

What Time is It?



Eccl. 3:1-15

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During the day, there is a question I wonder about a lot, and the question is what time is it? Now, right now some of us might say it's not 9:38 AM, but to me it's not 9:38 AM, it's time for me to preach. In some cases, we measure time by an hour and a minute, but at other times, we measure time by events, we measure time by moments, and we measure time by seasons. I believe the writer of Ecclesiastes is wrestling with that question, what time is it? We are going to answer that question this morning as we read Ecclesiastes chapter 3.

Now, if I understand correctly, we set our clocks back last Sunday for the last time — we will never go back to Standard Time. In the spring, we will set our clock forward but we will never gain that hour back. In the United States, we are going to live on Daylight Savings Time instead of Standard Time in forty-eight of the states, all except Arizona and Hawaii. Now I don't know about you, but I don't like that I like Standard Time, because that means, for me and my day, it actually gets darker quicker in the afternoon and my day ends quicker for me. December 21st is my favorite day of the week because it's the longest night of the year. I love that day best of all days. I mean, when you get up the sun ought to already be up, in my

opinion. There's going to be a debate. Some of you are like me and you like Standard Time, and you aren't going to like it next year when we switch to Daylight Savings Time and we are never going back to Standard Time. Some of you are reversed. In the early morning service, I got a few boos and I got some hand claps for the people who love that we are going to Daylight Savings Time all the time. See, all of us see time differently. I mean, if you are a Tennessee fan, you measure the year by a season, football season, correct? If you are from Kentucky, it's basketball season.

We all have different ways in which we look at time. This morning, that's what the writer of Ecclesiastes is doing — he's looking at time but I think what he really wants all of us to realize is we live under God's time. So every time you have that thought...*Daylight Savings Time? Standard Time? What time is it?* I want you to think about God's time and am I responding right to the fact that I am living in a world that's on, not my time, but God's time. Let's read the first 8 verses of Ecclesiastes chapter 3.

Scripture

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

I want to give a disclaimer. As best I can tell, Ecclesiastes chapter 3 begins with a poem, a song. Solomon was a master at writing poems. He was a master at song writing. Me? There's no love for poetry in me at all; I am a prose guy. Now, verses 1–8 are a song, a poem, but 9–15 is the explanation of why the writer is writing the song and what the song's really about. I am that guy who when a new song comes on the radio that Memish is listening to, I don't get it. She knows I don't get it. She will look at me and say, "You didn't get that, did you?" And I say, "No, I didn't get it." But I have lived with her long enough to know not to ask what the song's about and why it's being sung, but to let her listen to the song in its totality. And then after the song, she will patiently and lovingly explain it to me — but look at me like she has no clue why I don't get it! I am a prose guy. Verses 9–15 are in prose, but let me tell you what I have done for you and for the Lord...I spent most of my week studying a song. I'm not 100% sure I understand the song, but I think I do, so I'm not going to be dogmatic at all. As a matter of fact, I called Kory last night and said, "Here is what I see in this text, but it's a song." He said, "Dad, it's okay if you contradict me." So I may contradict Kory this morning or he may contradict me later, but I am admitting to you upfront that I got a passage of Scripture that I probably shouldn't be preaching because half of it's a poem. Got it? So I have tried to do my due diligence with the poem in verses 1–8, but I can't wait to get to the explanation of the poem in 9–15!

Solomon says, for everything there is a season and a time for every activity under heaven. As Kory's already said previously, the phrase, "under heaven," the phrase, "under the sun," is talking about Solomon trying to figure out how life is to be lived under the sun without regard to knowing God. Can you imagine trying to figure life out under the sun? See, that's hard for me because ever since I was been a kid, I have been exposed, not to just life under the sun, but life above the sun. When Solomon writes this song about life under the sun, what he's really talking about is how life is in

a fallen world. Now, you and I can identify with that because even as believers in Christ who live above the sun we still live below the sun in a world that is fallen. So that's what Solomon's going to write about.

Now, here's where I am a little envious...I am a lot envious, to be honest with you — songwriters can take a truth, a thought, and write it in three and a half minutes and be done, and it takes a preacher with prose fifty minutes to say the same thing. Then, when the preacher has spent fifty minutes saying the same thing the three-minute song says, nobody remembers the fifty-minute sermon but everybody sings the three-and-a-half-minute song! Give me a break, amen! Did you know that in the 1960's, someone put a tune to these verses and made it a song? And then, it was recast later as a song. Are you aware of that?

Listen to this...in a fallen world everything has its season. Every activity under the sun in a fallen world has its time. And so now, the songwriter's going to sing about time. He's going to talk about twenty-eight seasons but he's going to arrange them in pairs of fourteen. These are called merisms where he takes one 'time' and then contrasts it with its opposite 'time.' Using Hebrew poetry, he's going to make a statement, a merism — and then, he's going to put another merism with that merism so that the second merism gives clarity or more detail to the first statement.

So, from the skill I learned from Celisa explaining songs to me, I want to try to break this song down for you. I think it's broken down into four stanzas, so to speak. In the first stanza, there is a group of eight "a time to" phrases. In the second stanza, there is another group of eight. In the third stanza, there is a group of four. And then in the fourth stanza, there is a group of eight again. When we put this song together, we see the totality of life lived under the sun, the totality of what life's like living in a fallen world. I didn't like it at first when a songwriter changed the words to Amazing Grace and added that little phrase...*my chains are gone*, but I now like it. Not to change God's Word, but I want to remind us as we listen to this song that it is viewed differently now for us who live on this side of the cross — Solomon is living *before* the full revelation of God in Christ so that skews his song a little bit, but he still nails it on what life is like in a fallen world.

Let's look at the first stanza, "A time to be born, a time to die; a time to plant, a time to pluck up what is planted; a time to kill, and a time to heal; a time to break down, and a time to build up." This week I meditated on this, and I think each of those eight seasons is describing life in a fallen world that has a beginning and it has an ending, and you need to remember that. Life has a beginning. Life under the sun, life in a fallen world, has an ending. Now, when it says there is a time to be born, Hebrew scholars will say that this should not be stated as a time to be born, but it should be stated as a time to give birth. It is talking about the blessing of the ability to give birth that God gives to us as people, the blessing to bring life into being as He did when He spoke everything into existence. But when you bring life into existence, know this — in a fallen world, that life will end. So those of us who live under the sun are going to have a season where we experience life, but we will also have seasons where we experience the death of that life.

Next, the writer said there is a time to plant and a time to uproot what has been planted. Now, some people want to say a time to plant and a time to harvest. No, no, no, no, no. That's not what the writer had in mind. See, in his day, you planted the seed, the seed grew, the seed produced fruit, and then after the seed produced fruit you uprooted the plant. Have any of you ever uprooted something that was still alive that you planted? That's the picture here. Again, it's that metaphor of you giving life to something, you plant it — but in a fallen world it's not going to last forever — you are going to uproot it, you are going to take it away.

Then look what he says. Now, watch this. The first two merisms (or the first four seasons of time) start with the positive and end with the negative. Start with birth end with death. Start with planting end with uprooting. But this next part of this stanza starts with a negative, "A time to kill, and a time to heal; a time to break down, and a time to build up." Now as Christians, we are going to struggle here with this "time to kill." But please hear me say this; the writer is not writing from a prescriptive point of view, he's writing from a descriptive point of view. He's not saying what's right or wrong, what's moral or immoral. What he's saying is this is how life is, there are going to be seasons when people kill intentionally, and you are

going to experience that in a fallen world. You may be on the other end of that, you may have a family member who's on the other end of that, or you may be in a country where that happens, but that is going to be offset with "a time to heal." There's a time when you don't kill but you healed a person from the wound or the injury or whatever they have done. That's what life looks like in a fallen world. There's going to be a time to break down. Solomon knew this. He knew there would be a lot of things he was going to invest his wealth in and he was going to build it up and then the guy who followed him was going to tear it down, break it down! Solomon knew that those things he was building were not going to last forever. But then, there's that time where you do build up, and you may build up after you tore down something previously. So just be careful what you are building, and just know it's not going to last. No matter how hard you try, there's a season when it's going to be torn down, but praise the Lord, you had that season to build it up.

Now we go from this cycle of life, this beginning and end, to understanding what we experience in life when we go through these seasons. Look what he says in the second stanza, "A time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance; a time to cast away stones, and a time to gather stones together; a time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing." If you examine these, all of these deal with emotions. You had better get ready for this — there's going to be a time when you are going to have a time or a season where you are going to weep, you are going to be moved to tears, you are going to be moved to sadness, and you are going to express that some way. You can't stop it. It's going to happen. I love all of our humanitarians who are trying to take pain out of the world, but it's not going to happen. In a fallen world, we are going to weep — but we are also going to laugh. I know that every week of my life, as long as I am alive and Michael Palmer is alive, I'm going to have a laugh because he's going to call me with a joke, he's going to answer his phone saying it's "the funny farm," and he's going to make me laugh and I like that. Aren't you thankful that there are moments in life when we laugh?

In a fallen world, under the sun, there is absolutely going to be as much weeping, if not more, than laughing. That's what the writer's trying to say.

That's what this song is about. But sometimes, you just can't cry your tears and shut it off, and there is a mourning season. It doesn't matter how much everybody tries to tell you something to make you laugh, you can't, and you are not going to. You are not weeping; you are mourning the loss of someone, the loss of something.

But when you are in that season, there's also going to be somebody else in another season of life who is in the season of dancing. The Hebrew scholars say this word really isn't the word for dance; it's the word for skip. I assume Solomon was like me; he didn't have much rhythm in his body. So when he wanted to describe dancing, his dancing looked like my dancing would look, it's more like skipping. The point is there's a time when we are saturated with grief, but then there's a time when life is so good our feet hardly touches the floor and life looks like a dance!

"A time to cast away stones, and a time to gather stones together." I love this...but now to really understand this, you have to remember what life was like back then. Do you do you remember when God talked about Israel and how He was going to plant them as His vineyard? He said one of the first things He did was to remove the stones from the field before He planted them. See, the Hebrews knew God created the world and they thought God might have had angels assist Him in creating the world — so the thought was that when God had the angel spread all of the rocks out over the earth, the angel actually tripped at the border of Palestine and dropped all of the rocks. Palestine is rocky, and so Israel is always gathering or casting out stones. Now here's what happened, this is in 2 Kings, chapter 3. One of the ways that you got back at your enemy (when you could) is you took rocks with you into battle, and when you conquered him, all of those rocks that he had taken out of his field, you threw rocks back into his field, his best fields. Can you imagine emotion that's so strong that you want to ruin the property somebody else has? Now, let's make this real. Have you ever wanted to smash somebody's car? Have you ever wanted to slam somebody's door? That's what this is referring to here...except imagine somebody taking stones and just filling your farm land with them. Yeah, there's a time to do that. Now, again, this is not prescriptive, this is not saying it's right to do that, so don't go do this. Keep

your rocks to yourself! It's saying if you live life under sun, there are going to be some people who are going to really mistreat you and do some really mean things to you, and that's going to be a season. But those stones that are thrown at you — do you know what you can do? You can gather them up and you can get them out of your field, and do you know what most people in Israel did when they took the rocks out of their field? They made a fence around their property. Go to Europe and you will see the same thing.

"A time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing." Do you feel these emotions? I wish you guys could have been with me in August when I got to go back to Brazil to the RBBI. It had been two and a half years since I had been with my pastors, and I want to tell you we didn't say a word but we hugged, and we hugged, and we hugged. I got more hugs than you can ever imagine. I got longer hugs than you can ever imagine. *Da abraço me* ~ 'give me a hug!' In that hug, you felt the emotion of how those pastors were so glad to see me, but you should have seen the hug I gave them! Have any of you been in that hug, maybe with your wife, and it's good — and then all of a sudden she quit hugging — and being a guy, you knew you did something but you didn't know what you did? The fact that she stopped embracing you...she didn't have to say anything. Have you been there? Have you ever walked into that room or that store where you saw them see you, and they acted like they didn't see you? You got the message of how they really feel about you. They had rather go down the toilet paper aisle than to acknowledge you! That's the emotion of this song.

Look at the third stanza, "A time to seek, and a time to lose; a time to keep, and a time to cast away." In the first two stanzas, it is life being a cycle, having a beginning and an end. Now for you it's linear, but for life in a fallen world that just keeps cycling — birth, death, birth, death, birth, death, birth, death, planting, uprooting — but your time is short; it's like a vapor. We carry around all of these emotions in a fallen world. But now, he deals with something that's really big for us in America being in a capitalistic society, and that's our possessions. This is the wealthiest man on the planet writing this. In his day, Kory said his wealth was established

at two point two trillion dollars. We can't even measure that in inflation today. And he tells us there is a time to seek. There is a season in your life where you go after something, you try to possess something, but also know there will be a season where you lose it. Now, here is where we struggle — what time is it when it comes to our possessions? When do we say, I have enough? When do we say that? At the same time you are in that season of seeking, there will be others who will lose everything, and it will come to you one day too. You aren't going to be able hold on to it. That is just life in a fallen world.

Look at this next line, "A time to keep, and a time to cast away." If this principle weren't true about living in a fallen world, we wouldn't have to have attics in our houses. You know, there's that time when you possess and you have to decide, am I going to keep this? So we put it in the attic because we are going to use it again, right? We're going to need it at some point so we are going to hang on to it and put it in the attic. That little garage next to the house? That's not enough anymore. We have to have a building out back because we want to keep so many things. But then, there's going to be that season where you are going to throw it away. Can you imagine how humbling that is to know you put something in the attic that you thought was so valuable you made your husband go up in the attic and put it in a certain place? Twenty years later, you forgot it was there, and now you are going to throw it away. I mean, is this not true? How do you know if you are in the season of putting in an attic or throwing it away? That's what Solomon is wrestling with and that's what many of us wrestle with, life under the sun, life in a fallen world.

Now, the last part of the song, "A time to tear, and a time to sew; a time to keep silence, and a time to speak; a time to love, and a time to hate; a time for war, and a time for peace." I put these together, these eight merisms, because I believe these speak about relationships. Solomon was talking about how life has a beginning, how life has ending, he talks about emotions we are going to have in life, he talks about the possessions we are going to acquire or discard, and he ends with relationships. Now, I admit I may be missing this — but I have read enough prose in the Old Testament in the historical books where they are describing relationships,

especially people's relationship with God, especially people who are in a deep relationship with someone who wants to show somebody else how sorry they were for what they did. To show their sorrow they would just rip their clothes, and put ashes on their head, and they would sit in the presence of God, or in the presence of the king, or the presence of the one they had harmed. I'm thinking they must have had a lot of clothes back in those days! Can you imagine every time you blew it and wanted to get right with somebody, you had to tear your clothes? Do you know what they would do? Once everything had been made right, they would sew that piece of cloth together. So, there's a time to confess and repent. Are you in that season where you are going to need to repent and confess? You will one — that's just life in the fallen world. Or, are you in that part where you need to sew? See, if we aren't careful many of us let our mistakes of the past define us in a fallen world. This is saying there's a season where you get over what you have done and you sew your clothes back together, because even though you were in a wrong relationship or wronged in a relationship, you can now be right in a relationship that used to be wrong and we get it back together.

Now, you know this next one, silence...there is a time in relationship when you just need to zip it, not say a word. You have been there, right? There is nothing you are going to say that's going to make this right or make them right, so you just zip it! It's the best thing you can do. But then, there's another season where you speak, say how you feel. You need to talk about it, get it out on the table. Now, generally in life under the sun, generally in a fallen world, we go to the extreme. We got the person who never says a word, and we got the person who never hushes. The speaker pursues the one the one not talking and the one not talking runs as fast as they can to get away from the one talking. What the writer is saying here is you are going to have a moment when you need to zip it, but then at other times you need to talk. How do you know when to be quiet and how do you know when to talk? That's what Solomon is struggling with.

And then, watch what Solomon does in this last part, "A time to love, and a time to hate; a time for war, and a time for peace." The first merism here begins with a time to love, ends with time to hate. It starts positive, ends

negative, but the last sentence starts negative, ends positive because he wants you to know this is just how life is. There's going to be a time when people love you, but then there's going to be time when people hate you. This isn't saying we have the right to hate, it's just saying it's going to happen. You know what happens when hate isn't dealt with...it leads to war. You know who you are at war with...you know every time you see him or her, the defense mechanism comes up and you are ready. That's just life. You are not going to change it; it's going to happen, life under the sun, life in a fallen world.

Then Solomon ends this with war and peace...if you crisscross this, hate eventually leads to war, and love leads to peace. Now, that's what we would all choose, but we don't get to choose. That's what the writer is trying to say. In life, you are not on your time. You don't have control, someone else does, and that leads the writer to say what does a man profit from his toil? If this is how life is, what does it profits us to live in a fallen world?

The next verse says, "I have seen the business that God has given to the children of men to be busy with." He saw the business with which God has made man busy and he saw how unhappy man is, and this is why he wrote this song, to really say yeah, you got the right to be unhappy. Because if you live your life in a fallen world, if you live your life under the sun and you don't have a perspective of life above the sun, you will always be asking why. What does it profit you?

Look at the next verse, "He has made everything beautiful in its time." Now we bring the one in who governs time, and that is God. So even though we live in a fallen world, guess whose time we are on...we are on God's time. He is sovereignly in control of all of these twenty-eight seasons. Do you know what God has done, being God? In its time, He makes all of these seasons good for you, regardless of which season you are going through. Now, what the Bible is doing, what Solomon is doing here, is he's writing a song out of what he knows God did in Genesis 1 — how God created when He created everything, it was good. Now we live in a fallen world, but do you know what God has done? God has taken sin that man brought into the world, and God's still governing time and seasons so that when that

happens to you, guess what? God's going to make it good in your life. How many of you have ever had something happen and you thought your life was over? You were devastated, you were mourning, and in that moment you had no clue that a few years later you would be doing what you are doing right now. You now look back and know that was the best thing that ever happened to you because you would have never seen it on your own. We can't say that about all things, but Solomon is saying every season of our life, God makes that season good.

Now, how can it be good unless God has a purpose? God's got a purpose and we don't need to forget that. Look at this next part, "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." Now, I think when it says God has put eternity in our heart, this isn't saying we long to die and go to Heaven, because I don't know of anybody that longs to die and go to Heaven. I mean, everybody wants to go to Heaven but nobody wants to die. If I told all of you who want to go to Heaven this afternoon, we will meet at three o'clock, there would be very few of you. Those of you who are going to go with me at three o'clock to Heaven, the primary reason you would want to go is because you have someone there you love...but then the reason you don't really want to go is because of the people that you love here. That's not what this is talking about, I don't think. When it says God has put eternity in our heart is that even though we live in a fallen world, we still are made in the image of God and we long for eternity. We long to see life from God's perspective. We love and want to figure out life, and that's in our heart, but God says...*I won't share my glory with you. I made you in my image, but you are not me and you are never going to figure it out. You are never going to know what I'm doing from beginning to end.* What does that ultimately lead us to have to do? We are going to have to trust God.

Now, look at this next verse, "I perceived that there is nothing better for them than to be joyful and to do good as long as they live." I wonder why Solomon didn't say 'me?' I wonder if he got to a place that he's given up on really discovering what life's about, especially at this moment. But he knows there's going to be some who are going to figure it out, some of the children are going to figure it out, and that is why he says I perceive that

there's nothing better for them than to be joyful and to do good as long as they live. So here's what we need to do living in a fallen world — we just need to choose to be joyful. Quit striving after happiness because happiness is based on what's happening to you, and so many of us are trying to change what's happening to us so we will be happy. Joy comes from an inward relationship with God that sustains us in a fallen world because our joy is coming from a right relationship with Him! It doesn't matter what season of life we are in, we can be joyful because we can concentrate on our relationship with God no matter what season we are in.

Now, when it says, "to do good as long as they live," I think it isn't a moral perspective exactly, it just basically means to be joyful and respond positively. Ah man, he's got me here...I do not always respond positively. There have been some things I have faced and I didn't realize this might be in God's time, so I responded negatively. You too, right? What He wants for us is for as long as we live is to be joyful and respond positively to whatever season of life you are in, because you believe God has ultimately ordained this season and it's good for you.

This next phrase we saw last week in Kory's sermon, "...also that everyone should eat and drink and take pleasure in all his toil—this is God's gift to man." God has a gift that He wants each of us to have and we can experience this gift. If we experience this gift, the gift of God's presence — the gift of understanding that we live in a fallen world but we are on God's calendar, it's all in God's time and what is happening to us is not happening in a chaotic way but it's under the sovereignty of our God, not a fatalistic God but a loving God — then do you know what He wants us to do? He wants to eat, He wants us to drink, and take pleasure in what we are doing, and this is God's gift. I have noticed that when we go through certain seasons of mourning, of loss, we don't want to eat, we don't want to drink (I am talking about water here), and we don't want to work. We get so sad that it affects us physically. We get depressed and we don't want eat, we don't want to drink, we don't want to get out of our pajamas; we just want to turn the TV on and let somebody else think for us. That's life under the sun, because when we deal with the next paragraph, if there is no sovereign God and we aren't living on His time, what's the point?

Do you know what God wants you and I to do? Look at what Solomon tells us next in verses 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. That which is, already has been; that which is to be, already has been; and God seeks what has been driven away.” You that really want to change the world, not going to happen. Sorry. So why has God ordained and allowed us to live in a fallen world? So that we will ultimately fear Him. We will ultimately realize the only one who can help us figure out life is God, and we have to live life God’s way. Do you know what He wants you to do? Do you know what His gift to you is? As you go through the seasons of your life, don’t let that season rob you of your joy. Don’t let it rob your relationship with Him. Don’t respond negatively because it isn’t going to affect the other person when you respond negatively, it’s going to affect you! Don’t quit eating, don’t quit drinking, and don’t quit going to work. Here is where we need to recognize what Solomon is saying. You are not going to work to acquire things. I hope you don’t ever change jobs just so you can have a better standard of living because you could take a job that you will be miserable in for the rest of your life. Do you know what God wants you to enjoy? He wants to enjoy your work. Because it’s not the possessions you can get from working that changes your life, it’s you being fulfilled and knowing what you are doing is what God wants you to do, because you believe you are on his time and not your time. Amen?