

A Time For Every Purpose Under Heaven

Series on Ecclesiastes

When I was 10 years old I thought that anyone who was 20 was really grown up. When I was 20 I thought I would live forever. When I was 30 I thought people who were 50 were pretty old. Now that I am over 60, it's my kids that think I have one foot in the grave. Do you find there are periods of life when time seems to rush by, and other times it just seems to drag? When you're on holiday, two weeks seems to go nowhere. When you're on a diet, two weeks takes forever. The writer of this journal that we call Ecclesiastes makes some observations on the subject of time. He says to us "If you take a cross-section of the events of life, you will see that life is full of seasons. There is a time for every purpose under heaven".

"There is a time for everything, and a season for every activity under heaven: a time to be born and a time to die, a time to plant and a time to uproot, a time to kill and a time to heal, a time to tear down and a time to build, a time to weep and a time to laugh, a time to mourn and a time to dance, a time to scatter stones and a time to gather them, a time to embrace and a time to refrain, a time to search and a time to give up, a time to keep and a time to throw away, a time to tear and a time to mend, a time to be silent and a time to speak, a time to love and a time to hate, a time for war and a time for peace. (Ecclesiastes 3:1-8)

His observations caught the imagination of the singer/ songwriter Pete Seeger who turned it into a song "To everything turn, turn, turn – there is a season – turn, turn, turn- and a time for every purpose under heaven. A time to be born - a time to die, a time to plant, the time to uproot, a time to kill a time to heal, and so on.

Solomon takes 14 opposites of life: tearing down and building up: weeping and laughing: mourning and dancing: making love and not making love – (that's what the phrase "gathering stones" means) a time to speak and a time to be silent and so on. Solomon goes through all these contrasts and says there is a time for everything.

Now there are three ways you can understand Solomon's pronouncements on the seasons of life.

1. The humanistic approach.

The humanistic approach is very popular today. This approach says "It is within our human capacity to decide the time to do something. I'll decide when it's time to dance. I'll decide when it's time to build up and break down. I'll decide when to plant and when to uproot. It's my decision. The voluntary euthanasia movement is rapidly gathering support throughout the Western world. Behind the voluntary euthanasia movement is humanistic thinking that says "I'll decide when it's time to die - not God." The abortion argument is based on the same humanistic premise. "It's my right to choose". When society elevates humanism to such a level, then it's not such a big jump from free choice for abortion, to free choice for assisted suicide, to free choice for the cloning of human beings. In other words, playing God. Making life in our own image. Making life and taking life when it suits us.

2. The fatalistic approach.

This says that all of life has been predetermined. Every bit of my day, every season of my life, every event that happens to me has already been mapped out. I must accept it cheerfully. If you're a Muslim, then it's the will of Allah. If you're Hindu, then it's all to do with Karma - the law of cause and effect. It's just a result of all my accumulated bad deeds. I can't do anything about it. It's beyond my control. It's a matter of fate. There is a season for everything, and I must accept it.

The approach Solomon takes is different, and this is where Solomon has another one of his "over the Sun" insights.

3. God is the one who sets the times in seasons of life.

He is the one who determines when we are born and when we die. Most of us can accept that. We can accept there is a time to heal, a time to harvest, a time to build, a time to laugh, and a time to dance. We don't have a problem with God being behind the good things of life. But is God the one who sets the times for weeping, for tearing down, and for killing? Is God really behind it all? Let's bring this down to the tough issues of life.

About 30 years ago Murray Keyte was a dynamic youth leader at our church. He trained as a Social worker. He was personable, funny, incredibly talented, and had a wonderful rapport with kids. Murray loved Jesus, and his life was so full of joy when he got engaged. When he and his fiancée were driving near Port Hedland in Australia, they were involved in a head on car smash. Murray was killed, and his fiancée was seriously injured. Now I wish I could tell you that 30 years later, I could see the purpose in Murray's early death. Certainly, at the time many of the young people in the Youth ministry were forced to think about their relationship with God, but did God have a purpose in that?

Does God have a purpose for a little child dying? When people we love are struck down with a debilitating illness, does God have a purpose in that? The Good News Bible translates verse one of Chapter 3 like this. "Everything that happens in this world happens at the time God chooses." Do you get angry when you hear that? Do you get angry when you hear verse 11? "He has made everything beautiful in its time". How can he make everything beautiful when little children are starving, women are raped and drunken drivers are killing innocent people? How can everything be made beautiful when human trafficking worldwide is becoming bigger than the drugs trade?

Let me say at the outset that there are some things we just won't understand until we get to heaven. But there is a key phrase in this passage that will give us some understanding of what God is doing in the here and now. This key phrase is found in this next lot of verses I'm going to read.

***"What does the worker gain from his toil? I have seen the burden God has laid on men. He has made everything beautiful in its time. He has also set eternity in the hearts of men; yet they cannot fathom what God has done from beginning to end. I know that there is nothing better for men than to be happy and do good while they live. That everyone may eat and drink, and find satisfaction in all his toil--this is the gift of God. 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 men will revere him. Whatever is has already been, and what will be has been before; and God will call the past to account."* (Ecclesiastes 3:9 -15)**

The key phrase is found in verse 11- "**He has also set eternity in the hearts of men**". God has placed within our hearts a curiosity about the future. He has made us so that we want to see beyond today. We want to know the reason why. We want to know the purpose of it all. If we can't see the purpose of something, we can't cope. That's why little children ask lots of "why" questions. Why does the cat sleep curled up? Why does Daddy grow whiskers? Why are you putting that stuff on the cake? Why? Why? Why? You answer 50 of those questions and there are a hundred more to come. Even little children have eternity in their hearts. Solomon is saying to us that without God, life just doesn't make sense. Unless we can see from the perspective of eternity, then the times and seasons of this life just leave us perplexed and angry. We have eternity in our hearts. We were made to look at the events of this life from the perspective of eternity. If we rule eternity out of the equation, life becomes futile and meaningless.

The Tapestry Of Life

Hanging in Coventry Cathedral in England is the largest tapestry in the world. It's a tapestry of Graham Sutherland's conception of Christ and Majesty. It's magnificent. And it's huge. It weighs over a ton and it is the size of a small tennis court. In that tapestry are 900 different shades of wool. Can you imagine being on the reverse side of that tapestry and looking at perhaps two square inches of it? Looking at those light and dark threads and trying to figure out what it's all about? It would be meaningless. It wouldn't make any sense. That's what it's like trying to figure out the times and seasons of life without God. It's pointless. But it's not pointless to God. It all has meaning and purpose. It's all part of an eternal picture.

The great news is that in Christ Jesus, God has invited us round to his side of the tapestry to let us look at what he is making. It's so big, we still might not understand it all, but what a difference it makes being on the other side of the tapestry! You and I have the opportunity in Jesus to look from God's perspective. God has put eternity in our hearts, and that eternal perspective helps us makes sense out of life now.

An Eternal Perspective.

Here's how an eternal perspective makes a difference. The apostle Paul wrote to the Christians in Rome **"I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us". (Romans 8:18.)** Paul wrote that having been beaten up for his faith and put in prison for what he believed. How could he say that? Because he had eternity in his heart. He also wrote **"And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose". (Romans 8:28)** That's an eternal perspective. Here's another eternal perspective from Paul. **"For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord."** (Romans 8:38 & 39) Now that's an eternal perspective.

I've just finished reading the New York Times No 1 bestseller "Unbroken," which is the remarkable life story of Louis Zamperini. Zamperini was an Olympic athlete who during World War Two crashed into the Pacific ocean in his bomber. For 47 days he and two others drifted in a tiny life raft over 1000 miles on the Pacific ocean. All they had to drink was rainwater, and they stayed alive by eating raw fish and seabirds. They had to fight off sharks that leapt out of the water to snatch them out of the raft. When they finally saw a plane they signalled it. But the plane was Japanese, and it came down and machine gunned them four times. Each time Zamperini had to get into the water with the sharks to avoid the bullets. One man died, and the other two were captured by the Japanese. Zamperini was imprisoned in Japan for two years, and for the whole of that two years he underwent barbaric torture. When he arrived home at the end of the war he was a physical and mental wreck. He couldn't cope with the nightmares, so he turned to alcohol to drown out the memories. He said that if he had known what he would have had to endure, he would have killed himself. When he was at his absolute worst, his wife took him to a Billy Graham crusade in Los Angeles, and he turned his life over to Christ. At 28 years of age, Jesus absolutely transformed him. His whole life completely changed. He went back to Japan, found his old prison guards, and forgave them. His marriage was restored. He dedicated his life to helping troubled kids. He's now 94 years old, and for the last 62 years he's still talking about how Jesus changed him. It's an inspiring story of a man who had eternity in his heart. God had an eternal view of this man's life. He has an eternal view of your life and my life. What we see in this life is only a tiny fraction of all that God sees for us.

Doing It Right First Time.

Before I finish, there is one more important verse. It's in Ecclesiastes 3:15. ***Whatever is has already been, and what will be has been before; and God will call the past to account.*** (Ecclesiastes 3:15) What in the world does that mean? It's saying that God patiently repeats things until they are learned. He repeats the lesson until we get the message. Have you ever seen a piano teacher at work? A piano teacher doesn't set a lesson and then go on to the next one if you haven't mastered the last one. You just go over and over and over it until you get it right. There's no point in going on to Rachmaninov piano Concerto number 3 if you haven't mastered grade 1 music. That's the way God teaches us. We don't go on to the next lesson, until we have learned the last one. We just go back and repeat it all again. That's why he took the children of Israel up to the edge of the Promised Land, and when they faltered, he took them for a 40 year walk in the desert and they came back to the same place 40 years later. God makes the same things happen again and again. God has put eternity in our hearts. He wants us to see life from the perspective of eternity. He's willing to take us around the other side of the tapestry, but if we insist on doing things our own way, we never get to see things from his perspective. There is a time for every purpose under heaven. We begin to understand more of that when we put our hand in the hand of God and walk with him into the future.

David McChesney, Westlake Church in Nyon, Switzerland