

“Time Keeps On Ticking”

Ecclesiastes 3:1-22

If you have your Bible, let me invite you to open up with me to the third chapter of Ecclesiastes where we have been recently, in a series that I have given the title, “The Search for Happiness.” You hear a lot about that in our generation. No matter who they are, people want to be happy, to be fulfilled, to find satisfaction in life. The world around us says that it is found by making ‘self’ the center of one’s life. The Bible says something totally different. Jesus said that life isn’t found by seeking to save our lives. We find true life by losing it, through renouncing the self and carrying the cross and following Him as the supreme Lord of our lives.

The book of Ecclesiastes is so important because it shows us that ultimate meaning and lasting satisfaction cannot be found ‘under the sun.’ That phrase is used some 30 times throughout the book and it describes a view of life that is strictly earth bound. Solomon, the writer of Ecclesiastes, uses this phrase to make his argument that life under the sun is ‘vanity,’ or a wisp of smoke. Our lives cannot be understood if our gaze goes no further than the sun. By his own admission, Solomon had set out on a quest to find meaning in things such as wisdom and knowledge, pleasure and thrill seeking, work and career, wealth and possessions. He tells us in chapter 2 that no matter how hard he tried, he could not think his way into life, he could not feel his way into life, he could not work his way into life, and he could not collect his way into life. He comes to the conclusion that apart from God, no one can have true and lasting enjoyment. Only God infuses life with meaning and ultimate purpose. So with that in mind, let’s take a look at what Solomon goes on to say next here in chapter 3.

A quick glance at chapter three will reveal a four letter word that is mentioned some 31 times. The word to which I am referring is the word 'time.'

Time is one of the realities of life that is quite mysterious. When you're enjoying something, it seems like you never have enough of it, and when you're enduring something it seems like you have too much of it. When you're young, it seems like time creeps along, and when you're old it seems like it flies. And yet all of us have the same amount, really. There are 60 seconds in a minute, 60 minutes in an hour, 24 hours in a day, and 7 days in a week.

The third chapter of Ecclesiastes presents us with a picture of a sovereign God who is Lord over time. He is the One who regulates all of our days, down to the very minutes and seconds that make up our life here on earth. There is nothing that happens in life that is beyond His control. And yet this flies in the face of so much of the world's way of thinking. Atheism sees life as the product of chance, void of ultimate meaning and purpose. Deism acknowledges that there is a God, but because of the presence of so much evil and suffering in the world, He must be indifferent and removed from our world. The Word of God presents us with a much different picture, however.

The God of the Bible is King of time, and the Ancient of days. He is the God who has revealed Himself to us, who has spoken to us via His timely Word, and the One who has entered both time and space and matter in the Person of Jesus Christ. Unlike us, He is not bound by time, but rather time serves His purposes.

1. The OPPORTUNITIES that time affords (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.”

The first eight verses of this chapter are among the most beautiful words in all of Hebrew poetry. Back in the 1960's, the Byrds had a popular song that used these verses from Ecclesiastes as lyrics. Turn, turn, turn...

The Preacher of Ecclesiastes describes the wide range of human experience in these verses, and you will notice that there are 14 couplets or pairs mentioned through verse 8. Each of the pairs make up a larger whole. Birth and death, planting and harvesting, weeping and laughing. The idea that Solomon conveys here is this—there is a time and purpose for every season of life.

Ecclesiastes 3:1—“For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven.”

The word ‘season’ that is used here is a word that means a set time, or an appointed time. It is a word that carries the idea of predetermined purpose. The NAS translates verse 1 this way: “There is an appointed time for everything, and there is a time for every event under heaven.”

When the translators of the Greek Septuagint translated the word ‘time’ in verse 1, they didn’t use the term ‘chronos’ which views time as duration. Instead, they used the term ‘kairos’ which viewed time as opportunity. The reason is that Solomon isn’t simply referring to time as that which is ticking away. Time for the Preacher is an opportunity.

This is the Old Testament equivalent to what Paul wrote:

Romans 8:28—“And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose.”

Solomon is showing us how God is the King of Time. He regulates our minutes and our seconds. He rules all our moments and all our days. Nothing happens in life without His superintendence. Things are not wildly spinning out of control. Rather, even time itself is serving the purposes of Almighty God. History is ‘His Story.’

Things happen when they do because God rules over time as well as eternity. There is a definite orderliness to the way God does things. He is precise in all that He does. Because He is absolute in His authority over space and time, He puts everything in its own time and place. This has been true from the very beginning of time, when God divided the days of creation. We see it with every change of season—the turning of summer into fall and the coming of springtime after winter. The rhythms of creation testify to the orderliness of their Creator!

In the covenant that He established with Noah, God said:

Genesis 8:22—“While the earth remains, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night, shall not cease.”

Solomon presents fourteen couplets and twenty-eight statements. There are fourteen positive statements and fourteen negative ones, and you can fit them into three separate categories. The first describes the influence of time on our bodies, the second focuses on our souls, and the last deals with our spirits.

Notice the opportunities that time affords according to the Preacher:

Physically

“A time to be born, and a time to die; a time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is planted; a time to kill, and a time to heal; a time to break down, and a time to build up.”

Solomon says that each of us have a time to be born, and a time to die. In God’s providence and wisdom, all of us came into the world at a fixed moment in time. Though your father and mother brought you into this world, God knew you even before you were born and saw to it that you entered the world. And just as sure as the day of your birth, so also will be the day of your death. There is a fixed moment in time when you will take your final breath and step into eternity. A family gathers to welcome new life into the world, and another one gathers to pay their final respects to a loved one whose time to die has come. It is not that far of a walk from the nursery to the morgue. Our death is an appointment that all of us will experience at some point on God’s calendar. (Hebrews 9:27)

I read where on November 11, 1963, President John F. Kennedy visited Arlington Cemetery to pay his respects to America’s fallen heroes. As he looked over the sprawling Virginia hillside from Arlington House, he said, “It is so beautiful that I could stay here forever.” Two weeks later he returned in a flag-draped coffin to be buried beneath the eternal flame. To everything there is a season, a time for every purpose under heaven—a time to be born, and a time to die.

Just as there is a time to be born and a time to die, there is a time to plant and a time to pluck up what has been planted. There is a time to build up and a time to tear down. I witnessed this principle so vividly this past week. At one time, Rome boasted in its great strength and power. The Romans built magnificent cities all throughout the ancient world. They built colonnaded streets, temples, and massive amphitheaters. Now, those cities and structures are nothing but piles of ruins. For everything there is a season, and a time for every purpose under heaven—a time to build up, and a time to tear down.

Emotionally

“A time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance; a time to cast away stones, and a time to gather stones together; a time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing.”

Just as time presents us with physical opportunities, so also does it present us with emotional opportunities and seasons. There’s a time to cry, when tears flow freely; there are also times for laughter. Hopefully, the times of gladness outnumber the times of sadness! Elsewhere, King Solomon prescribes cheerfulness as good medicine for the soul:

Proverbs 17:22—“A joyful heart is good medicine, but a crushed spirit dries up the bones.”

None of us enjoy emotional pain and sorrow. Yet even tears are a part of life that you and I cannot escape.

One of the great encouragements to our faith is the fact that we have a Great High Priest who sympathizes with us in our weaknesses. At the funeral of a dear friend, even the Lord Jesus wept. He was smitten with the feelings of our infirmities.

There’s a time to mourn and a time to dance. There’s a time to embrace, and there are times when we need to simply be left alone. The Lord has created us with a wide range of emotions, and sometimes we feel we are at their mercy. But one of the best ways to get through the difficult emotional seasons of life is to remember that they are but seasons, and seasons always give way to other seasons. Just as the cold of winter gives way to the warmth of spring, so also do seasons of grief give way to seasons of rejoicing. And were it not for the dreary

days of winter, we would never fully appreciate the sunshine and blue skies of spring. Hear the words of the Preacher!

Spiritually

“A time to seek, and a time to lose; a time to keep, and a time to cast away; a time to tear, and a time to sew; a time to keep silence, and a time to speak; a time to love, and a time to hate; a time for war, and a time for peace.”

These last six pairs involve the inner decisions of our lives deep within the spiritual part of us. They involve calculated decisions on our part. There is a time to seek, be it for a job or a home or a church family. There is a time to lose, a time to break ties with the past. There is a time to keep or to hold on to something, such as your convictions and your principles. Yet there is also a time to throw away (perhaps some spring cleaning comes to mind?) There is a time to let go of old resentments and grudges and things that keep you weighed down in life. I don't want to go through life full of bitterness. In the words of Elsa, “Let it go!”

What Solomon says in verse 7 may be the hardest for me—a time to keep silent, and a time to speak. There is a time when the best thing you can do is hold your tongue and refrain from saying something that you will later regret. Yet keep in mind that there is also an appropriate time to speak. Wisdom is simply knowing the seasons!

Time presents us with opportunities to serve God, to bless others, and to enjoy life as a gift that comes from the Lord.

What Solomon is teaching us here in these verses is that all of life unfolds under the appointment of providence. Birth and death, sowing and harvest, joys and sorrows, acquiring and losing, speech and silence, war and peace—everything

has its appointed time from God. He is sovereign, but He is always faithful. Our lives need to reflect His divine pacing. We need the cadence of His call, the rhythm of His wisdom running through our moments, our days, and our years. Through all the seasons of life, through all the various circumstances of our quickly fleeting years, God remains both compassionate and omnipotent.

2. The OBJECTIVES that time serves (3:9-15)

“9 What gain has the worker from his toil? 10 I have seen the business that God has given to the children of man to be busy with. 11 He has made everything beautiful in its time. Also, he has put eternity into man’s heart, yet so that he cannot find out what God has done from beginning to end. 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. 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. 15 That which is, already has been; that which is to be, already has been; and God seeks what has been driven away.”

Just as time presents us with opportunities, so also does it serve divine objectives. God uses time to advance His agenda. When Solomon looked around, he found people who were hurried with life under the sun. He considered the business that God gave the children of man to be busy with. And from strictly an ‘under the sun’ perspective, it all seemed to be so random and pointless.

He asks the question, “What gain does the worker have from all of his toil?” (illus. of prison camp)

God infuses our work with meaning. The responsibilities that you and I have in life, rather than viewing them as drudgery, we can view them as a means of worship.

God's plan

Notice the phrase, 'God has given,' used there in verse 10. It is the idea that God is the One who sets the agenda for my life. You see this truth woven all throughout Scripture.

Jeremiah 1:5—“Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations.”

It is the same truth that David writes about in Psalm 139. You are not an accident, my friend. And the things that have happened to you are not obstacles keeping you from God, but are the means by which God longs to draw you closer to Himself.

Malcolm Muggeridge—*“Contrary to what might be expected, I look back on experiences that at the time seemed especially desolating and painful with particular satisfaction. Indeed, I can say with complete truthfulness that everything I have learned in my seventy-five years in this world, everything that has truly enhanced and enlightened my existence, has been through affliction and not through happiness.”*

He went on to say that if it ever were to be possible to eliminate affliction from our earthly existence, the result would not be to make life more enjoyable, but to make it too trivial.

What if on the way to satisfaction, God wants to take us through the valley of pain? He fully intends on bringing joy to our lives, but His plan to bring it about includes both pleasantness as well as pain. This is clear in the cross.

Hebrews 12:1-2—“...let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.”

If I were the one responsible for the planning of my life, in no way would I ever plan pain. Neither would you! If we were given the option to choose, we would choose no unpleasantness in life. But it would ruin us. And God has a better plan for us than we do.

God's purpose

Notice what Solomon says in verse 11, where he makes a statement that constitutes one of the most wonderful and revealing truths in all of the Bible. He says, “He has made everything beautiful in its time.” Let me tell you, that is an awesome promise, for it means that the circumstances of our lives are chocked full of divine purpose.

David Jeremiah—*“We have no problem connecting with that truth in the nice moments. What sets the true saint apart is his ability to apply it during moments of unpleasantness. When young couples fall in love and get married, they are convinced that God has made everything beautiful in His time. But ten years later, when little children are underfoot, bills are due, a job has been lost, and a medical scare has been diagnosed—we wonder what happened to all that beauty. Marriage has lost a little luster, parenthood is less glorious, and homebuilding is more sweat than sweet.”*

No matter the season, God has a reason. It is not a cliché, but is a matter of divine fact. God has purpose behind:

- the joys of life
- the sorrows of life
- the good times of life
- the not so good times of life

God's perspective

He has made everything beautiful in its time, meaning that it all serves His purpose, which is why I am in need of His perspective. When I fail to see my life through the lens of faith, when I look at it from an under the sun perspective strictly as it comes my way, I easily become confused and disillusioned in life. I am quick to make snap judgments about a situation as I look at it only from an earthly angle. Yet when I see things through His eyes, a beautiful picture then comes into focus. Faith gives me perspective.

In life, you and I have the option of two attitudes. Option number one is the attitude expressed in **Genesis 42:36** where Jacob looks at his life and says, "All this has come against me." Or, option number 2 is the attitude expressed in **Romans 8:28**, which recognizes that all things work together for the good of those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose."

Look at what Solomon also says in verse 11, "He has put eternity into man's heart." Though we are bound by time, deep down on the inside of us, we long for eternity. The idea here is that God has put something in our hearts as those uniquely made in His image. It is a taste, a longing for that which cannot be discovered through the material and physical experiences of life.

C.S. Lewis — *“If I find in myself a desire which no experience in this world can satisfy, the most probable explanation is that I was made for another world...Our heavenly Father has provided many delightful inns for us along our journey, but He takes great care to see that we do not mistake any of them for home.”*

God has placed eternity in our hearts, but Solomon gets to the root of our struggle. We have an eternal longing deep down on the inside, but we cannot find out what God has done from beginning to the end. In other words, we have eternity in our hearts but we are bound by time. We were made to live forever, but time takes it toll out on our body and soul.

There is a time for everything, but we are often in the dark!

3. The OFFENSES that time reveals (3:16-22)

“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. 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. 18 I said in my heart with regard to the children of man that God is testing them that they may see that they themselves are but beasts. 19 For what happens to the children of man and what happens to the beasts is the same; as one dies, so dies the other. They all have the same breath, and man has no advantage over the beasts, for all is vanity. 20 All go to one place. All are from the dust, and to dust all return. 21 Who knows whether the spirit of man goes upward and the spirit of the beast goes down into the earth? 22 So I saw that there is nothing better than that a man should rejoice in his work, for that is his lot. Who can bring him to see what will be after him?”

I don't have time to get through these verses, but suffice it to say that Solomon noticed several problems or offenses that time has a tendency to reveal. Where

there ought to be righteousness, there is wickedness. Where there ought to be justice, there is injustice.

Just like the animals, man is powerless over his own death.

The last question of the chapter is a question that reveals man's need for a Savior. And in order for this Savior to rescue me, He needed to step into time and space and matter.

Galatians 4:4-5—“But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth His Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons.”

Let me tell you something—Jesus always knows what time it is. Go back through Solomon's list in verses 1-8 and you will see that Jesus knew the right time for every activity. Read through the account of His life and ministry in the gospels, and you will discover that even when He was late, He was still on time. Think about it...

He knew when it was time to plant and when it was time to uproot. (John 15; Matthew 15:13) He knew when it was time to heal. As He walked the dusty roads of Israel, He opened blind eyes and deaf ears. He made the lame to walk and cleansed the leper.

He knew when it was time to break something down, whether it be overthrowing of the moneychanging tables or cursing the fig tree. He knew when it was time to build, for He said, “I will build My church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.”

He knew the right time for every emotion. As the Man of Sorrows, John 11:35 says that Jesus wept at the grave of Lazarus. His heart was filled with compassion for the lost as he saw them as sheep without a Shepherd.

He knew when it was time to embrace, for He embraced tax collectors and sinners of every sort. Yet He refrained from embracing the Pharisees and religious hypocrites, and kept at a distance those who trusted in themselves that they were righteous.

He knew when it was time to speak and when it was time for Him to remain silent. Everything that Jesus did was in perfect submission and cooperation with God the Father's agenda. Even the moment of His own death upon the cross happened not a moment too soon or a moment too late.

Romans 5:6—“For when we were still without strength, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly.”

Jesus died for our sins not a moment too late!

From the moment of His death, to the moment His buried body began to breathe again, Jesus demonstrated that He is Lord over time and eternity. And my friend, He still is an On-Time Savior! By virtue of His death and resurrection, Jesus Christ rules the universe with authority over time and eternity. And one of these days, He will return again!

*Crown Him with many crowns,
the Lamb upon His throne;
Hark! how the heav'nly anthem drowns
all music but its own!
Awake, my soul and sing*

*of Him who died for thee,
and hail Him as thy matchless King
through all eternity.*

*Crown Him the Lord of years,
the Potentate of time.*

*Creator of the rolling spheres,
Ineffably sublime.*

all hail, Redeemer, hail!

*For Thou hast died for me;
They praise shall never, never fail
throughout eternity.*