

Everything Beautiful in its Time
Ecclesiastes 3:1-15
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Read Ecclesiastes 3:1-15

“The words of the Lord are pure words, like silver refined in a furnace on the ground, purified seven times.” (Psalm 12:6)

Introduction: What Phase Is This?

John Craigie is a folk singer-songwriter who has a song that I heard called, “What Phase Is This?” Here are some of the lyrics, they don’t really rhyme, it’s more of speaking over guitar with a little melody:

“I went through my Legos phase / went through my Lincoln log phase / I went through my baseball card phase / went through my Saturday morning cartoon phase / I went through my Zeppelin phase / went through my reggae phase / I went through my teenage phase / went through my “no smiling for pictures” phase / I went through my “girls are stupid” phase / went through my “girls are awesome” phase / went through another “girls are stupid” phase / I went through my teacher phase / it only lasted half a day / went through my jam band phase / it lasted a little longer than it needed to. (Chorus) What phase is this? What phase is this? All we do is change, so how long do I get to keep this phase?”¹

John Craigie’s not a Christian singer, but he has humorously paraphrased Ecclesiastes 3:1-8. I’m sure you recognize similar phases of growing up in your own life. It’s a good reminder that our lives have different seasons, different phases, different chapters where we are working through different things. The different chapters of schooling help us divide up our childhoods, then we have early career single years, then married but no kids years, then the years of raising kids; Kath and I are wondering about the challenges of the next phase known as “empty nesting” that will look a whole lot different than any other seasons/phases in our lives. Every chapter, every season brings us challenges and obstacles that we have to conquer then and there, and it’s good to be reminded that life isn’t always going to be fun and joy, that there will be times of hardship and being challenged. But it’s also great to be reminded that the difficult and tedious parts of life will not always plague us; there will be joy. What season of life are you in? Are you in a time of building up and working hard? Are you in a time of mourning and hurt? What is God teaching you in this season?

Let’s turn to our text to see how

I. Time Provides a Season for Every Activity (vv. 1-8)

¹ *For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven:*

² *a time to be born, and a time to die; a time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is planted;*

³ *a time to kill, and a time to heal; a time to break down, and a time to build up;*

⁴ *a time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance;*

⁵ *a time to cast away stones, and a time to gather stones together; a time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing;*

⁶ *a time to seek, and a time to lose; a time to keep, and a time to cast away;*

⁷ *a time to tear, and a time to sew; a time to keep silence, and a time to speak;*

⁸ *a time to love, and a time to hate; a time for war, and a time for peace.*

¹ From the album “Capricorn in Retrograde: Just Kidding... Live in Portland”

How many of you can't help but hearing the old 1960's Pete Seeger song (popularized by the Byrds) "Turn Turn Turn" as we read those verses? It was a pretty faithful reworking of these verses to fit the melody of the song. It's really interesting that these contrasts of good and bad times in life seemed to connect with the peace-loving, flower-power generation of the 60's, right? This poem touches on every area of life, everything between being born and dying. And it doesn't just tell us the good, happy things that we make time for - the healing, building, and laughing - because this is life under the sun, life after the fall of humanity into sin. So we get the ugly and harmful - the killing, the tearing, the war - in addition to the positive.

These 14 sets of opposites attempt to cover all the complexities of life, all of the choices and decisions that we must make with wisdom to know when each one is appropriate and right at the time. Sometimes you find out something that's happened and you don't know whether to laugh or cry or get angry. Sometimes it's unclear whether a situation calls for an embrace or refraining from embracing. Recently, one of my daughters told me that when she's mad, we shouldn't try to cheer her up, just leave her alone. My other daughter appreciates me trying to work through her angry feelings. I have to have wisdom in handling each one, when to embrace and when not to. Nations must decide if it's time to go to war or to pursue further talks for peace. These choices and seasons change as we age, they change depending on who we are relating to and what the situation calls for.

We're reminded here that there is balance in life - even happy lives have seasons of pain, even difficult lives have times of joy. Every season passes and a new season takes its place. These cycles make life more enjoyable, less monotonous, and God accomplishes His work of renewal and rebirth. And there's hope embedded in these words: Your planting may be wearying, but it will lead to a harvest to reap. You may be in a season of mourning but hang on because a time for celebrating will come! If we don't recognize that we are not stuck in seasons forever, we will miss what life has for us. I think of Mrs. Havisham from Dickens' novel *Great Expectations*. She was left at the altar by her fiancé, and it so scarred her that she stopped living her life. She literally made all the clocks in her house stop at 8:40, the minute she learned that her fiancé had left her. She lived in perpetual mourning, still wearing her wedding dress every day of her life, determined never to move beyond that defining tragic event. Ecclesiastes 3 would tell her that her pain does not mean she would never be happy again and that a time of grieving could give way to a time of joy and embracing.

So often we don't want to have to endure the negatives on this list - we don't want a time of war, we don't want to mourn, or to refrain from embracing. If life was up to us, it would always be full of joy and excitement and things going our way, right? Why doesn't God hand us life like that? Because #1, human beings choose enmity with God and so we choose conflict and struggle. But even those who love God would not grow or mature if everything in life was easy and we never had to struggle or suffer. And when circumstances force those times, it is the most courageous thing to do the things we don't want to do. This is probably the best place to quote a famous *Lord of the Rings* scene: Frodo the hobbit is telling Gandalf the wizard that he wishes he didn't have the burden of carrying the ring of power: "I wish it need not have happened in my time," said Frodo. "So do I," said Gandalf, "and so do all who live to see such times. But that is not for them to decide. All we have to decide is what to do with the time that is given us."² (*End quote*) We are not masters of our fate, we do not control time; we must react to the times and situations that are thrust upon us. And it is to our own detriment when we do not submit to the times and seasons. If we plant during harvest time, we'll never get a good crop; if we dance when we should be mourning, we don't grieve for the dead; if we keep silent when it is our turn to speak, we risk letting things happen that we

² J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Lord of the Ring*, (New York, Houghton Mifflin, 1994), p. 50.

oppose. May God give us wisdom to discern the times and the courage to respond to the opportunities that we are given.

The next five verses explore the question of who makes the times the way they are. Is it impersonal forces or the tides of culture or the devil forcing us to endure things? There is only One who ordains all of time, and we can be sure that

II. Time is in God's Hands (vv. 9-13)

⁹ What gain has the worker from his toil? ¹⁰ I have seen the business that God has given to the children of man to be busy with. ¹¹ He has made everything beautiful in its time. Also, he has put eternity into man's heart, yet so that he cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end. ¹² I perceived that there is nothing better for them than to be joyful and to do good as long as they live; ¹³ also that everyone should eat and drink and take pleasure in all his toil—this is God's gift to man.

Verse 9 asks the “so what?” question following up the first 8 verses - we have times for all of these activities, but ultimately, what have we gained? Knowing Solomon as we do, the answer to that rhetorical question is probably, “Nothing.” But not so fast, because verses 10 and 11 give us a bigger view of our lives: we have been placed here in the middle of God's big story. He has given us work to do, He has given us purpose and reasons to be here, but we will not necessarily understand what He is working out. And Solomon concludes with vv. 12-13, saying essentially: “You don't know what God is doing in the grand scheme of things and it's frustrating to try to figure it all out and reconcile it all. You'll feel so much better if you take life as it's given to you - work when you have to work, eat and drink and find pleasure when you have the time. That's the only way you're going to truly enjoy your life.” I'm reminded of Acts 1:7, where Jesus tells His disciples, “*It is not for you to know times or seasons that the Father has fixed by His own authority.*” And Deuteronomy 29:29 - “*The secret things belong to the Lord our God, but the things that are revealed belong to us and to our children forever.*” The right response to the frustration of not understanding the big picture of God's work in our lives and in history is to enjoy what God has given us to enrich our lives.

I want to spend some time in verse 11 because it's intense. The first phrase, “*He has made everything beautiful in its time,*” is one of those verses that's always ripped out of context and put on the sides of mugs or on a piece of artwork with a picture of a butterfly. And how we usually interpret that is that God redeems everything and makes everything work out just right for us. And I'm sure that's a little bit of the sense of this - that, as Romans 8:28b says, “*...all things work together for good, for those who are called according to His purpose.*” But the Hebrew word for “beautiful” can also mean “fitting, suitable, appropriate.” This more echoes the phrase in Esther (4:14) where her uncle tells her that she was put into the place where she was “*for such a time as this.*” In other words, God has placed you and everything around you at just the right time that He wants you there. It is appropriate that you are there “for such a time as this,” and like Frodo, you have to decide how you'll live in the time you're placed in. I didn't want to start a new pastorate right as COVID hit America, but that was God's timing, so we're going to keep working and see what God wants to do in the middle of all of this.

Have you come to terms with the fact that God is the first cause of everything that happens in your life? So all of those times that you go through (weeping or laughing, mourning or dancing, etc.) are ordained by God and He has placed you in the middle of them. Everything else in life knows their place - the sun knows when to rise and set, the snow knows when to come, the animals know when to hibernate and the birds know when to fly south for the winter, all those things... humans are the

only ones who can try to ignore the seasons and the occasions that God gives us, and stubbornly work against what He has set in motion. Wisdom teaches us to submit to His timing.

The end of verse 11 - "*He (God) has put eternity into man's heart, yet so that he cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end*" – so often people want answers for how God could allow someone to get sick or die, or allow some natural disaster. But we usually don't get that insight on this side of heaven. And what about when the opposite happens – when God brings beauty and good out of sin and disaster? Are we as quick to acknowledge Him then? One of my FB friends (that none of you know) posted this this past week:

"Lord, I simply can't wrap my mind around, yet put into words, how well you have treated me. I'm brought to tears when I think back to all the times you were with me and I didn't notice. I'd be dead without you. You created me and years after that you even interrupted my suicide attempts... Remind me of your power, loyalty, and love when I put you aside and live as if I don't and have never needed you. Remind me of how there was joy in suffering and somehow hope in darkness... I don't want to miss out on who you are and what you are doing any more than I already have... You are so freaking awesome."

That's a great perspective on God's work in our lives. We do not know God's eternal plans, but we can be sure that

III. Whatever God Does Endures Forever (vv. 14-15)

¹⁴ I perceived that whatever God does endures forever; nothing can be added to it, nor anything taken from it. God has done it, so that people fear before him. ¹⁵ That which is, already has been; that which is to be, already has been; and God seeks what has been driven away.

Solomon is really starting to teach some solid theology here! God's actions are eternal. Anything He has purposed and planned to do will be accomplished; no one can stop Him, no one can alter His actions. Psalm 111:7-8 tells us that "*The works of His hands are faithful and just; all His precepts are trustworthy; they are established forever and ever, to be performed with faithfulness and uprightness.*" God's plans have been set from the beginning of time, and He continues to work them out.

You may hear the phrase, even from unbelievers and atheists, that "everything happens for a reason." But that statement from someone who denies there is a God or some kind of intelligent designer in the Universe makes no sense. How can there be a reason if there is no one working things out or making sure that things are given purpose and meaning? Maybe they mean chance or karma, but the laws of the universe don't give any reasons, they just exist. Gravity does not act with intentionality, hoping to make things work out well in the end; it just exists and keeps you from flying off into space. Yes, we can agree that everything happens for a reason, but only because we can agree with the greater proposition that "everything happens for God's reasons."³

And furthermore, God's mighty acts are made known to humans to remind us that He is great and that we should have a healthy fear and reverence of Him (end of v. 14 - "*so that people fear before him*"). We'll see the fear of God pop up several more times in Ecclesiastes, each in a slightly different context. Here the idea that God is the eternal One who determines all things, and that no one is greater than Him or can overrule Him, should simultaneously make us fear and give us comfort. It should also lead us to trust Him and rejoice in His gifts. God is infinite, has no limits of space or power or time. God not only endures forever, He is not subject to time, He stands outside of time, above and before everything.

³ Adapted from Ligonier Ministry's TableTalk article "A Time for Everything" from February 2015, p. 51.

Conclusion:

I have five questions and then five suggestions, because some people need questions to help them answer how they'll apply these things and others need straight suggestions. Five questions:

- 1) Am I willing to accept that time is outside of my control, and that God is in control of everything that happens in my life and in the world?
- 2) Will I adapt my life to whatever season I find myself in, or will I stay in denial when I am not happy with what is happening around me?
- 3) Can I wait on God's timing in my life even when I want those things now?
- 4) Will I accept God's good gifts in my life with joy and thanksgiving, or will I take them for granted?
- And most importantly: 5) When it's my time to die, will I be destined for eternity?

Here are 5 ways to help you apply this passage, all start with "A":

- 1) Appreciate all time as a gift from God. As I said before, we are living in His Story, so thank Him for the time you are given.
- 2) Accept that God has a purpose in both the good and bad times of life.
- 3) Affirm your trust in God during confusing times. You may not know what God is doing or what your response should be, but trust that He is there, He is in control, and He is good.
- 4) Apply the present time to doing good. Since you can't live in the past or the future, seize the present day to obey and please God.
- 5) Anticipate time beyond your death and live your life in light of that. Set your mind on things above, make your calling and election sure, and live a life that God will reward in eternity.

I've noticed something about human beings: we often wish that time was not fixed; that the past could be redone. How many times do people sit around and think, "If only I had done _____ instead, my life would be so much better"? Or they ask each other, "If there was one thing in life you'd have done differently, what would it be?" How many shows or movies feature time travel and the ability to go back in time and change things? And the Marvel universe is turning to the multi-verse and their latest series is "What If?" asking how things would have turned out if different things had happened to their superheroes. There's a new show on NBC called "Ordinary Joe" where they go back and forth between this guy's three possible futures – a rock star, a doctor, and a police officer; it all depends on what path he took after graduating from college. But here's the deal: those are all fascinating questions to ask and ponder, but you don't get to redo anything in life. You can't relive any of your past and you can never know the ramifications of your future. All of time is in God's hands and we make the best choices we can with the time we're given and then we live with the choices and consequences.

We don't get a redo, but we can find redemption. We don't get to undo our past mistakes, but we do get to find forgiveness and have our sins wiped away, remembered no more and no longer held against us. The Gospel of Jesus Christ tells us that He died for our sins and that they are no longer counted against us. We are justified in God's sight, which I've heard a good way to remember that "justify" is "just as if I had" never sinned. Jesus took our sin onto His account and paid the penalty for it while He was dying on the cross, and He gave us His perfect righteousness.

The life of Jesus is a picture of a man who knew what time it was, what season He was in. Jesus was born at the right time; Galatians 4:4 tells us that, "*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.*" Jesus knew when it was time to begin His public ministry. He knew when it was time to heal a leper or a blind man. He knew when it was time to break down someone's false righteousness and when it was

time to build up those who needed grace and forgiveness. He knew when to mourn for His friend Lazarus and when it was time to rejoice and dance. He knew when to be silent before His accusers and when to speak the words of life to the crowds and His followers. He knew when it was time to seek the lost sheep and when to cast away the goats. And He knew when it was time to head to Jerusalem where He would be arrested, convicted, and put to death. “To the day He died, Jesus knew the right time for everything. From beginning to end God’s sovereignty over time and eternity is perfectly and gloriously displayed in the life and work of Jesus Christ.”⁴

“He has put eternity into man's heart” – the way we commonly understand that phrase is that God has given us a connection or a yearning for heaven. And that’s very true, but we can also receive true eternal life in our hearts as we receive the Holy Spirit into our lives and trust in Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior, bridging the gap between us and God the Father. As we are justified in God’s sight, forgiven of all of our sins, and brought into God’s family, we are given eternal life because of Jesus’ sacrificial death for us. Amen.

Benediction

2 Peter 3:18 - *“But grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. To Him be the glory both now and to the day of eternity. Amen.”*

⁴ Philip G. Ryken, *Why Everything Matters: The Gospel in Ecclesiastes* (Glasgow, Scotland: Christian Focus, 2015), p. 66.