

# The Truth About Time

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[ 0 : 00 ] If you have a Bible, please do turn back to the book of Ecclesiastes, and we are in chapter three this evening, Ecclesiastes chapter three.

We're going to read from verse one through to verse 15 of this chapter together. The words will be on the screen as well. That's page 671 in the church Bibles.

Let us hear God's word together. There is a time for everything and a season for every activity under the heavens.

A time to be born and a time to die. A time to plant and a time to uproot. A time to kill and a time to heal.

A time to tear down and a time to build. A time to weep and a time to laugh. A time to mourn and a time to dance.

[ 1 : 11 ] A time to scatter stones and a time to gather them again. A time to embrace and a time to refrain from embracing. A time to search and a time to give up.

A time to keep and a time to throw away. A time to tear and a time to mend. A time to be silent and a time to speak.

A time to love and a time to hate. A time to be silent and a time to fight. A time to be silent and a time to fight. A time to be silent and a time to fight. A time to fight. A time to fight. A time to fight. A time to fight.

What do workers gain from their toil? I have seen the burden God has laid on the human race. He has made everything beautiful in its time.

He has also set eternity in the human heart, yet no one can fathom what God has done from beginning to end. I know that there is nothing better for people than to be happy and to do good while they live.

[ 2 : 19 ] That each of them may eat and drink and find satisfaction in all their toil. This is the gift of God. I know that everything God does will endure forever.

Nothing can be added to it and nothing taken from it. God does it so that people will fear him. Whatever it is has already been and what will be has been before.

And God will call the past to account. This is God's word. Please do keep that passage open in front of you as we consider it together this evening.

I don't know if those words are familiar to you at all. Certainly the first part of this chapter. There are what might well be the most famous verses in this otherwise relatively unknown book.

It's a poem about time. You probably don't need me to tell you that. You can't really miss it, can you? And it is a beautiful poem about time.

[ 3 : 27 ] I don't know if you're a fan of poetry. It's not something I naturally rush to. But God loves poetry. Vast swathes of the Old Testament are written this way.

And that is in part because poetry not only speaks to our minds, but our hearts. It affects our intellect like prose does.

But the lilt of language evokes emotions in us that big chunks of narrative are often unable to do in the same way. So it's one thing, isn't it, to say God is infinite or God is the king of all creation.

We know what that means, but when Isaiah says that God measures the oceans in the palm of his hands or marks off the edges of the universe with the breadth of his hands or that the nations are like a drop in a bucket to him, like dust on the scales.

That's close. It hits differently, doesn't it? It means more to us. We can feel what is being said, not just understand it.

[ 4 : 48 ] It invokes a sense of awe and wonder that the bare facts don't always manage. And so even if you're not a fan of poetry, you can still be moved by it and it can still resonate with us.

That, I think, is why this passage is as well known as it is. Don't worry if you've never read it before or never heard of it. But it attaches itself to the depth of our souls.

It means something to us, even if we can't quite put a finger on what that meaning is. And it resonates with us because we know that there is a time for everything under the sun.

There is a time for everything under the sun. That is why when the birds, that's an American rock group in the 1960s, for everyone who needs help with our music history like I did, when they blatantly plagiarized the teacher, that the song went straight to number one in the U.S.

And I think it remains the best-known song. Someone can correct me on that afterwards. But the lyrics of the song are taken virtually verbatim from Ecclesiastes 3. Straight out of the Bible, and yet it meant something to everyone.

[ 6 : 13 ] Because this is life for everyone under the sun, isn't it? There are seasons of war and seasons of peace. There are times for building up and times for tearing down.

A time for embracing and a time for refraining. And with the swinging pendulum of the clock, the teacher takes us back and forth across all the different seasons that we experience in life.

There's a time to be born and a time to die. The pendulum swings back. A time to plant and a time to uproot. A time to kill and a time to heal.

A time to tear down and a time to build up. And so the clock ticks on and on and on. Time marches on beat by beat, swinging back and forth.

That is life, isn't it? If you've lived any length of time, you know this is the way that life goes. The poem starts with the bookends of every life, doesn't it?

[ 7 : 26 ] Verse 2, there are a time to be born and a time to die. And within those universal events of every life comes every other season under the sun.

So here's just a very simple task for you this evening. Just glance through the poem in verses 2 to 8. It's laid out helpfully in the NIV. There's 14 pairs, right?

In each pair, which side of the pendulum would you choose to be on? Which side would you choose to experience in each instance?

The answers are mostly fairly obvious, aren't they? Even if each pairing doesn't have a decidedly negative choice in the sense of evil or wrong, nevertheless, every pair has one side which seems to speak of loss or bereavements, of losing, of tearing down, of breaking, of destroying, of war, of killing, of death.

And we know instinctively that even if it's not necessarily evil, it's not good. Building up is better than tearing down.

[ 8 : 49 ] We'd rather laugh than weep. Maybe a time to uproot is better than a time to plant if you're a particular fan of potatoes. But you can see, can't you, that life, joy, finding, embracing, planting, building, that they're distinctly positive images.

That is life heading in the direction we want it to go, we know it should go. There's a season in every one of these pairs that we want to be in, that we want to experience.

Let me ask you another question. which of those times have you experienced? Which of those seasons have you gone through?

Which one are you in the midst of right now? For most of us, to a greater or lesser extent, we've probably gone through all of them, haven't we? There are times we've had to uproot ourselves from places or people we'd rather not.

Times we've had to tear down what we'd spend much time and effort building up. There are times when those whose embrace we used to treasure no longer feel as warm as they once did.

[ 10 : 21 ] Maybe relationships relationships have gone cold. Maybe disagreements have arisen and the one you would have delighted to hug you now look at and know it's no longer the right time for it.

The family gathers together at Christmas. It's a time for joy and dancing. Everyone is together to enjoy the season.

But the seasons pass. the next Christmas comes, the pendulum swings and there's an empty seat at the table. It's no longer a season for dancing but for mourning.

Our time to die hasn't come yet. The teacher's been making sure we'll know it'll come soon enough. But even then we've experienced death's pangs, haven't we, as it's cruelly cut short the lives of those we love.

we experience it all in time, don't we? And we don't experience them all.

[ 11 : 29 ] Here's the point I think the teacher's making. We don't experience them all because we choose to. We don't choose which seasons to have.

The seasons come and go. And we have no choice but to live through whatever times come our way. Some of them good, some of them evil.

That's life, isn't it? That's why that this poem resonates with so many people, not just Christians, but everybody under the sun because this is life under the sun.

This is life under the sun. There are good times and bad times, and we don't really get to decide when each will be.

That's what the teacher wants to get across through this poem. We love to be in control, don't we? We love to be in control, but the reality is when it comes to time and seasons, we are not.

[ 12 : 37 ] time happens to us, seasons come and go, and we'd love to hold on to the good ones. As with life, it is but a breath, and they are here one moment and gone the next, and there's no stopping the relentless ticking of the clock, and the pendulum inevitably swings back and forth.

It's a humbling truth, isn't it? We do love to be in control, and we often think we are in control. We carefully plan our diaries, we keep a constant eye on the clock, we look forward to planning times of joy, but so often we end up disappointed or frustrated.

In just this last week, how many plans of yours have fallen apart? How many times have you found yourself frustrated or disappointed or annoyed that something didn't go the way you wanted it to?

The uncomfortable truth about our time is that there is no such thing as our time. We don't own it, and we can't control it.

We're in week three of Ecclesiastes now, and maybe you're starting to catch on to the teacher's style. It's not often immediately uplifting, is it? He breaks down the way we so often think about the world, and he does it here with a beautiful but very simple little poem that shows us just how little control we have over the times and seasons we are subjected to.

[ 14 : 28 ] But as always with a teacher, he does it so that he can show us a better path, so he can show us a better way to live life.

Time happens to us, but it doesn't happen arbitrarily. We're not in control of it, but God is. That's where the teacher takes us next.

Having showed us the uncomfortable truth about our time, he now shows us the wonderful truth about God's time. The wonderful truth about God's time.

And the first wonderful truth about God's time is that it is God who is in control of time. That is good news. Time happens to us in verse 1 to 8, but when it comes to God in verse 9 to 15, it is God who is acting, isn't it?

Just look through those verses. God is making everything beautiful in its time. Everything God does will endure forever. We are but a breath, but God is eternal.

[ 15 : 44 ] And everything God is doing is part of his eternal purpose. And God is doing time. It is his. Every season you are subjected to belongs to him.

It is under his control. And that is good news. It is good news because God is good. It might sound a bit banal, is that it?

Let me just give you an illustration to you know what I mean. We have a three-month-old son and he is regularly not in my hands. But because I care about him, right?

I care about him a lot. I care about whose hands he is in. It matters to me. And so if he's not in my hands, I want to make sure that he's in the hands of someone I trust.

So if he's in Mary's hands, that's great. I know I can trust her. She loves him as much as I do. If he's in your hands, that's great. You promised a few weeks ago that you would help show him in Christ.

[ 16 : 55 ] And I'm very thankful for it. So I would trust you. I would think he's in good hands. But if you turn to me and said, Kim Jong-un's got your baby, I'd tense up a bit.

I'm not sure I can trust him. I'm not sure that's a safe pair of hands. I can rest when what I care about is in the hands of people of good character.

So I can rest when my son is in my wife's hands. I can rest when my son is in your hands. And I can rest when I know that every time and season is in God's hands.

He is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. That's someone we can all trust to be in control of time.

In fact, it would be distantly bad news, wouldn't it, if time was under human control? If we were the ones who ruled it? Not only are there a lot of wicked people in the world who wouldn't want to decide in the times and seasons under the sun, but we are all people who make lots of mistakes, who are fallible, who make errors of judgment all the time.

[ 18 : 32 ] It is a good thing that time is not in our hands, but is in God's hands. So that is good news, but it leaves a bit of a problem, doesn't it?

It is good news that God is in control of time, but the times and seasons we experience are not all good like God is good, are they? we are subject to every season mentioned in verse 1 to 8, and many of them are times we'd rather not face.

That's what the teacher wrestles with in verse 10 and 11. Just look down there with me. I have seen the burden God has laid on the human race.

He has made everything beautiful in its time. He has also set eternity in the human heart, yet no one can fathom what God has done from beginning to end.

The bad times are just as much under God's control as the good times. That's partly because God has placed a burden on the human race.

[ 19 : 49 ] Verse 10. God has placed a burden on the human race. When Adam ate of the tree in the garden, it was God who pronounced the curse on it for his disobedience.

Adam incurred it. It is his responsibility. It is our responsibility, but it is nevertheless God's who laid it on us. God has to undo the curse.

But he is the same God who promised to undo the curse that we are justly subjected to. And the undoing of the curse is also something that God does in time.

It is all happening under the sun. Paul says in the book of Romans that at just the right time, Christ died for the ungodly.

And so God has burdened us in time with a curse we fully deserve, but he is also working out his perfect plan of redemption in time.

[ 21 : 07 ] That plan is being worked out. That's why the teacher says God is making everything beautiful in time. Again, that is great news. But it still leaves us with a question, doesn't it?

If in Christ God is undoing the effects of the curse, why do we still undergo times of war and death? Why is life still full of mourning and sadness?

Even for God's people, even for those of us in Christ? Well, I don't know. And the teacher doesn't know.

No one can fathom what God has done from beginning to end. We cannot get our heads round God's eternal plan.

We cannot figure out all the intricacies of his perfect purpose. words. We are, after all, as we saw in chapter one, very small, and our lives are very short.

[ 22 : 16 ] And so we're not expected to understand everything that God does. And we mustn't be so arrogant to think that we can understand everything that God is doing.

instead we are simply to fear him. End of verse 14. God does it, the it being everything, so that we will fear him.

God does it so that we will fear him. The fear of God is a massive concept that all the wisdom books of the Bible unravel in all its fullness. But here, I think in Ecclesiastes, there's two aspects of fearing God that the teacher wants us to come away with.

We fear God by resting in his sovereignty and obeying his commands. Resting in his sovereignty and obeying his commands.

First of all, we fear God by resting in his sovereignty. God is in control of time and so we can rest assured that he knows what he's doing.

[ 23 : 38 ] But here's where I think Ecclesiastes 3 is so helpful on this point. Because there are still times for everything. Resting in God's sovereignty doesn't mean you are not allowed to weep and mourn in seasons of life.

Resting in God's sovereignty doesn't mean that there won't be times where you're refraining from times of silence. Those times we are still going to endure.

But we can know that God is making everything beautiful in its time. I was reminded of the story of Jacob. Jacob at the end of Genesis 37.

I don't know if you're familiar with Jacob and Joseph but Jacob was a father to twelve sons and his most beloved was Joseph the eldest son of his most beloved wife.

He was a father to a young man who went out to work one day and never came home. We can lose the personal heartache when we're reading through Old Testament narratives can't we?

[ 25 : 07 ] But Joseph went out to work one day and then later on his brothers came to Jacob with a bloodstained cloak that belonged to Jacob's son.

What does Jacob feel in that moment? As he holds in his hands the torn clothes of his son he laments he says that he's without doubt torn to pieces there is no doubt in Jacob's mind what has happened.

Some fierce animal has got hold of him and as he mourned the loss of his son he could not have helped but imagine the horrific way his young son's life had come abruptly to an end.

As chunks of flesh were torn from his skin as he cried for help and nobody came. That is what Jacob would feel in that moment.

And it is truly awful isn't it? He was rightly inconsolable. That is the right emotion to feel at that time.

[ 26 : 27 ] But I wonder when you read the story do you feel the same inconsolable sorrow that Jacob felt?

I'm going to guess probably not. Not because we don't care about Jacob's feelings but because as we read through the story of Joseph we see the bigger picture don't we?

We know what's going on. we're getting to see the bird's eye view. We know he's not really dead. We know he's going down to Egypt for a purpose for God to raise him up to the right hand of Pharaoh to fill the store houses of Egypt for an impending famine and when that famine arrives to save Jacob.

To save Jacob and his brothers. We've got all that in our heads as we read Jacob standing there with a blood stained cloak.

And so while the moment of sorrow isn't taken away for Jacob in the time, we look at it and see the overarching purpose of it all.

[ 27 : 46 ] And we know there is a good plan here. And that wasn't the case for Jacob or for Joseph. For 20 years, he was in no doubt that his son had died.

20 years. Joseph had no idea what was to come of it as he was sitting in a pit of an Egyptian prison having been sold into slavery by his brothers and falsely accused of rape by his master's wife.

Joseph wouldn't have been thinking all is well. God knows what he's doing. Let's put a brave face on it. That's not what it means to rest in God's sovereignty.

What it does mean is holding on to his faithful promises in all seasons of life, including those we'd rather not go through.

God is sovereign over it all. We're allowed to wrestle with these questions like the teacher does. To say, I don't understand why it's this way. We're still going to go through seasons of weeping, of tears, of mourning.

[ 29 : 08 ] But in those times, we can rest assured God is sovereign over it all. And even though we will be mystified by it at many points, there will come a day when we'll look back and see God's plan unfold.

Jacob had to wait 20 years. We might have to wait longer than that to marvel at God's wisdom and understanding. please do do jubilee Snowf ■ so we fear God by trusting His omnipotent rule, by resting in His sovereignty and accepting that we see only the smallest fraction of His cosmic plan.

so we fear God by resting in his sovereignty knowing that he is working out his eternal purposes through time even when we cannot fathom it and secondly and very briefly we fear God by doing what is good with the time that he has given us just look at verse 12 I know that there is nothing better for people than to be happy and to do good while they live that each of them may eat and drink and find satisfaction in all their toil this is the gift of God we heard something very similar at the end of last week didn't we and so in a way we've been here already and we return again as the book goes on so I'm not going to dwell here too long but we fear God by doing what is good we fear God by resting in his sovereignty we fear God by doing what is good what is good is what he has commanded us to do that's where the teacher is going he's going to make that point clear at the end of the book the conclusion of the matter is to fear God and keep his commandments and so we fear God by accepting that this is his time and so we should really do what he has told us to do with it if you want to know whether you are living in the fear of God you need only ask yourself who am I trying to please and if the answer is God we will do what he has said is good to do won't we again I mentioned in brief last week that we need to remember those are good commandments given to us to live a good life that is what God wants for us he wants us to live the best possible life by listening to his words and God wants you to be happy we see it there plainly don't we there is nothing better than to be happy and do good but we remember don't we as we go through Ecclesiastes that there are seasons for that there are seasons for enjoying and there are seasons for mourning if there's one thing that we've learned tonight is that those seasons are no constants they change as the pendulum of the clock swings back and forth but whatever season of life you are in know that God is over them all and working through them all this is his time so enjoy it when you can but let us fearfully trust him through it all remember God is God and you are not so we accept our lack of control rest in God's sovereign plan and do the good he has given us to do let us pray before we sing our final hymn together thank you guys thank you for giving us a time fear shock awe tents so we are going to explain to you the easy lacrosse aside of the ■ the barrier to the

And the and the our ■■■■