

# Timing Is Everything

GIVE IT ALL YOU'VE GOT!

OCTOBER 5, 2014

The Old Testament reading for this third Sunday of our stewardship series, Give It All You've Got!, is from Ecclesiastes 3. I didn't include it in the readings because most of it comes along in the middle today's longer-than-usual-sermon anyway: *"God has made everything beautiful in its time. God has also set eternity in the hearts of men; yet they cannot fathom what God has done from beginning to end."*

Timing is important. There's a time to be happy and a time to be grumpy, and morning is definitely a time to be grumpy. Some people jump out of bed before sunrise, smiling and singing, wishing happy hellos to everyone they meet. I'm not a morning person, so these early-morning cheerleaders just make me grumpier than ever. I totally agree with Proverbs 27:14, *"Whoever blesses a neighbor with a loud voice, rising early in the morning, will be counted as cursing"* -- Bad timing can make a blessing feel like a curse.

Perhaps the best-known passage about timing in all of world literature is in the Bible at the beginning of Ecclesiastes 3. You can follow along in the pew bible on page 580.

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

*<sup>2</sup> a time to be born, and a time to die;*

*a time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is planted;*

*<sup>3</sup> a time to kill, and a time to heal;*

*a time to break down, and a time to build up;*

*<sup>4</sup> a time to weep, and a time to laugh;*

*a time to mourn, and a time to dance;*

*<sup>5</sup> a time to throw away stones, and a time to gather stones together;*

*a time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing;*

*<sup>6</sup> a time to seek, and a time to lose;*

*a time to keep, and a time to throw away;*

*<sup>7</sup> a time to tear, and a time to sew;*

*a time to keep silence, and a time to speak;*

*<sup>8</sup> a time to love, and a time to hate;  
a time for war, and a time for peace*

Timing is important. In economics a farmer needs to know when it's time to plant and when it's time to harvest. An investor needs to know when it's time to buy or to sell. Stock traders know that in just minutes people can go from riches to rags. An employee has to know whether it's time to ask for a raise or not. Timing can make the difference between failure and success.

Timing is also important in our emotions. There's a time to weep and a time to laugh. If there's a celebration going on, it's no time to be mopey. If somebody has been struck by tragedy, it's no time for telling jokes. Proverbs 25:20 says, *"Like vinegar on a wound is one who sings songs to a heavy heart."*

Timing is important in relationships. If you're convinced it's "a time to embrace," but your partner thinks it's "a time to refrain from embracing," it can be awkward. If you think it's time to speak and the other person thinks it's time to be quiet, there could be trouble.

Timing is important in everyday decision-making. If you lose something, there's a time to keep looking and a time to quit. And how about this – when you're moving or cleaning house, there's a time to keep a thing or a time to chuck it! From big decisions to small details, timing matters.

The best way to understand time and to use it well is to look beyond it. If we simply live from one event to the next, we never see the big picture. I had a friend who would say God is outside of time. God was here before the past began and will be here after the future ends. Eternal. The universe is unfolding according to God's plan. Even if we can't understand it all, God enables us to enjoy the beauty of everything in its time.

Ecclesiastes 3 begins by saying, "*There is a time for everything,*" and lists a bunch of things that are part of life at one time or another. The writer then repeats a question he has already asked earlier: "*What does the worker gain from his toil?*" (3:9, see 1:3, 2:22). What's the point of it all?

When he first asked that question in chapter 1, he answered, "everything is vanity" -- empty and meaningless. He was speaking from an "*under the sun*" perspective, an outlook focused on the here-and-now with no mention of God. In chapter 2, he writes that he tried almost everything imaginable to satisfy his longings but still came up empty, and he began to see why. He saw that it's impossible to find satisfaction without God. It comes only as God's gift. By the time he reached chapter 3, the writer was still asking hard questions, but gained some insight, and began to develop some answers.

Now, when he asks, "*What's the use of it all?*" he's not so gloomy. He doesn't just complain about meaningless drudgery and emptiness. Instead, in verses 10-15, he says:

*<sup>10</sup> I have seen the business that God has given to everyone to be busy with. <sup>11</sup> He has made everything suitable for its time; moreover he has put a sense of past and future into their minds, yet they cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end. <sup>12</sup> I know that there is nothing better for them than to be happy and enjoy themselves as long as they live; <sup>13</sup> moreover, it is God's gift that all should eat and drink and take pleasure in all their toil. <sup>14</sup> I know that whatever God does endures forever; nothing can be added to it, nor anything taken from it; God has done this, so that all should stand in awe before him. <sup>15</sup> That which is, already has been; that which is to be, already is; and God seeks out what has gone by.*

This passage holds a key that unlocks the whole book of Ecclesiastes, a key that opens the door to the mystery of time and eternity. The basic assumption is that God is in charge, and this passage reveals three implications of that.

First, God's timing is beautiful and meaningful. From our perspective, life can be a burden, like a jumble of unconnected events. But God has a plan in which there's an appointed time for everything, and this plan brings beauty to each event and time. *"God has made everything beautiful in its time."* God arranges all the various times into a wholeness which reveals this beauty and brings blessing to the people. As the New Testament puts it, *"In all things God works for the good of those who love God, who have been called according to God's purpose"* (Romans 8:28).

When we think about beautiful timing, then, it's not just a matter of knowing what to do at any given time. It's a matter of realizing that there are all sorts of times and events that come into our lives regardless of any choices we make. It's God's choice, not just ours, which ultimately determines the times of our lives. God "burdens" us with a life we might not have chosen for ourselves, right? Should we fight it and be frustrated, or should we trust God, who makes everything beautiful in its time? As long as we think we have the right to run our own lives, we will find God's control burdensome; but once we surrender and trust God's plan, we begin to sense the beauty of God's timing.

The second and central truth in this passage is that God has set eternity in our hearts. Even though much importance is placed on 'stuff', we still sense a need for something more. We have time on our hands but eternity in our hearts.

God has made everything beautiful in its time, but we're not designed to be satisfied with time. 'Stuff' can come and go, but it's not enough to satisfy our deep longing. These things are beautiful gifts of God, but they were never meant satisfy us. Time is like an appetizer -- not the main course -- and it was never meant to be.

In each of our hearts there is a God-shaped hole -- an emptiness that only the fullness of God can fill. When Ecclesiastes talks about eternity in the heart, it adds that we *"cannot fathom what God has done from beginning to end."* But what we can't fathom on our own, God shows us in

Jesus. The New Testament says that the goal of believers is to *"have the full riches of complete understanding, in order that they may know the mystery of God, namely, Christ, in Whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge"* (Colossians 2:2-3).

If you go to a restaurant hoping for a big meal and there are only a few little treats on your plate, how do you react? You could be so upset at the tiny servings that you're can't even enjoy what's there; but if you know that they're appetizers, you can relish each morsel because you know that the main meal is still coming.

In the same way, once you realize that this life isn't all there is, that the main feast is not in time but in eternity, you can relish the times and treats of life without being frustrated at your hunger. You know why the hunger is there: God put eternity in your heart. You know that God is going to satisfy that hunger at the great banquet we've talked about.

A third insight is that, because God is in charge, God's the one who makes the final evaluation of everything. It seems like there's nothing new under the sun, that history just keeps repeating itself without meaning, and each generation faces the same basic issues as any other generation.

It may be true that the stage of history doesn't really change all that much, but the actions of each individual matter very much, and God will examine and give a final ruling on everything.

In the words of Ecclesiastes 3:15, *"Whatever is has already been, and what will be has been before; and God will call the past to account."* The true meaning of history is in what God makes of it in light of eternity.

Now, one objection the writer raises to all this talk of eternity and God's purpose is the fact that we all end up dying like animals. The last part, chapter 3:18-20 says,

*"... the fate of humans and the fate of animals is the same; as one dies, so dies the other. They all have the same breath, and humans have no*

*advantage over the animals; for all is vanity. <sup>20</sup> All go to one place; all are from the dust, and all turn to dust again. (3:18-20)*

Wouldn't it be nice if we could live like animals and relax and follow our urges with no thoughts of eternity? Animals don't worry about right and wrong, they don't think about death. They just live and die, and turn to dust. People live and die and turn to dust too, but people are different. Even if we're not certain what happens to us after we die, the fact that we think about it shows we're different.

God knows we're like animals in a lot of ways, but we have eternity in our hearts. Eternity gives us a conscience -- a soul -- a sense of God's eternal standard of right and wrong, and so we're not content to live like animals. Eternity also gives us a sense that death shouldn't be the end. We don't like the idea of simply dying like animals.

The Teacher of Ecclesiastes, centuries before Christ, saw hints of eternity and of God's beautiful timing. But what were only hints and hopes at the time of Ecclesiastes became reality in Jesus. God's timing came together with eternity. In Galatians 4:4 it says, "*When the time had fully come, God sent his Son.*" At Jesus' birth, eternity entered time: God became human. At Jesus' resurrection, time entered eternity: humanity became immortal with the life of God.

So, back to where we started: timing is important. There is "*a time to be born and a time to die.*" So, too, there is a time to be born again. There is a time to repent. There is a time to turn to Jesus in faith, and that time is now. The Bible says, "*Now is the time of God's favor, now is the day of salvation*" (2 Corinthians 6:2). Timing is everything. Each day is the day to **give it all we've got** as we use this precious gift of God -- TIME -- to know, to grow, and to share Jesus -- and if necessary, use words...

Amen.