

## ‘MANY SEASONS’ ECCLESIASTES 3

**[St Mark’s Northbridge, All Services, Sunday May 1, 2022]**

### **1. Learning To Manage Time.**

If an alien visited planet Earth and spent a week in Sydney, I reckon they might return home and report that one of the major ambitions of people who live here is to learn to manage their time. When people ask us how we are, we often use words that describe how full our lives have become: really busy, flat out, under the pump, exhausted. And when people ask us what we hope for, or even would like prayer for, we often respond by saying we’d like to find a way simply to get everything done, or we’d like to be able to develop better time management skills. And there’s a whole industry now that exists to capitalise on our time management quest. People have made millions writing books, developing courses, and spruiking strategies- all designed to help us be better managers of our time. And, of course, the implicit assumption of this quest, and this industry, is that time is something we are able to master. So often we operate with this conviction- that our lives would be better if only we could be lords of our time.

I wonder if you’ve ever stopped to ponder what God thinks about all that? Perhaps you have. And perhaps you’ve supposed that God would prefer that our lives were a little less frenetic and anxious. Maybe that’s true. But what about the assumption itself? Does God think we can master our hours and days like this? Would God agree that being lords of our time is an achievable ambition? Well, I want to suggest to this morning/evening that Ecclesiastes 3, at the very least, asks some pretty searching questions about that assumption. And I’d like us to spend the next little while considering why that is.

This chapter is mostly a chapter about time. And I’d like us to consider it under three headings today/tonight- time and human activity (verses 1-8), time and eternity (verses 9-15), and then time and judgement (verses 16-22).

### **2. Time & Human Activity (3:1-8).**

And we begin with the poem that we find in verses 1-8- probably the most famous verses in Ecclesiastes.

‘There is a time for everything, and a season for every activity under the heavens.’ He’s not saying, of course, that everything is “right”- that there are no wrong or unholy activities. It’s significant, I think, that none of the things he lists in these verses are inherently sinful things. And, as we’ll see later in the chapter, the Teacher believes there are such things as just and unjust actions, righteousness and wickedness. But what he is saying here is that there are seasons in life- seasons of making and developing and nurturing things; as well as seasons of unmaking, and unravelling, and ending. The Teacher says that there are appropriate times for many things, even things that might seem, on paper, to be opposed to each other.

He wants us to know that it’s too simplistic to talk about human existence simply in terms of life, when human existence also includes death. It’s too simplistic to talk only about laughter when there are also tears. And he also wants us to know that we can’t reduce God using just one side of a stark duality as if he’s for life, and peace, and joy, and as if death, and conflict, and sadness come from someone else, or exists under someone else’s sovereignty. The sovereignty of God over time is the assumption that undergirds this whole chapter. There is a time for everything and a season for every activity in God’s world, under God’s hand. God is the Lord of death as well as birth. He rules when his people weep as well as when they smile. His reign extends over hatred as well as love. He is King in the midst of war as well as in the midst of peace.

Most of the opposites he lists here make some sort of sense to us. We know that life begins with birth but ends in death. We know that the natural world thrives because things are planted in one season and uprooted in the next. It might feel like a difficult issue for us with our modern sensibilities, but we also know that the Bible is not categorically opposed to all killing, and all war, but that alongside God’s insistence on the sanctity of life, there are also, in God’s good purposes, times for violent justice.

The one in verse 5 about scattering and gathering stones is foreign to us I suspect. But it probably refers to the ancient practice of covering a field with stones to stop it producing crops, and conversely clearing a field of stones so that a crop can be planted and harvested<sup>1</sup>.

The rest, I think, are not foreign to us at all. We know there are times when a hug is needed and times when it would be inappropriate to touch someone. We know there are times when it’s good to laugh and right to cry. We know too, although we’re not always very good at it, that there are times to speak and times to keep our mouths shut. We understand these things with our minds, and we know these things in our experience.

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<sup>1</sup> See 2 Kings 3:19 + 25; Isaiah 5:2, 62:10

And the perspective of these verses is a perspective we find throughout the Bible. The Bible acknowledges from beginning to end that there are different times for different things. The Bible affirms that human existence is a tapestry of different activities and moments. Each day and each year are different to the one before. Life under the heavens is definitely not boring.

### 3. Time & Eternity (3:9-15).

But secondly, time and eternity. And in verses 9-15 the Teacher returns to the themes of chapters 1 and 2. Verse 9.

[Read 3:9-10]

In the midst of different times and seasons, the meaninglessness of life remains. And this is a burden people must carry.

But then we get verse 11, and this is quite an amazing verse.

[Read 3:11]

In the first place, he's saying that God has made everything 'beautiful' in its time. Again, it's an observation about timeliness rather than a moral judgement. And I think his point here is simply to reiterate and affirm the perspective he gave us in verses 1-8. Everything has its proper place in God's world. At the right time, many, many things can be beautiful<sup>2</sup>. He's saying again that whilst birth is beautiful, at the right time death can be too. Whilst laughter is beautiful, there is also such a thing as a beautiful tear. And whilst love is beautiful in obvious ways, there is a beauty in righteous hatred in its proper time too.

But notice what else the Teacher says in verse 11: 'He has also set eternity in the human heart'. Not only are there appropriate times for a rich variety of things in human existence, but there is also a sense, deep in every heart, that life- real life- is bigger than the times we inhabit on the earth. That sense of eternity, of life beyond our time if I can put it like that- that sense may be being suppressed or ignored or rebelled against, but in the hearts of all men and women it's there. And that too is a vital thing to grasp. Because if our hearts are made for life beyond our time as well as for life inside our time, then that will have all sorts of implications for how we view and understand and use our time now. And again, the Teacher will flesh this out more as the chapter continues.

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<sup>2</sup> Perhaps 'appropriate' is a helpful translation? See the Holman translation for example. But according to Michael Eaton, this is a word generally applied to beauty in appearance (eg. Genesis 12:11)- *Ecclesiastes* (Tyndale)- p.81, so the NIV translation is to be preferred.

But, for now, he wants us to grasp that this complex combination of time and eternity in the hearts of men creates a kind of confusion. He says that we cannot ‘fathom what God has done from beginning to end.’ Knowing that there is a time for everything, and knowing that there is also eternity, only serve to remind us that God is beyond us, and his understanding is beyond ours. The relationship of beauty in time, and eternity in hearts, is, in a very real sense, unfathomable to us. There is much that he, and we, do not know.

But, says the Teacher, there are some things I do know. He goes on in verse 12-13.

[Read 3:12-13]

Firstly he knows that if everything is beautiful in its time then happiness, and doing good, and eating and drinking, and satisfying work- these are all expressions of God’s kindness. They may not be the source of ultimate meaning, but they are nevertheless his gifts to be enjoyed.

But secondly, he also knows what he says in verses 14-15.

[Read 3:14-15]

Eternity means that the work of God outlasts time as we know it. And it’s not at the mercy of human interruption or change. And the work of God in the world is done so that we might learn what God is like and come to honour him. It’s an incredible thought, isn’t it, that while he is at work all through the world, God’s purpose is full of grace. He wants to be known by us. He works in the world so that we can know him.

And then verse 15<sup>3</sup> leads in to the theme of the final section of the chapter- time and judgement.

#### **4. Time & Judgement (3:16-22).**

And here the Teacher adds to his reflection on time the all-important moral dimension. Whilst he’s said that there is a time for everything and that everything is beautiful in its time, he’s also prepared to say that some things that take place in the world are unmistakably wicked. And this too resonates with our experience of human existence. Verse 16.

[Read 3:16]

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<sup>3</sup> Note that verse 15c is notoriously difficult to translate. The Holman has ‘God repeats’; the ESV ‘God seeks what has been driven away.’ There seems to be very little consensus on what the original Hebrew means.

And as he reflects on this, it leads him to reflect on God's judgement- his perfect justice. Verse 17.

[Read 3:17]

Here he uses the language of time in a new way. Because in verse 17 he's talking about there being a time when every activity will be weighed, when it will be assessed by God. And every deed that has made up the colourful tapestry of human existence will receive its proper judgement.

This, of course, is essential for every person to understand if they're going to be wise- because we don't exist in time, or act in time, without accountability. Our times now must be lived in the light of that time then- at least they must if we're to live wisely. Many, sadly, do not live that way. Many live as if this time now is all the time there is. They live as if there's no accountability for how their time is spent, for how they act, and for what they do. But that is a tragic foolishness. And since you and I see that foolishness in the world all around us, all the time, it ought to trouble our hearts each and every day. Because there will be a time for every activity, a time for every deed to be judged. There will be a time of accounting.

And in verses 18-21, the Teacher connects the time of judgement with the day of death. And he points out that in respect to death, all God's creatures are the same. At one point we're all breathing, but there will come a time for every creature- humans, goldfish, and giraffes- when our breath will stop. We will return to the dust. Time on this earth does not go on indefinitely. For every one of us, it ends. And this too is part of the burden of meaninglessness that God has laid upon us. Which is why the chapter also ends like it does- verse 22.

[Read 3:22]

Here he reiterates what we read in verses 12-13. It is good to enjoy our work and to savour the times we have- because they won't last, and after this life, something new will happen to us- something we can't yet see. There is time now and time to come. And we need to live as best we can in the intersection of those two realities. That's what this chapter is all about.

## **5. Learning To Live In God's Times.**

It's about learning to live in God's times- the times he's given now, and the time to come. And I hope what is obvious to you is that these are God's times more than they're ours. He is the Lord of these times. And that realisation renders our constant

striving to master our time a little silly, I would have thought. Time is not something we can ever really gain mastery of! Of course, it is possible for us to use our time wisely or foolishly. It is possible for us to spend what God has given productively or frivolously. So there is wisdom in our desire to manage time well. But we must remember our limitations. And we mustn't kid ourselves that we can become the lord of our time. Someone else is already in that role! Our task is to learn to live in harmony with the time God has given us. And according to these verses, that task has three key components. So let me summarise for you now as we conclude.

**- knowing what time it is (and seeing its beauty)**

Firstly, living in God's times means knowing what time it is and seeing its beauty. This chapter reminds us that simply running with our own agenda will often mean we end up out of step with the times we find ourselves in. Instead, we need to be aware of what's going on in the world around us, sensitive to what's going on in the lives of the people around us. You don't want to uproot while someone else is planting. And you don't want to laugh when someone else is grieving. You don't want to be helping someone search for what they've lost and give up too quickly. You don't want to speak when someone else needs you to be silent. There is a time for everything, and our responsibility is to live harmoniously with each moment we're in- seeing the beauty of what each moment calls for. And that's why we could also add to the list we've been given in verses 1-8.

There's a time to work late and a time to come home and be with your family. There's a time to clean the house and a time to sit on the couch and watch Netflix. There's a time to tell someone you've been hurt and to seek their repentance, and there's a time to silently bear with your frustration and disappointment. There's a time to discipline a child sternly and a time to laugh at their cheeky behaviour. There's a time to get married and a time to separate from a spouse. There's a time to keep working and a time to retire. There's a time to quietly pray for a needy friend and a time to make a phonecall to see how they are. There's a time to try and work through your own issues by yourself and there's a time to go and see a counsellor. There's a time to do some more thinking and a time to bite the bullet and make a decision. There's a time to vote for the political party you've always voted for, and a time to vote for someone new. There's a time to endure a complex and stressful friendship, and there's a time to bring such a friendship to an end.

I could go on. But you get the idea. In God's world, there are many different seasons and moments- all of them beautiful in their own way. And minute by minute we need to see what this beautiful moment is we're in right now, and to embrace it. That's the first thing.

## - accepting what God gives

But the second thing Ecclesiastes 3 teaches us is that living in God's times means accepting what God gives.

### □ a burden

And he's given us a few things. But the first thing I want to mention is what the teacher refers to in verse 10. God has given us a burden. And that burden is having to live with the reality that some of our times are hard. And a life marked by unavoidable difficulty is a life characterised by the kind of meaninglessness that Ecclesiastes is pointing out. There is a kind of sad resignation in this chapter I think. It doesn't depart from a trusting sense of God's sovereignty in everything. But nevertheless there's an under-current of grief here which is right and true. Because things like death, and war, and fruitless work, and broken relationships, and sorrowful tears are genuinely painful. Whilst they all can be beautiful in their own way, they are nevertheless part of the brokenness and frustration of life under the sun. And this chapter encourages us to resign ourselves to the frustration, and to expect these pains. One of our common problems as Christians is that we adopt expectations about life that people in the world around us adopt without assessing those expectations in the light of the Scriptures. And so we find ourselves expecting life to be happy, seeing hard things as annoying aberrations, and then feeling disappointed that God has let us down. But this is simply a product of unbiblical thinking.

And so we need to hear what the Teacher says to us here. And what he'll go on to say later as well: 'When times are good, be happy; but when times are bad, consider this: God has made the one as well as the other'<sup>4</sup>. That's Ecclesiastes 7:14. And that's Biblical thinking. He rules in everything. He's in charge of every experience we have. He's not just the God of birth, and laughter, and love, and peace. He's the God of death, and weeping, and broken relationships, and war.<sup>5</sup>

### □ limitations

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<sup>4</sup> Note also the way the theme of time surfaces at other points later in the book as well- eg. 8:5-6, 9:11-12.

<sup>5</sup> It is important to remember, though, that this is not just something to accept with grief. Because this is also, the source of our comfort. The famous preacher Charles Spurgeon once gave a sermon based on Psalm 31:15- 'my times are in your hands'. Here are a few lines from it: 'Sweet to my soul are these words- "My times are in thy hand." Take the golden sentence home with you. Keep this truth in your mind. Let it lie on your tongue like a wafer made with honey. Let it dissolve until your whole nature is sweetened by it. . . . Few are the words, but mighty is the sense, and full of rest.' 'Whether times are reviving or depressing remains with him who is Lord both of time and of eternity; and we are glad it is so.' [Spurgeon- May 17, 1891: 'My Times Are In Thy Hand'- Sermon No. 2205]

But a few other things too. Because the second thing this chapter says God gives us is our limitations. As Jasper reminded us last week, this book is like a battering ram that breaks down our pretensions. And particularly here the Teacher reminds us of the limits of our understanding. There are things we can know, but there is so much we don't. And this too is a reality we need to accept from God's hand. We ought to humbly acknowledge, as verse 11 says, that living in God's times means not being able to fathom much of what God is doing. As one writer puts it, the Teacher of Ecclesiastes presents us with 'a sovereign . . . God who acts in ways fully calculated, yet not calculable'<sup>6</sup>.

### □ gifts

And the third thing the chapter tells us God gives us are gifts to enjoy. We might have to live with pain and trouble, and we might have to live with our limitations, but we also receive pleasures and satisfactions from his hand. They are not the meaning of life, by any stretch of the imagination, and they are not the resolution to our grief and confusion. But they are nevertheless things that make life easier, and more joyful.

And once again we're told this so we'll avoid falling into worldly thinking. We can, can't we, drift into the suspicion that God is anti-fun, anti-pleasure, stern, dour, focussed on rule-keeping, and not very pleased if he sees us enjoying ourselves. But that's not true is it. God is the God of birth, and laughter, and love, and peace. God really did make a time for those things. He is the God who, as verses 12-13 say, gives us food and drink, and satisfying work, and good deeds to do, and happiness along the way. He is the one who 1 Timothy 6 describes as the God who 'richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment'<sup>7</sup>.

{{And if that's true then we need to work hard at resisting over-simplification. Because there's a lot of over-simplification that goes on in Christian circles. Perhaps, like me, you've heard Christians say, sometimes even Christian preachers, that we should really give all our best time to ministry because that's what really matters. And they might imply that there's no time for rest or pleasure given the urgency of the gospel going out. And then on the other hand, you'll sometimes hear people say that we should be much less busy because, more than anything, God wants us being still and contemplating him. People will mis-use the story of Mary and Martha, or misuse Jesus' teaching on seeking first the kingdom, or distort other parts of the Bible all to get us to make one thing the sole focus of our lives. But these are all reductions of what the Bible actually teaches. And they all, in the end, reduce God.

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<sup>6</sup> Daniel Fredericks, *Coping with Transience*- p.37, quoted in Thomas R Schreiner, *The King In His Beauty*- p.302

<sup>7</sup> 1 Timothy 6:17

In God's word, and in God's world, there is a time for work and a time for rest. There is a time for ministry and a time for other pleasures. There is a time for sitting at the feet of Jesus and just listening, and there is a time for pouring your guts out so that people might enter the kingdom. There's a time for giving your best in the pursuit of excellence, and there's a time for doing what you can and saying that's all you can do. In my life, God can be glorified by my grateful heart as I sip a glass of red just as much as he can by my zealous heart as I preach a sermon<sup>8</sup>. I hope you believe that. Because that's what the Bible teaches. And anything else is an over-simplification that we need to learn to resist.}}

#### □ **the hint of eternity**

Well, the fourth thing Ecclesiastes 3 says God has given us is that hint of eternity. So while we accept the burden he's laid on us, and our frustrating limitations, and while we enjoy his good gifts, living in God's times also means remembering that judgement will come to us all- a time for every activity and every deed. And we ought to live now as those who remember that we are accountable- for every choice we make and every hour we spend.

{Because we might need to live in the balance of work and rest, the balance of speech and silence, the balance of tears and laughter. But we are never called to balance concern for others and self-indulgence. One of those is righteous and the other is wicked. And as I suggested before, knowing what time it is has a lot to do with seeing what's going on in the lives of others and seeking to love them. That's always the life we're to live. And Ecclesiastes never commends self-indulgence. So whether I'm enjoying a glass of wine or preaching a sermon I should seek righteousness. I should remember the eternity that God has placed in my heart. I should remember that there will be a time when every deed will be judged.}

And for those of us who read Ecclesiastes now, so many years later, we are helped in this, I think, by knowing a little more than the Teacher knew. He asked some rhetorical questions at the end of this chapter. Verse 21.

[Read 3:21]

And verse 22.

[Read 2:22b]

I wonder what difference it makes to us to know the person who can answer those questions for us?

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<sup>8</sup> See Chester, pp. 23-30.

**- trusting his justice, with fear**

Well, I'm out of time, but the very last thing to say today/tonight is to point out the third thing the Teacher tells us here about what it means to live in God's times. And that's this. We do live in a world marked by great evil and great injustice do we not? This is true for us personally as well as globally. And this is part of the burden we carry.

But the Teacher reassures us here that as we live in God's times in God's unjust world, we can still trust in his ultimate justice. As verse 17 says, 'God will bring into judgement both the righteous and the wicked'.

Which reminds us, of course, that God's justice is not just for wicked people out there, but for us too. And so it's right that our trust of him to be coupled with proper fear too. Which is where the book of Ecclesiastes ultimately wants us to land- the fear of God. And we hear that in these verses today. So I finish with this- verse 14. [Read 3:14]