
everything appropriate
in its time."*



“What profit is there to the worker from that in which he toils? I have seen the task which God has given the sons of men with which to occupy themselves” (Eccl 3:9–10).

- The cyclical nature of life under God’s meticulous control leads Solomon again to the provocative question he asked previously: “What advantage does man have in all his work which he does under the sun?” (1:3).
- Walter Kaiser: “All life unfolds under the appointment of divine providence—birth, death; growth, harvest; joys, sorrows; acquiring, losing; speaking up, being silent; war and peace. Since everything has its time from God, all the labor of a person by itself cannot change the times, circumstances, or control of events” (*Coping with Change*, 100).

“He has made everything **appropriate** in its time. He has also set eternity in their heart, yet so that man will not find out the work which God has done from the beginning even to the end” (Eccl 3:11).

- Solomon now answers the question he raised in v. 9 (and in 1:3).
- In response to the temptation toward *cynicism* or *contempt*, he affirms that God’s control of time is “**appropriate**” (*lit.*, “beautiful”) in that all of life’s circumstances are “fitting” and “wisely orchestrated.”
- Solomon’s answer reminds of us **Romans 8:28** – “And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to *His* purpose.”

“He has made everything appropriate in its time. He has also set eternity in their heart, yet so that man will not find out the work which God has done from the beginning even to the end” (Eccl 3:11).

- At the same time, God has placed in man the desire to know how all of God’s plans fit together—He has set **“eternity in their heart.”**
- Solomon testifies that man has an innate inclination to transcend *the present circumstance* and look at once upon all the past and all the future—to see clearly from the beginning to the end.
- But Solomon acknowledges that such understanding is beyond man; God has kept it appropriately hidden from his understanding.
- The purpose of this mystery is to teach *humility* and *faith*. **Men of the Word**

“I know that there is nothing better for them than to rejoice and to do good in one’s lifetime; moreover, that every man who eats and drinks sees good in all his labor—it is the gift of God” (Eccl 3:12–13).

- Another *carpe diem* (“seize the day!”) text (see also 3:22).
- Submission to God’s comprehensive control, and acknowledgement that it is appropriate, are reflected in three things: (1) appreciation for God’s rule; (2) obedience to God’s commands; and (3) gratitude for God’s gifts.
- **“One’s lifetime”** is the set of circumstances (3:2–8) that God ordained.
- **“The gift of God”** – God has not given man the understanding of eternity, but He has given man things to enjoy in this life of which he is not worthy.
- This is exactly opposite to the typical responses of *frustration* or *fatalism*.

“The enigmas of existence can make people frustrated and fretful. Instead of fretting, however, we need to accept our limitations and enjoy those things which God has so graciously provided for us—those good things which He intends that we enjoy (vv. 12–13).”

—Barrick, *Ecclesiastes*, 66

Enjoyment—*not* frustration and anxiety.

III. God's Control over Time Is Everlasting

Ecclesiastes
3:14–15

*"Everything God does
will remain forever."*

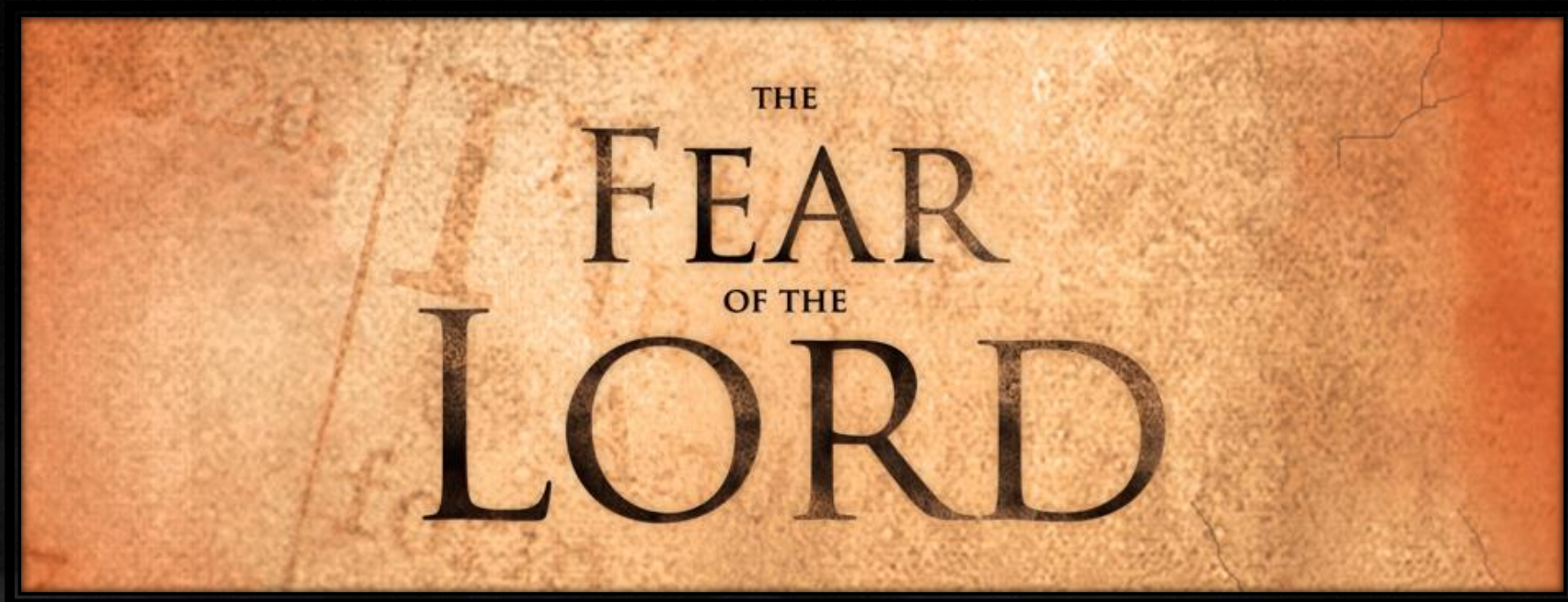


“I know that everything God does will remain forever; there is nothing to add to it and there is nothing to take from it, for God has so worked that men should fear Him” (Eccl 3:14).

- **Psalm 90:1–4** – “Lord, You have been our dwelling place in all generations. Before the mountains were born or You gave birth to the earth and the world, even from everlasting to everlasting, You are God. You turn man back into dust and say, ‘Return, O children of men.’ For a thousand years in Your sight are like yesterday when it passes by, or as a watch in the night.”
- The eternality of God and His sovereign control, as well as our finiteness and transitoriness, should lead us *to fear* (*lit.*, “be in awe before Him”).
- **“Fear”** = “reverent faith” see also 5:7; 7:18; 8:12–13 (3x); 12:13.

The “fear of the LORD” is “that affectionate reverence, by which the child of God bends himself humbly and carefully to his Father’s law.”

—Charles Bridges, *An Exposition of Proverbs*, 3–4



“That which is has been already and that which will be has already been, for God seeks what has passed by” (Eccl 3:15).

- Solomon asserts that God—as the Everlasting One—does not experience time as we do.
- He never loses track of time, wastes opportunities, forgets what has passed, or encounters anything new.
- In particular, although we may consider details of the past as “water under the bridge,” a “distant memory,” or “bygones,” “the past” for God is not a mere memory; He actively knows **“what has passed by.”**
- This affirmation prepares us for what follows in vv. 16–22. *Men of the Word*

IV. God's Control over Time Is Righteous

Ecclesiastes
3:16–22

*"God will judge both
the righteous man and
the wicked man."*



“Furthermore, I have seen under the sun *that* in the place of justice there is wickedness and in the place of righteousness there is wickedness. I said to myself, ‘God will judge both the righteous man and the wicked man,’ for a time for every matter and for every deed is there” (Eccl 3:16–17).

(1) The first challenge: *the presence of injustice* (v. 16).

- Solomon considers what is a universal experience—the *substitution of injustice for justice* in the very places where justice is demanded.
- Verse 17 provides the response: ***there will be a final reckoning*** “for every matter and for every deed” (God’s sovereignty doesn’t negate human responsibility).



“One of the ways we learn to live by preparing to die is by realizing that death means judgment and that this is a good thing. It gives my present actions meaning and weight, and it gives my experienced losses and injustices a voice in God’s presence. What is past may be past, but what is past is not forgotten to God, and because he is in charge and lives forever, one day all will be well. Every single thing that happens will have its day in court.”

—David Gibson, *Living Life Backward*, 56

“I said to myself concerning the sons of men, ‘God has surely tested them in order for them to see that they are but beasts.’ For the fate of the sons of men and the fate of beasts is the same. As one dies so dies the other; indeed, they all have the same breath and there is no advantage for man over beast, for all is vanity. All go to the same place. All came from the dust and all return to the dust” (Eccl 3:18–21).

(2) The second challenge: *the similar fate of man and beast* (vv. 18–20).

- Solomon considers the implications to the fact that man and beast meet the same physical end—*the dust*.
- Where is God’s fairness in this?

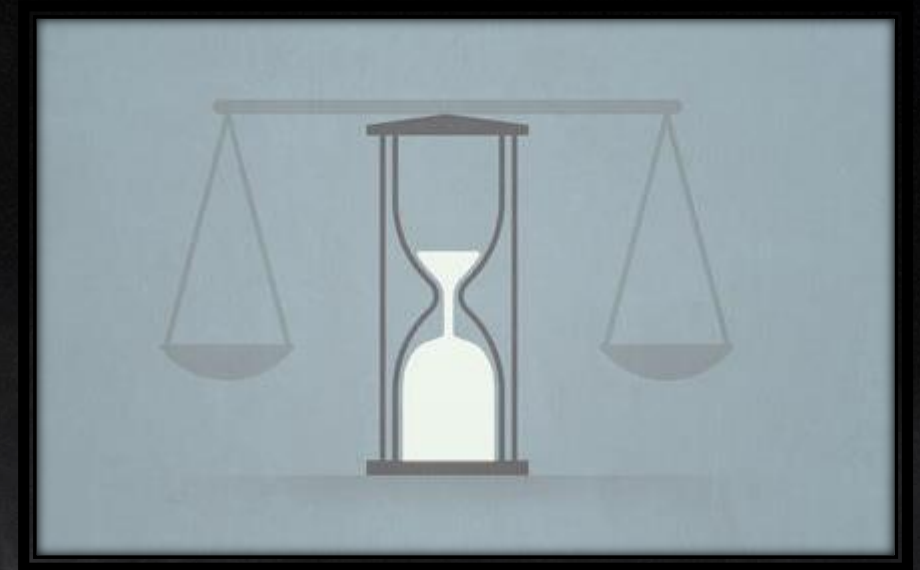
- Solomon echoes the truth of **Genesis 3:19** – “By the sweat of your face you will eat bread, till you return to the ground, because from it you were taken; for you are dust, and to dust you shall return.”
- Verse 21 provides the response to this challenge: **“Who knows that the breath of man ascends upward and the breath of the beast descends downward to the earth?”**
- V. 21 is difficult to interpret and is best understood not as a sincere question (“Who knows if?”), but as an acknowledgement of fact.
 - Solomon has just referred to future judgment (3:17) and will emphasize it again in the book’s conclusion (12:14).
 - Solomon will later expressly state that the soul returns to God (12:6–7).

“Remember Him before the silver cord is broken and the golden bowl is crushed, the pitcher by the well is shattered and the wheel at the cistern is crushed; then the dust will return to the earth as it was, and the spirit will return to God who gave it.”

—**Ecclesiastes 12:6–7**

“There are not many who take to heart as they ought to the fact that the spirit of man goeth upward and that the spirit of the beast goeth downward to the earth”

—Leupold, *Ecclesiastes*, 100



“I have seen that nothing is better than that man should be happy in his activities, for that is his lot. For who will bring him to see what will occur after him?” (Eccl 3:22).



- Having reaffirmed God’s impeccable righteousness in His sovereign control over time, Solomon issues another *carpe diem* (“seize the day”) exhortation (see 2:24–26; 3:12–13; 5:18–20; 8:15; 9:7–9; 11:7–10).
- Since God will judge “every deed” in the end, man is responsible to *steward his life*—however brief it may be—appropriately in the present.
- This stewardship requires an enthusiastic embrace of one’s God-given responsibilities in this present life.

“Our Creator is in control and makes known His will for His people. We are not to pour more effort into understanding our frustrating and uncontrollable circumstances. Nor ought we to spend our time comparing our lot in life with another’s. We ought not to indulge in retaliation, resentment, bitterness, or disappear into a fantasy world. Reject these reactions to life’s difficult circumstances and intrinsic injustices. Abandon self-pity and despair. Identify the advantage to your disadvantage. Thank God that He uses such circumstances to humble you, to make you more dependent upon Him, and to be thankful for what He has given to you to enjoy. Your joy of God’s gifts grows greater in the light of your trials while you live ‘under the sun.’”

—William Barrick, Ecclesiastes, 70–71

Hear the Preacher!

*"The words of wise
men are like goads . . ."*



1. Cease grumbling.
2. Respond with awe.
3. Learn to delight in God's sovereignty.
4. Remember future judgment.
5. Steward your time.

A black and white photograph of an open book with a hand turning a page. The background is dark, and the lighting highlights the texture of the book's pages and the hand. The title "Men of the Word" is overlaid in white text.

Men *of the* Word

Wednesdays, 7–9 pm | gracechurch.org/motw