

Time and Eternity Ecclesiastes 3:1-22

If you're new with us, we're studying the book of Ecclesiastes. This is sermon 3. It is a book that speaks **about the harsh realities of life under the sun**. It is extremely honest about the futility and **frustrations** of life in this fallen world.

Last Sunday, we discussed three reasons for despair and one source of meaning and joy. Despair: (1) wisdom doesn't satisfy; (2) pleasure doesn't satisfy, and (3) death is inevitable. Joy/Meaning: Knowing the God of grace and Justice.

It wasn't long after that last point that the news came out about the helicopter crash that killed nine people including Kobe and his daughter. So tragic. I had just said in the sermon, "We watch the news and we weep sometimes." It's true, isn't it?

- **Life is a vapor. Sorrow is real. Death is real. And what you do matters.**
- We're seeing these things in Ecclesiastes.
- It's a book that forces to think about life and death - **about time and eternity.**
- Let us pray that God would teach us to number our days that we may get a heart of wisdom. [**Pray**]

The general theme of this chapter **is about our Sovereign God who rules over time.**

- **It's about considering time in view of God – in view of God's sovereignty, God's sovereign goodness, and God's sovereign justice.**

When we consider time in view of God, it should lead us to *fear God and to enjoy God*.

Growing up watching the Chicago Bulls, I recall how the team would huddle up before the game and one player would say, "What time is it?" And the team would say "Game time!" (How many elementary teams did the same thing!?).

We are asking that question today from Ecclesiastes. **What time is it?**
Or better yet, "**Whose time is it?**"

In the **poem about time (3:1-8)** makes no reference to God, but then the author draws several principles about **time in relation to God in verses 9-22.**

So this text both a **comforting** (God is sovereign and good) and a **challenging** text (we should live with the awareness of God's justice). It's reassuring and sobering.

It's comforting because it tells us **whose time it – God is sovereign over time, and who makes everything beautiful in its time, so we can trust him.**

- **And God is good, so we can enjoy him.**
- It's **challenging because it reminds us of why we must use our time wisely, in light of death, final judgment and eternity.**
- Time is obviously important because **what you do with your time is what you do with your life!!!**

#1: A Poem on Time (3:1-8)

This poem is very popular as many of you know.

- Baby boomers are tempted to sing, “Turn, turn, turn!”
- Long before the Byrds sang this popular song in the 60’s, Qoheleth wrote it.
- Pete Seeger wrote that song originally released as “To everything there is a season” and gave part of the royalties to Israel!
- It’s a poem **about the experiences of life** – some positive and some negative.
- **Hootie and the Blowfish used to sing “Time, why you punish me”** – we can feel that in this poem.
- **We know the frustration of time, “There aren’t enough hours in the day!” “Where did the time go?”**

The poem consists of **fourteen pairs of opposites**, covering aspects of life.

1: Notice, “for **everything**” there is a season for “**every matter**” under heaven. Again, this book is a reflection on all of life.

2: being born and planting – two ways of giving life.

- **43 years ago yesterday – hospital closed...**
- **Our little Zeke too. Anyone else?**
- **Well everyone in this room was born! We have that in common!**
- **There was a time for you to be born...**
- **and there’s time to die - we don’t know when that is.**
- **Ecclesiastes 9:12: “For man does not know his time.”**

3: “Killing” and “breaking” down can’t be avoided in this life.

- Although “**healing** and **building**” are preferable!
- He doesn’t address subjects like what constitutes a **just war**; but is simply speak of the facts of this life.

4: Life contains both **sorrow and joy**, doesn’t it?

- It is good and right to **weep** and **mourn** over death at loss. Our Savior wept.
- And there is a time to **laugh** – when you’re with friends recounting the blessings of God.
- We **dance** at weddings. **And I dance when grilling out!** My kids would rather me stop.

5: Stones. Probably referring to casting stones on the field of an enemy in time of war (2 Kgs. 3:19, 25), and then removing them when the war is over to replant.

- There is a time to refrain from **embracing** – to say goodbye.
 - **\Boys to Men used to sing “It’s so hard to say goodbye to yesterday”**
 - Some seasons you don’t want to end – you don’t want to stop embracing.
 - **We think about saying goodbye to a friend that you got to visit with or with a spouse who is going off to war.**
 - **I’ve been in the airport on more than one occasion and watched soldiers return home and be greeted by their family – it melts your heart.**

6: There is nothing in this world that is ours forever.

- There's a time to **have a garage sale and give up on ever fitting into those pants!**

7: Perhaps this refers to mourning and funerals, as mourners tore their clothes, and their comforters kept silent during times of grief, but people were free to repair clothes and freely speak at other times. (Parents want to quote the "time to be silent" part to their kids!)

8: Emotions are mentioned: **Love** and **hate** in this life...

- We're told to love and hate the right things (**Rom 12:9**)

"war" and "**peace**" represent sociopolitical conditions.

Summary

A. We read of the full range of **human existence** – birth to death

B. of the full range of **human emotion** – weeping/laughter, mourning/dancing, love/hate

C. of a whole lot of **human activity** – planting /gathering; killing/healing, breaking down/building up; casting stones/gathering stones; embracing/not embracing; seeking/losing; keeping/casting away; tearing/sewing, speaking, being silent

So the poem is intended to represent, in artistic fashion, the entirety of one's life.

- The author moves back and forth among **desirable** and **undesirable** aspects of life.
- But he *doesn't* tell us anything to **do** yet.
- He *doesn't say* **attain** the desirable and **avoid** the undesirable.
- He's simply reflecting **on life as it is**. "That's life."
- Life contains all of this.
- **Watch the news – chances are, the stories could be set under these categories.**
- "There's nothing new under the sun."

Life is about seasons. This is one of the reasons I don't like the word "**Balance**."

- I know you can use it in proper way, **but life is less about balance and more about seasons.**
- **You don't tell someone during finals week, "You need some balance." No, you need to study endlessly to do well. It's a season of study.**
- A season with tiny little kids is a **different season, right?**
- **There is a season to matriculate, and a season to graduate, a season to take a job and work, and a season to retire, a season to stay, and a season to move.**

Part of our frustration of life comes when we try to live in a different season than the one we are in.

- **Frustration occurs and joy is absent when we fail to adjust our expectations.**
- **We should see life as a gift, and live in the season we are in.**
- We should regularly ask God, **"What time is it?"**
 - Is it time to embrace?
 - Is it time to build or tear down... Is it time to speak or be silent?
 - We need wisdom to know.

Notice also that there's no mention **beyond the grave & no mention of God in this poem.**

The poem ends with *peace* (shalom) but there total shalom is not found in this life.

The text goes on to then look at time in view of God and life beyond the grave...

#2: Some Principles on Time – in View of God (3:9-20)

In verses 9-15 as well as the following verses, **the camera shifts to God.**

And with a God-centered worldview, we can draw out **four lessons regarding time.**

The first three are in verses 9-15, indicated by the three phrases,

- “I have seen” (v. 10)
- “I perceive” (v. 12)
- “I perceived” (v. 14)
- **The fourth principle** I will draw from **verses 16-22**, which is more loosely connected, as it is a continuation of reflection on time, indicated by the phrase, “Moreover” or “but” – but also leads into chapter 4. At any rate, we will consider these verses as well.
- **I will give you something that is said about God, and the principle or application for us in light of this truth.**

A. Because God is sovereign over time, we should trust him. (3:9-11)

9-10: Toil in view of the fall – “busyness” (v. 10) meaning *affliction*.

Big theme in the book — **vanity**, vanity, “**what does man gain by all his toil?**” (1:3)

- I was encouraged in my reading of Isaiah this weekend in that even Jesus felt this:
- **Isaiah 49:4** But I said, “I have labored in vain; I have spent my strength for nothing [hevel] and vanity; yet surely my right (vindication) is with the Lord, and my recompense [reward] with my God.”
- He felt the frustration of people rejecting him, but he entrusted his work to the Father, knowing that He sees and he will reward.
- He was confident that the Father would reward his work, and we labor with that confidence.

11: God will make everything beautiful in its time....

- **Dolly Partin and Willy Nelson did a song with a play on these words! (I’m going to try and hit all the music genres in one sermon!)**
- **We don’t understand it all, but we trust him.**
- He has made everything “fitting” in its time.
- **Life is filled with burden but also beauty.**
- Sometimes we see that beauty in this life; but **ultimately we wait for it to come at the Son’s coming.**

“We cannot find out what God has done from beginning to end” (3:11)

- **It is beyond our scope of investigation -- but he is working out all things according to the council of this will.**
- **One thing we are left with in Ecclesiastes is the idea of the **inscrutability of God.****

- “³³ Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!” (Rom 11:33)

We must therefore wait on God’s timing and trust him.

- We read in the NT of God’s perfecting timing in sending the Son (Gal 4:4);
- “at just the right time Christ died for the ungodly” (Rom 5.6).
- “The time is fulfilled, the kingdom of heaven is at hand” (Mk 1).
- “My hour has not yet come” (John)
- God is in control. We don’t understand everything – but we trust him.
- **God is the King of Time. “From everlasting to everlasting, you are God” (Ps 90)**

He rules all our moments and our days.

- **Nothing happens in life outside his superintendence.**
- Jesus said, “Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? And not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father. **But even the hairs of your head are all numbered.**” (Matt 10:29-30)
- **How many hairs are on your head? “You’re like, “More than yours!”**
- Someone knows! **Our Father reigns over this creation with fatherly sovereignty.**

Most of us would rather manage our own agenda, rather than wait on God’s timing.

- But we must instead say with David, “I trust in you, Oh Lord ... My times are in your hands” (Ps 31:14-15).

Our lives are unpredictable but on this we rest: God is trustworthy – We rest in his sovereign power and providence.

- **I was talking with a couple in this church about adoption recently... We have so many in this church who have experienced the emotional roller coaster of the adoption journey.... They have been given a timetable, and have a country, which is great... But I added, “Just remember it is all unpredictable ... don’t bother planning, just enjoy the ride and trust the Lord.”**
- **We went to adopt two kids and came home with four!**
- **You never know what the Lord may do in your life.**
- **The writer Charmaine Crouse Yost told Time Magazine about driving away from a party in tears because she was so lonely, not realizing that in the sovereign providence of God one of those people she met that night would become her husband.**

We often think God’s timing is off, rather than trusting in him.

- Let us embrace **the beauty of God’s comprehensive sovereignty** -- the God who works out all things together for our good, to those who love him and are called according to his purpose.
- **This is comforting isn’t it? God sees the end from the beginning.**

We can live knowing that our lives are part of a bigger picture which we cannot see but is visible to our good and wise God who sees the whole thing as beautiful.

- Part of wisdom is knowing that **we have limited access on this big picture!**

We want access to it, which is why the author says, “he has put eternity into our hearts”

- But we must trust him.
- **“Part of growing up in the world is learning to grow small. God intends us to be like children who trust their parents to know best because they can see what the children can’t see and they know what the children are not yet able to know. And here’s the thing – the relationship of trust is built on the character of the parents. If the parents are good and wise and kind, then the child who cannot see the end from the beginning has nothing to fear.” (David Gibson)**
- We have every reason to trust our God – believing that he will make everything beautiful in time.

“Eternity in Our Hearts” (11)

- To my unbelieving friends, you should know this about yourself.
- You will never be content with **only your time in this life.**
- **You are hardwired for eternity.**
- **That’s why you long for it.**
- **That’s why you long for something more in this life.**
- **You may choose to deny it; you may choose to avoid this thought... but you cannot remove it.**
- **Your are made to know this God, to glorify him and enjoy him forever.**
- **Eternity is in our hearts – and Jesus is who you need to fill that longing.**
- **You will die – and right now God is giving you time to repent and be right with Him. So don’t delay.**

B. Because God is sovereign and good, we should enjoy him. (3:12-13)

Here we see the **contented life** proclaimed:

- **“Be joyful” – Why? Because God is sovereign and good.**
- **“Do good” – Serve God and people (Micah 6:8) – and do it joyfully.**
- **“eating and drinking and taking pleasure in our toil.”**
 - **“this is God’s gift to man.”** This from the hand of God.
 - This speaks of God’s grace.
 - Enjoy this good gifts of food and drink with gratitude.
- **God could have made us to just drink water; or to just go to like a gas station – but he gave us taste buds!**
- **He gave us coffee, apples, strawberries, bread, fruit juice, wine, cheese, steak, potatoes, cabbage and carrots and almonds....**
- **Even as you live in a cursed world, you can throw down a blanket and have a picnic, giving thanks to the Father who has given us everything for our enjoyment.**

Many believe God is sovereign but not good.

- We must not think *mechanically* about God’s sovereignty.
- **God is personal; He is King over time as the sovereign God, but He is fatherly in his sovereignty. He is good.**

These verses remind us that under the sunlight of God's sovereignty, we should rejoice in God's gifts; we should obey the Lord's commands.

- Eat your sandwich with joy.
- Sip your coffee or your tea with happiness.
- Get in that kitchen with a great recipe and cook to God's glory.
- Do your job with delight.
- Love God and neighbor and do it all to the glory of God.

C. Because of God's sovereign and eternal, we should fear Him (3:14-15)

14: We see that God is involved and that what God does **"endures forever."**

- God's work in the world is enduring, it is complete, it is just. It is perfect.
- His nature is unchanging – his steadfast love endures forever; his renown endures forever.

15a: We cannot fundamentally alter the nature of the world.

15b: God ends up balancing the scales for justice "God seeks what has been driven away"

- He will have the last word on injustice and will redeem the time
- In final judgment, he will take every action into account.
- So fear God. God is sovereign. God's work endures. God's work is just.
- Be ready to meet him, stand in awe of him.

The Fear of the Lord

- This is central in Ecclesiastes and in wisdom literature.
- Live in awe, reverence, obedience and trust.
- There are different motives given throughout Ecclesiastes for doing so, but here it is because we are not God. God is God.

"What God does lasts forever."

- He doesn't answer all of our questions – "we can't pull a string and make God dance for us" (Begg) – He is God and we're to revere him.
- God makes everything beautiful in time – we cannot comprehend everything – he is God!
- The recognition that God is God should lead us to enjoy his gifts, and to fear him.

D. Because God is the sovereign and just (and because death is inevitable), we should live to glorify Him (3:16-22).

16: "Moreover I saw" links up with the previous verses.

- Some of the same themes are now touched on, but there is a stronger emphasis now on **death and judgment, on ethics, and on our mortality.**
- The poem began talking about "a time to die" and now it is touched on again.

**There's not only a time to be born and a time to die,
there's also a time to be judged – when this life is over.**

- It is the reflection on judgment that helps us make our lives count.
- Judgment gives my present life meaning and weight.
- 1 Corinthians 10:31 – Whatever you do, whether you eat or drink, do all to the glory of God.” Everything! Even little things.

16: The “place of justice” – that is the law courts.

- The preacher laments the injustice in the world.
- There’s a particular pain that comes when those in authority abuse others; not only the courts, but we think of parents abusing kids, coaches abusing players; pastors abusing others... It is particularly grievous and wicked.

17: Judgment. There will be a day of judgment and a day of vindication for God’s people. He doesn’t go into detail; he simply states the reality.

- Believers hold in faith that God will deal with all the wrong done on earth (Rev 22:11-13).
- There is a time to be born, a time to die and a time for judgment.

18-22: Death. He now centers his thoughts on the inevitability of death.

We are like the animals in one sense animals (18; cf. Ps 73); one of those ways is that like the animals we will return to dust (19-20). Another reference to Genesis 3.

¹⁹ By the sweat of your face
you shall eat bread,
till you return to the ground,
for out of it you were taken;
for you are dust,
and to dust you shall return.”

He’s not talking about our uniqueness as image bearers; only that we will die like animals.

21: He doesn’t state a position on life after death. He just leaves us with the question.

- What he is stressing is the need to work now – not assuming we have plenty of time.
- You will die and you will be accountable to God (v. 16-17).

22: Enjoy the life you have.

- Get busy living!
- Stop looking for some future thing; enjoy your life now, using it wisely.
- It may seem strange to say that a consideration of mortality should lead to joyful work, but that’s what he says.
- We’ve experienced the satisfaction of a job well done
- Do it with joy to God’s glory; you don’t know what will come after your work.
- Do it knowing all your work matters, from spread sheets to changing diapers! (Though I’m not sure how you can enjoy spread sheets, but many of you do!)

Application: So how should we live in view of death and judgment? Wisely!

1. Live with an awareness that you are going to die!

- When you contemplate death – perhaps with a loved one, **you really see what matters right?**
 - Most of you know this.
 - Will you be ready when that time comes?
 - When it comes to receiving Jesus Christ as Savior **there is no time like the present!** (2 Cor 6:2)
- 2. Live with a resurrection in mind!**
- While he gets final judgment right, he does not have a resurrection in view.
 - Here is where he need the whole Bible.
 - Our resurrected Christ conquered death – we read of the curse in Genesis 3 but also of the promise of a Savior – and he has defeated death through his death and resurrection.
 - He has opened the way for our resurrection.
 - Believers will rise with a new body.
 - **We will see that everything we did in Jesus' name mattered; so let us live in light of this good news.**
- 3. Make good use of the time you have now!**
- Get busy doing God-honoring activities!
 - “Teach us to number our days that we may have a heart of wisdom.

The poem describes life in a fallen world.

The following verses describe how we should view time in view of God.

1. **Because God is sovereign over time, we should trust him. (9-11)**
2. **Because God is sovereign and good, we should enjoy him. (12-13)**
3. **Because of God's sovereign and eternal, we should fear Him (3:14-15)**
4. **Because is the sovereign and just (and because death is inevitable), we should live to glorify Him (16-22)**

Trust him. Enjoy him. Fear him. Glorify Him.

While we live in this cursed world, we rest in the Savior who has reconciled us to the Father and enabled us to live lives of meaning and joy.

Jesus came into this cursed world, and took on the pain and suffering for us.

He experienced these seasons:

- There was a time for him to be born,
- A time for him to heal the sick,
- A time for him to build and tear down,
- A time to party with sinners, and to weep at Lazarus' tomb.
- There was a time for him to die.
- There is now a time for him to build up his church...
- And one day soon, there will be the time for his return ... a time for him to usher him total peace.

- **Maranatha.**