

Topic	God Sets The Time
Reference	Ecclesiastes 3:1-15
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We often hear this passage at funerals, but the words are haunting and yet beautiful and as the words are read out they speak to our soul, they connect. This beautiful poem on time is written by Qoheleth, the teacher, Solomon, as a lens through which we can actually see life, looking at life through time. So what he has done is that he uses this poem to sharply focus on some of the issues that we need to look at in the world and in ourselves. The theme of Ecclesiastes is written in

Ecclesiastes 1:3 (ESV) **What does man gain by all the toil at which he toils under the sun?**

Ecclesiastes 3:9 (ESV) **What gain has the worker from his toil?**

So basically this poem is about looking at life and in the end what gain has the worker from his toil.

THE TYRANNY OF TIME

1. God Sets the Time of Our lives

This poetry is often misunderstood. Is this piece of poetry prescriptive or descriptive? If you decide which one it is, it helps you understand, otherwise you won't be able to interpret this poetry. People say it is prescriptive because it says;

- .. a time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing;
- a time to tear, and a time to sew;
- a time to keep silence, and a time to speak;

It is prescriptive as it tells us how to live our lives, because timing is everything. So if you speak at the right time it would be like gold. You speak at the wrong time it will be something else. There are lot of books like *The Seasons of God* by Richard Blackaby or *Embrace Your Season* by Stuart P Webb where you try to find out what season you are in and so therefore you could practice the correct actions, but there is a problem. The clue is given in the passage.

Ecclesiastes 3:1-8 (ESV) **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;**

The season means there is a particular appointment for a time for every matter or desired purpose or event in the world that means its everything fixed. It cannot be prescriptive. You don't get to

decide when you are going to be born or die. So it is hardly likely that this poem is about prescriptive, what to do.

Ecclesiastes 3:10 (ESV) **I have seen the business that God has given to the children of man to be busy with.**

(ESV) **He has made everything beautiful in its time.**

Ecclesiastes 3:13 (ESV) **also that everyone should eat and drink and take pleasure in all his toil—this is God's gift to man**

So this is basically descriptive, it is not prescriptive. It describes at what happens. If we look at the entire song you will see that there are about 28 times that the word 'times' is used. It is a very nice poetic way to tell that the whole of human existence has been mapped out by time and you have got opposites, born then you die, plant and then you pick up, there are positives and negatives.

There is complete list of activity

- born – die
- plant – pluck up
- kill – heal
- breakdown – buildup
- weep – laugh
- mourn – dance
- castaway – gather
- embrace – refrain
- seek – loose
- keep – cast away
- tear – sew
- silence – speak
- love – hate
- peace – war

It tells us that there is no real sequence. Life is a bit of mess. There is good stuff there and there is bad stuff there. It covers the whole of life's experiences. The poem points to events behind the actions. If we are looking at the actions themselves then we might be led to think that this is basically prescriptive, what to do, but it actually points to events behind the actions. For example, time to breakdown which is like damage to property and then you go to tear it down. So these actions all point to the events in our lives and so therefore these are the events of our lives. These are the realities of our lives and if we look at the realities of our life there is something that comes right out and it hits you.

a. There are two strands of life.

You are very good or very bad and everything in between. It is ugly and it is beautiful. Vesna Vulovic was a Serbian air hostess in Yugoslav Airlines. The plane blew up and she fell from 33,000 foot from the tail section of the plane and landed and she lived. No one else survived in that blow. Recently, Safie Rose Roussos went to Ariana Grande concert and she was blown to bits. My father died at the age of 40 with his first heart attack and I have always wondered that. I have patients I have worked on for months and they won't die. I always think that it is not fair. My dad died when he was just 40 and we had to live alone and struggle. The poem is beautiful but it has got a horrible underbelly.

Picture of Faith

Hebrews 11:33-34 **who through faith conquered kingdoms, enforced justice, obtained promises, stopped the mouths of lions, 34 quenched the power of fire, escaped the edge of the sword, were made strong out of weakness, became mighty in war, put foreign armies to flight.**

That is one aspect of faith but that is not what life is all about. The same passage tells you

Hebrews 11:36-37 (ESV) **36 Others suffered mocking and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment. 37 They were stoned, they were sawn in two, they were killed with the sword. They went about in skins of sheep and goats, destitute, afflicted, mistreated.**

These were also heroes no less. So therefore you have got a bipolar picture of life. There are two strands right cut across the Christian church too. Just because you are in Christ does not mean that you get one strand, you get all the healing, all the success, you get all the power. In 1859 Charles Dickens wrote, *it was the best of times, it was the worst of times*. It was a beautiful novel describing his times. CNN had an article at the end of last century in 1999, written by a famous historian, Felipe Fernández-Armesto. He wrote.

It was the best of times. It was the worst of times. The 20th century produced more creativity, more effort, more technical resourcefulness, more planning, more freedom, more power for good than ever before in human history. It was also the century of the most destructive wars, the most inhuman massacres, the most barbarous tyrannies, the worst extremes of wealth and poverty, the foulest environmental degradation, the most trash, the cruelest disillusionment.

It is a bipolar picture of life. It is not changed in the 100 years and this affects us. We all deal with these two strands in life when we did not breathe because in case the other screw drops and then we are not. So we have got deep life produces because of these two strands if you are honest, deep insecurity. We are ruled by time.

b. We are absolutely not in control.

(ESV) **I perceived that whatever God does endure forever; nothing can be added to it, nor anything taken from it.**

So if God has decided that you are going to die tomorrow there is very little you could do about it. John F Kennedy read Ecclesiastes chapter 3 before he died. He didn't realize that these words were prophetic for him on that day that he will be shot and he will die. Somewhere in heaven it is all fixed, every single person here, when you are going to live and when you are going to die.

c. The Net Effect is apparently zero.

Qoheleth says, if you damage your property you repair it, you have tragedy and you have success, you divorced and get married. The net effect is zero. It doesn't what anywhere

Ecclesiastes 1:3 (ESV) **What does man gain by all the toil at which he toils under the sun?**

Ecclesiastes 3:9 (ESV) **What gain has the worker from his toil?**

Ecclesiastes 3:10 (ESV) **I have seen the business that God has given to the children of man to be busy with.**

What is this business? We get a better idea of what this business is by looking at verse 13 of chapter 1

And I applied my heart to seek and to search out by wisdom all that is done under heaven. It is an unhappy business that God has given to the children of man to be busy with.

Life is an unhappy business. So by having this bipolar strand of life it causes us to have an impulse to make sense of life. Why is life up and down, why is life good and bad? See God sets the time. We have got limited time. We are like trapped in an hour glass, you only got X amount of time which is destined and there is uncertainty that it could be good and it could be bad, there is no net gain and because of this you have got what we call an existential anxiety. Soren Kierkegaard wrote about this years ago.

When God sets the time and you are trap by time and uncertainty and there is no net gain and when things like this that anything happens in your life that brings this sharply into focus then you start to think, why I am here, what is my purpose in life, who am I supposed to be, how am I supposed to act. That is what the poem is supposed to be. The only time we read this poem is when bad stuff happens to us. When you are having good time and money is rolling in, you never look at this, because you are afraid you don't want the other to drop. Only when bad stuff happens, this existential anxiety happens. So God sets the time so that we actually have this anxiety. It is all worked in.

2. God Sets Eternity in Our Hearts.

Ecclesiastes 3:11 (ESV) **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 the beginning to the end.**

He says everything is beautiful or appropriate or suitable for its time.

- How can it be beautiful when they blow people up?
- How can cancer be beautiful?
- How can heart disease be beautiful?
- How can cardiac arrhythmia be beautiful?
- How can poverty be beautiful?
- How can disease be beautiful?

How can God say, he makes all things beautiful in its time? If you go to a person who is suffering in a hospital and tell him that God make things beautiful in its time, you are going to get slapped.

What does it mean that He has set eternity into man's heart? The Hebrews do not have a concept of out of time or beyond time or eternity. The Hebrews have a concept about extension of time, forward extension of time and backwards. So when they talk about the eternity, it is the whole of time. Time in its wholeness. It is a transcendent view of life and time where we can study backwards and look forwards.

When you have got a transcendent view of time, if you have got all of time, the future you can think about and the past you can think about and you meditate on that but you only got the present to feel. A dog cannot think like that; they act on their instincts. A human being is different, they can think backwards and forwards and they think about eternity. Einstein has got it right. He says *...for us physicists believe the separation between past, present, and future is only an illusion, although a convincing one.*"

If we look at some of the popular movies. It always reflects an idea that you want to transcend time. Young people will think forward; old people will think backwards. It is possible because God has put eternity in our hearts. In the old days it is divination and magic, they want to find out by cutting through and looking at the internal organs of the animals. Today we are better off because of stock market charts to look, so we actually have, God has put eternity to man's heart, yet he cannot find out what he has done. The desire to know is in your heart, the inability to know is in your head. There is this frustration that is built in to your life. Why does God give you a huge hamburger and your mouth is so small.

We look at progress. Felipe Fernández-Armesto writes, *Finally, it may be that progress is subverted by its own contradictions. It is its own worst enemy because it excites hopes which can never be fulfilled*

Kobayashi Issa is a very famous kabuki poet in Japan. He had a very bad life. He lost five out of five children. So he went to his Zen master and he asked his Zen master, "What is the deal man. I lost every single child. Can you give me some advice and something to touch my soul." Zen master turned to him and he said these words

Just as the sun rises and the dew evaporates. So on the wheel of suffering sorrow is transient life is transient man is transient

It is exactly like what Qoheleth writes, Hevel, Hevel, Hevel and then Kobayashi Issa writes in his poem these words

A world of dew
A world of dew it is indeed
And yet, and yet

His mind and his instincts contradict each other. It is mine, the world is dew, it is transient, it is just hevel, hevel and hevel but in his heart he cannot accept it because God has put that contradiction into our hearts. In his heart it is in yet and world of dew is in his head.

Ecclesiastes 3:15 (ESV) **That which is, already has been; that which is to be, already has been; and God seeks what has been driven away.**

Which means whatever you do in history for next five or six thousand years, history will repeat itself, it won't change. 100 years ago it was the best of times and worst of times, now it will still be a best of times and the worst of times and Fernandez says

There are "few lessons of history," and in any case people never seem to learn from them.

So what will be has been, will be. So therefore you have got sense of eternity because God sets this into our hearts and that cause frustration as not being able to know or grasp that eternity for ourselves.

How is this beautiful?

You have got on one hand God sets the time, makes you ask why I am here, what is my purpose in life? Who am I am supposed to be. On the other hand God sets eternity in our heart and frustration at not being able to know or change, you cannot grasp all the time and live through all the time.

3. God makes all things beautiful in its time

So God gives us life and life brings us existential angst. It gives you frustration because there is a whole of life that you cannot enjoy. It is like a tapestry. On the backside we will see all sorts of strands that are going everywhere in a disorderly fashion. When you see the other side of tapestry you see a beautiful pattern in life. Now, unless you know the purpose for which the

person weaving the tapestry does this, all the strands will be haphazard, all the pain in your life, the scars in your life, they seem really haphazard as they are not beautiful because you don't know the purpose. When you know the purpose, beauty comes with purpose. If you do not know the purpose it will never be beautiful and so therefore the word of God says

Ecclesiastes 3:14-15 **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.**

Beauty comes with a purpose. If you look at that purpose it is a purpose which God has in mind, not what you have in mind. If you look at life with what you have in mind it is like the back of tapestry, the strands go here and there. It is like what Macbeth says

Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player that struts and frets his hour upon the stage And then is heard no more: it is a tale. Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, Signifying nothing

If you look at the back of tapestry that is exactly what life looks like, because you are looking at life from the viewpoint of yourself. Life is for me to enjoy, for me to live, have children and then pass it on to the next generation and then inevitably life becomes messy and horrible and painful because that is not the purpose of life.

David Talbert and Soni were celebrating their 50th anniversary. In Vietnam he was shot in his right leg, lost almost all his blood, went to hospital and met his wife, within two weeks he proposed. Now if he did not get shot he would have never met his wife, but nevertheless it seems as if God makes beautiful things out of bad things. The purpose of life is fearing God.

Joni Eareckson Tada at the age of 18 jumped off into a stream and she broke her neck and spent the rest 50 years of her life in a wheelchair and she actually wrote a testimony and said, when I get to heaven I am going to stand there, I am going to hug my wheelchair and tell Jesus that this chair made me feel weaker. When I was weaker I kept on leaning onto you more and then I felt that you were stronger. So that chair is actually beautiful because the whole of her life transformed so that she touched millions of lives all over the world and that chair which we think is horrible, it is a dark strand in our lives that runs everywhere, it looks ugly but for her it is beautiful because it put that into her life. It has purpose, it made a closer and stronger and more in love with our Lord Jesus Christ. It is beautiful only because if it is based on God's purposes. Therefore, when God works in our heads, when he sets the time we experience existential anxiety, when he works in our heart with the sense of eternity and yet we cannot find out what it is, it causes human beings to fear God that there is a God that both the heart and the head tells you there is a God and you need to acknowledge that God, to fear that God, to love that God and walk with that God. This is how genesis describes Jacob

Genesis 29:20 (ESV) **So Jacob served seven years for Rachel, and they seemed to him but a few days because of the love he had for her.**

When you actually love someone, it does not look like seven years, it only looked like seven days. So bad stuff in the world even the wheelchair will seem beautiful if the purpose is properly discerned.

Acts 17:26-27 (ESV) **And he made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their dwelling place, 27 that they should seek God, and perhaps feel their way toward him and find him. Yet he is actually not far from each one of us**

Our purpose of life is to seek God, to acknowledge him as your savior, as your God. In the Garden of Eden man has to toil and work and face frustration, woman has painful childbirth and subjugation. Why did God do that? Was it retributive? It was a redemptive punishment for them. If you don't suffer you will never look to God that is why the strand of suffering in life is there because the ultimate purpose is to make it beautiful when we turn and we repent and we move before God. A man born blind in John 9. Jesus's disciple asked why is he blind.

John 9:3 (ESV) **Jesus answered, "It was not that this man sinned, or his parents, but that the works of God might be displayed in him.**

So this man spends his whole life blind and then Jesus heals him and he stands behold the highest authority of the land, the Pharisees and Sadducees and all the rulers and he tells them, I don't know what you think about Jesus but I was blind but now I see. His blindness gave glory to God.

Philippians 1:12-14 (ESV) **12 I want you to know, brothers, that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel, 13 so that it has become known throughout the whole imperial guard and to all the rest that my imprisonment is for Christ. 14 And most of the brothers, having become confident in the Lord by my imprisonment, are much more bold to speak the word without fear.**

Prison becomes an opportunity to be like the blind man. Paul says I am in prison for Jesus Christ and all the guard will have to see that Jesus Christ must be something isn't it. That makes prison beautiful. The prison doesn't become a dark strand anymore; it becomes a bright strand of gold. It is supposed to be beautiful because God is in control.

Ecclesiastes 3:14 (ESV) **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**

So every strand in our life is there because God is working a purpose in our lives. So when we are looking at this great big red strand in our life whether it is prison or illnesses, if you

remember that whatever God does endures forever nothing can be taken away, nothing can be added, God is in control and that gives us great comfort.

Romans 8:28 (ESV) **And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose**

The last thing we need to look at is that there is a greatest time and greatest beauty but when the fullness of time came God sent

Galatians 4:4-5 (ESV) **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.**

All of time, the whole of humanity is at the edge of seat and waiting for that one time of Christmas, good news of a great joy, born to you in the city of Bethlehem the savior of the world, at the right time. He came and then he said

Mark 1:15 (ESV) **and saying, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel.”**

We are living in this time, the time is now to bring the gospel, to believe in the gospel, to believe that Jesus Christ died for our sins and redeems our time and this message we bring to the rest of the world. What should we do at the current time?

Ecclesiastes 3:12-13 (ESV) **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.**

So there are bipolar strands in life, there are difficulties in life we don't understand why these things happen, the Qoheleth is telling us to chill out. Why you are worried about what is going to happen tomorrow, why you are mourning for past it is over, it is finished. Some of us are living in the future, but the teacher is saying that, no because you don't know what is going to happen to you, you live now. This is a decision; you make this decision today because every strand of your life is already determined by God. There is nothing actually that you can do about it.

Some years ago there were people like us which have debts, family problems, they have got hurts, they are thinking about the future, they are too busy, they were bankers, they were police people, they were fireman. 18 people took the airplane and slammed into two buildings. Many died but the ones that survived we should read their testimonies of how they started to live their lives after the accident. They still got all the miseries in life.

Pasquale Buzzelli fell from 22nd floor to 7th floor when the building collapsed. His wife says, every day is a gift. Brian Gafney says, *“It’s been a grind, but it changes a person’s perspective as what to stress over when you know you’ve dodged a bullet, not once, but twice,”* he said.

Bruce Salvog was also a survivor. He says

“If you’ve walked away from a near-death experience, it’s like an epiphany. The plan wasn’t for me to die but to do something else with my life “Money isn’t the story here anymore. It isn’t about a bigger house, or a yacht, it’s about life and service and I have not looked back and not regretted it one second.”

Why does it have to take two buildings to collapse for us to realize the most important things of life is to live to do good, to have joy and to enjoy the things that your simple toil has brought to you. That is what Qoheleth is telling us today. We are too mashed in the past, we can’t let it go, we are too fearful and frightened of the future and it is driving us from the real gift that God has given us, it doesn’t take a disaster to pull our head out of the mug.

Sujo John was an immigrant to America in 2001. He came to America to look for a better life. He got a job in one of the twin towers. He thought he had a better life. He came down from the building, he was rushing to the other building because the plane had hit and his wife was supposed to be in the other building and he ran towards it and just there he was with a crowd of about 15 people and just at that moment the entire second tower collapsed and it was debris falling all over and just before that the people were telling him, trust in Jesus, call upon the name of lord and he will be with you and some of them called and some of them didn’t. Every single one of people around him were crushed by the stones and the debris and steel. Only he stood in the middle of that rubble and the haze and he walked out alive.

These scenarios tell that God has a plan, start living it now and so therefore what he does with his time now is that he goes to different churches and tell people about what Jesus did for him, saved his life. He has gone back to India and he started a home for abused woman, prostitutes, it is called Rahab Home.

It takes something like that for us to decide to change our life, it does not have to. The message for us this morning is that there is time to be born and there is a time to die. You can’t change all that, every single strand of your life is determined by God. It doesn’t take a disaster for you to wake up or illness to wake up, God gives you all that anyway, so that you realize your purpose. It can only be beautiful if you understand God’s purpose in your life. So don’t fret about the past, don’t worry about the future, live for God’s purpose in your life today, grab what he has given you today, hug it close because you could lose it tomorrow and yet live in such a way that it would honour and glorify God and there is one more time I want you to look at

Matthew 24:44-46 (ESV) **Therefore you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect. 45 “Who then is the faithful and wise servant, whom his master has set**

over his household, to give them their food at the proper time? 46 Blessed is that servant whom his master will find so doing when he comes

There is not much time. It has been 2000 years since the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. He is coming soon and the most important time in the world it will be just like 9/11. You don't know when 17 people or 18 people decide to drive plane inside the building but God knows. When he comes there will be no more time, it will be judgment time and he wants to look at every single one of us. It is not fixed in a sense, it is open to you that whether we are faithful and we live and use God's gift in its proper way to bring beauty in your life, your suffering, find God's purpose and fear Him.