

ECCLESIASTES 3:1-15 WHAT TIME IS IT? - The wise person stewards time, realizing God controls all things.

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Time is one of the most valuable commodities we have. Once it is gone, we can never get it back. It seems like something is always vying for our time. Additionally, constantly being busy has become a status symbol, and we may fear being looked down upon for failing to keep ourselves busy. Consequently, many view time as a taskmaster. However, Ecclesiastes 3 reveals that time is a gift from God. Instead of being slaves to time, time is meant to give us the freedom to enjoy God and glorify Him in the opportunities He gives us as we move from one season of life to the next.

Would you rather have a greater quality of time or quantity of time? Explain.

UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

ECCLESIASTES 3:1–4:6

At the beginning of Ecclesiastes, the Teacher raised the question, “What do people gain from all their labors at which they toil under the sun?” (1:3). It is the central question to the book. The word gain means “lasting benefit”—that which remains of a person’s life after death.

The Teacher’s obsession was to discover if there is any lasting benefit to what a person does with his or her life. He observed that everything people strive to be and accomplish in life will eventually be forgotten. Believing that intellectualism and the world of academia can solve the mysteries to life’s most profound questions is a dead end. The promise that a life of luxury and self-gratification will result in lasting satisfaction is bogus. The fruit of one’s labors will eventually rot, and the supposed insights of human wisdom and philosophy are fraudulent (1:12–2:22). “Everything is meaningless” (1:2).

Life makes sense only when one recognizes it as a gift from God and lives to please God. This person will receive the wisdom, knowledge, and joy that comes from God (2:26). This truth lays the foundation for Ecclesiastes 3:1-15. If all of life’s activities and labors have meaning when lived and understood in relationship to God, then one needs to accept and embrace the seasons of life as God has ordained them. Each season of life—with all of its challenges, sorrows, and joys—is a gift from God. The seasons of life remind us we are mortal and subjugated to time. What we do is temporary, but what God does will last forever. Yet God has put a thirst for eternity in the human heart. It is impossible for one to quench this thirst through self-effort. One’s thirst for eternity can only be quenched by the grace of God through faith in the person and work of the Lord Jesus Christ. As Jesus said, “but whoever drinks the water I give them will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give them will become in them a spring of water welling up to eternal life” (John 4:14).

As you read Ecclesiastes 3:1-15, consider how embracing the seasons of life honors God. What makes each season identified significant?

EXPLORE THE TEXT

TIME AND PLACE (ECCL. 3:1-8)

V. 1 There is a time for everything, and a season for every activity under the heavens: V. 2 a time to be born and a time to die, a time to plant and a time to uproot, V. 3 a time to kill and a time to heal, a time to tear down and a time to build, V. 4 a time to weep and a time to laugh, a time to mourn and a time to dance, V. 5 a time to scatter stones and a time to gather them, a time to embrace and a time to refrain from embracing, V. 6 a time to search and a time to give up, a time to keep and a time to throw away, V. 7 a time to tear and a time to mend, a time to be silent and a time to speak, V. 8 a time to love and a time to hate, a time for war and a time for peace.

VERSE 1

In poetic form, Solomon listed a series of opposites, pointing out that each has been appointed by God and has an appropriate time and place in life. The point is that everything that happens in this time-bound universe is under God's sovereign authority. Consequently, the message for believers is they should not only accept the seasons of life but embrace every season God has appointed in their lives as His gift to them—as opportunities to glorify Him by doing what is right at the right time (3:11). Recognizing this truth is implicit to wisdom.

Wisdom in the Scriptures is the fear of the Lord—knowing the right thing, doing the right thing, doing the right thing at the right time, in the right way, to the right extent for the glory of God. The seasons of our lives are gifts from God, blessing us with opportunities to enjoy and employ the gift of wisdom that He has given us (2:26). The message is not fatalistic nor is God arbitrary. Rather, it points to the truth that God's timing is perfect.

What challenges must a person overcome if he or she is to embrace all of life's seasons and situations?

Type your response here

VERSES 2-8

The first pair of opposites in verse 2 is birth and death. God has appointed both as well as everything that happens in between. Death is as much a part of the human experience as is birth. In contrast to the eternal God, mortal man has a beginning and an end. The sooner we come to grips with mortality, the more we are able to recognize the preciousness of life.

A time to kill likely refers to war between peoples. The Bible recognizes the reality of war and even the necessity of it at times. It also recognizes capital punishment. Solomon was not concerned with what constitutes just war or when and if capital punishment should be implemented. Rather, he was merely stating there is a time to kill. He also acknowledged that there are times when a situation calls for healing. Similarly, there are times we must tear down things and other times when we need to build.

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In verse 4, Solomon used two extreme expressions of human emotions—sorrow and joy—to indicate there are occasions that produce a whole range of human emotions. Whether it is in the spontaneous instances when we cry or laugh or the more formal occasions when we mourn the loss of a loved one or celebrate at another's wedding, all of these experiences appropriately are part of the human experience.

Biblical scholars debate the meaning of the first pair in verse 5. If taken literally, it is probably a reference to clearing a field and removing stones for plowing and planting. The idea of gathering stones would be for the purpose of building walls around the field or the walls of a house. However, other scholars understand these expressions euphemistically from an ancient Jewish interpretation, interpreting "to throw stones" as sexual union and "to gather stones" as sexual abstinence (Lev. 18:19). This interpretation fits well with the second part of this verse, indicating that there was a time for a married couple to embrace and a time for them to refrain from embracing, since anyone who touched a woman during her menstrual cycle was deemed unclean according to Old Testament law (Lev. 15:19-33).

The Lord Himself demonstrated the first point of verse 6 in the parables, where a man searches for his lost sheep and a woman searches for her lost coin (Luke 15:1-10). These are pictures of Jesus who came to seek and to save the lost (Luke 19:10). Relatedly, the second pair of opposites—keep and throw away—is a reminder that nothing of this world is ours forever or lasts forever.

The two phrases, a time to tear and a time to be silent, probably allude to mourning or times of repentance. In ancient Israel, people tore their garments and were silent as expressions of grief or repentance for sin. However, it was understandable people were able to mend what they had torn and speak to one another at other times since no one was expected to continue their expressions of grief permanently. Additionally, once one repented of sin to God, one was to carry on in the joy of His forgiveness.

To love refers to choosing to care for and cherish, but to hate means to reject and repudiate. Both loving and hating are wise if the objects of our love and our hate are what God loves and hates. Also, the Bible

shows that while a kingdom should seek to be at peace with other kingdoms, there are times when war may be the only path to peace. The Scriptures depict this truth in the realm of spiritual warfare as we are to don the “full armor of God” and “fight the good fight of the faith” (Eph. 6:13; 1 Tim. 6:12).

How should recognizing that there are complementary seasons of opportunity that open and close in life impact how one lives?

ENJOY LIFE (ECCL. 3:9-13)

V. 9 What do workers gain from their toil? V. 10 I have seen the burden God has laid on the human race. V. 11 He has made everything beautiful in its time. He has also set eternity in the human heart; yet no one can fathom what God has done from beginning to end. V. 12 I know that there is nothing better for people than to be happy and to do good while they live. V. 13 That each of them may eat and drink, and find satisfaction in all their toil—this is the gift of God.

VERSES 9-11

Before Adam sinned, work was a gift God gave him in the garden (Gen. 2:15). With sin, this gift became cursed with difficulty. Yet the ability to work was a gift all the same; just as childbearing became painful for women, it does not negate the wonderful gift of a child (Gen. 3:16-19).

The problem for human beings is that, while God has given us the ability to work and to acknowledge that everything happens according to His perfect timing, we are unable to understand God’s timing. While we may have a sense there is a time and place for everything under God’s rule, we are incapable of grasping the true measure of eternity. It is this limitation that makes life a struggle. We have a desire to know the future, but its grasp is beyond us. Our consciousness of God and eternity speaks of God’s having created us in His image (Gen. 1:26-27). Nevertheless, because of the fall recorded in Genesis 3, sin has severely affected our consciousness of all things eternal. It is for this reason the gospel is truly good news. John 3:16 says, “whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.” What humans cannot grasp or accomplish, God has done for us in the person and work of the Lord Jesus Christ.

How does having a healthy sense of one’s mortality help one be a faithful steward of one’s time?

VERSES 12-13

Knowing that God has appointed the occasions and seasons of life, we should gladly accept and embrace them, trusting the sovereign God who has given us all things. We should enjoy the good blessings that God gives us, and during difficult seasons we need to remember that “in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose” (Rom. 8:28). In Hebrew, the last phrase in verse 12 is literally, “there is nothing better for them to do than to rejoice and to do

good in one's life." Thus, God's gift to us is to live joyfully and holy in Christ. God has given believers the gift of the Holy Spirit for this purpose (Gal. 5:22-23).

What are some practical ways of seeing good in the work and investments of time we make in this life?

BIBLE SKILL: Use a Bible or theological dictionary.

Review articles about eternity in a Bible or theological dictionary. Examine Bible passages included in the articles. Note the contrasts between God being identified as eternal and humanity as being created but looking toward eternity. How does this contrast impact your understanding of Ecclesiastes 3:11?

GOD WORKS (ECCL. 3:14-15)

V. 14 I know that everything God does will endure forever; nothing can be added to it and nothing taken from it. God does it so that people will fear him. V. 15 Whatever is has already been, and what will be has been before; and God will call the past to account.

VERSES 14-15

In contrast to the futile accomplishments of humans, everything God does endures. What God has done may not be improved upon or diminished. So what is God's ultimate purpose for the occasions and seasons in our lives? It is so that we fear him. It is to have what the Bible often calls the fear of the Lord. The fear of the Lord is a deep-seated reverence and awe for God that causes men to want to please Him at all costs. It involves wonder, submission, worship, love, and admiration inspired by His authority.

God is personally involved in the everyday affairs of His creation—in sustaining all things and working all things toward His perfect goals. In that security, we can enjoy life as a gift as we eat, drink, and labor (v. 13). This is a call to actively pursue good things in life. In a sense, these verses are about perspective. Though life sometimes can feel dark and gloomy, God has given us good things that break through the clouds like the morning sun. There are still rainbows in our fallen world. They are often the simple things, the things we take for granted. Our view of time—what we do with our time—affects how we live our lives.

God is the primary Actor in the natural world, and we are dependent on Him. The clock of time is powered by the providence of our sovereign God. We make real, responsible decisions every day, but in reality we know that the seasons of life are mostly out of our hands. In this, we learn to accept that we have very limited access to the big picture. Perhaps God intends us to be like children who trust their Father to know what's best because we cannot see what He sees and we cannot know what He knows.

How does recognizing that God is at work in the time granted and situations faced give a person hope and comfort?

KEY DOCTRINE: Stewardship

Believers are under obligation to serve God with their time, talents, and material possessions and should recognize all these as entrusted to them to use for the glory of God and for helping others (John 9:4).

APPLY THE TEXT

Believers must use time as God made it to be used, doing the right things at the right time.

Time is a gift, and believers should make the most of the time granted to them by God.

Believers can take comfort in knowing that God actively works in human history to fulfill His plans.

List activities and actions you have been putting off or avoiding. How can you embrace the items listed, looking for God's work in each?

Review your schedule for the next week. What adjustments do you need to make to be a better steward of the time you have?

As a group, memorize Ecclesiastes 3:11. Discuss each phrase in the verse and review the verse in different translations. Prepare to share with each other during the week ways this passage impacts you this week.