

## **Ecclesiastes**

### **Lecture 6**

By [Rev. Kevin Chiarot](#)

Let continue, with chapter 3, and here we come to the second major section of the book. Hopefully we are now braced and refreshed for the rest of the trip. But life under the sun is a many-splendored, yet twisted, thing and Solomon has miles to go before he sleeps. So here, he begins a new stage of the journey. We have seen the acute problem of inheritance, or succession. You can labor and toil, but you have no control of what those who come after you will do with your work. And Solomon's work in this chapter is no exception, for he could not have predicted the mediocrity that the Byrd's would inflict on his beautiful poem here. (Seeger)

In large part, due to their song "turn, turn, turn," this is one of the best known passages in the book. But it seems that almost everyone who knows the songs draws a fundamentally misguided conclusion about the poem in vv. 1-8. This is not a poem primarily about human times and seasons and our ability to wisely act in those times. While the poem certainly refers to things human beings do, what it is really about, in Martin Luther's words, is "human action in times that are beyond human control." That is, the times in this text are God's times, not mans. He is the Lord of time, he orders providence to fall out in these patterns, the plans of his heart stand from generation to generation. This means we have a description of the times God imposes on creation and human life, not a series of prescriptions or commands about how we are to act in those time.

Here I will make three points. First, the times in vv. 1-8, the problem of time in vv.9-11, and Solomon's resolution in vv. 12-15.

### **The Times**

First, then, the times. In v.1 we read: there is a time for everything, and a season for every activity under heaven. The first thing to note is the comprehensive nature of God's plan. It orders all events, from the hairs on your head and the falling of a sparrow, to the rise and fall of nations. God's providence embraces EVERYTHING, it has room for EVERY activity under heaven. What we get from vv. 2-8 is 14 pairs of opposites, 28 activities or times, which are meant to be examples of the "everything," the "every activity" which falls out in accord with God's purpose.

While these are opposites, it's not that half of the activities are good and half are bad. They are juxtaposed simply to give us a poetic description of the full range of human activity in the ordered, timed world of God. And, though there have been many attempts to discern an order to the pairs we see here, none has been successful. And that's not surprising. Life is like this. It's a series of overlapping and often bewildering seasons, which don't seem to have a coherent pattern TO US. Verse 2a: there is a time to be born and a time to die. These are certainly not times we choose. No one picks their birthday and no one appoints their funeral day. Note two things here: First, this opening pairing covers the whole range of life. The point is the whole of human life, as seen in its beginning and its end, falls out according to God's time.

Second, because of our lust for GAIN or leverage or control, we often underestimate just how decisive this sovereign administration of time is. Think about it this way: you don't pick your birthday. Which means you don't pick your parents. Which means you don't pick your genetic inheritance, your personality, your body type, your physical features or infirmities, your aptitudes. You don't pick your century, your nation, your culture, your language, your range of opportunities. And if you don't pick this – and much more is entailed here – and you don't pick the time you check out of the twisted world, then, you are deeply, deeply, constrained. You have a very narrow degree of freedom. Yet, self-deception and the lust for control being what it is, we walk around with the illusion that we are in virtually full control. It's a kind of universal madness. And the blindness is fueled by your day planner and your blackberry and your schedule and your secretary's schedule and your time-management seminars.

Few things reflect the hubris of moderns more than the phrase time-management. We are under the illusion that we are "managing" time when in fact it's managing us. No time-management book advocates thinking of it as playing one-on-one with Michael Jordan in his prime. Sure, you'll get the ball, but the range of what you control is going to be real small. You don't pick the day of your birth, and you don't pick the day of your death. Yet, there is a time, God's time, to be born, and a time, God's time, to die.

In v.2b we see the sovereign ordering of time extends even to plant life. There is a time to plant and a time to uproot. The creation comes pre-ordered, you need to fit into it or you have zero crop yields.

In vv. 3 and following we move into activities where we seem to have more control. Here we come across things which require some human judgment, yet no prescription; no direction is given us as to how to act. The main point here is the God's providence includes the full sweep human action. Verse 3a: a time to kill (either through a just war or capital punishment) and a time to heal. Verse 3b: a time to tear down and a time to build. This probably applies to structures. Sometimes you demolish, sometimes you build.

Verse 4a: a time to weep and a time to laugh. Even human emotions are under the sovereign hand of God. The parallel to weeping and laughing, in the second half of the verse, is a time to mourn and time to dance. No one schedules when they are going to mourn in their day-planner. The times of mourning, like the times of laughter and dancing, are *given* to us.

Verse 5 is the most difficult verse in the poem to interpret. A time to scatter stones and a time to gather them. It probably also refers to building in general. Sometimes you throw stones away, sometimes you gather to build. Verse 5b: a time to embrace and a time to refrain (from embracing). You meet your spouse, you embrace. But one of you will bury the other, and neither the time of embracing or refraining is in your control. You make new friend and embrace, they leave, or a rift develops, and the time to refrain is now thrust upon you.

Verse 6a: a time to search (probably for something lost), a time to give up. This accounts for a lot of WASTED time. You look for your keys, for a sale, for a piece of information, for something in the attic. It's good to look, but you need to know when to stop looking; and when you do, God has ordained that as well. 6b: a time to keep and time to throw away. There's a time to squirrel stuff away in the attic and a time for a garage sale. But the times don't come pre-labeled.

Verse 7a: a time to tear and a time to mend. This probably refers to the tearing of clothes in mourning, and the sewing of them that would take place after the time of mourning had past. Verse 7b: a time to be silent and a time to speak. This may be the hardest of all the seasons for us to discern. But while the plans of the heart belong to man, the answer of the tongue is from the Lord. God's time extends to our very words.

Verse 8a: a time to love and a time to hate. Here we see that the full spectrum of human emotion and activity is in view. And the hatred here is not necessarily evil. There are things we should hate. And even human hatred is in God's time. He turned the heart of the Egyptians to hate his people, then he turned their hearts to favor them. Even He has a time to hate- for He hated the abominable practices of the Canaanites before He gave the land to Joshua.

And the public correlates to love and hate are seen in verse 8b: a time for war and a time for peace. The major events of nation-states are all timed in the providence of God. From garage sales, to tears, to laughter, to sewing, to war and peace. All times in which we must act, but times which are beyond our control.

## **The Problem of Time**

Our second point is the problem of time. Here we can see that Solomon does not view this passage with the sweetness and light which many have deduced from the Byrd's song. For his conclusion about life in such a timed universe is given in v.9: What does the worker gain from his toil? Here is the driving question of the book again. What leverage or control do you have over this? Sure, you need to act wisely in the times, but you have no leverage over them. You have no leverage over your birth or death, over times of war and peace. You don't want to kill or tear down but the time demands it. You don't want to mourn but your friend has died.

You don't want to search but you lost something. You may want to heal, but you don't pick the time for healing. Who doesn't want to laugh and dance, but true joy can't be chaperoned. And your lack of leverage is made even clearer in v.10: I have seen the burden God has laid on men. This refers back to the grievous business God has laid on the sons of men. Not only are these times beyond your grasp, they fall out in a cursed world. A world where what is bent cannot be straightened, where what is lacking cannot be counted. This is burden, a divinely imposed burden, for the sons of men.

Solomon affirms, in v.11, that God has made everything beautiful, or fitting, in His time. Here we see clearly that the times in view in vv. 1-8 are not our times, they are God's times. Empirically, just by looking at the world, Solomon tells us repeatedly that we can't figure out what God is doing. But here he affirms by faith that all things do fit in God's plan. He has made them beautiful in *his time*. He spells out the problem more fully in the second half of v.11: He has also set eternity in the hearts of hearts of men; yet they cannot fathom what God has done from beginning to end. Here we see the great problem of time in vivid colors.

We know God has a plan. We know by faith that he makes everything beautiful in its time. And we also have eternity in our hearts. This means we have a desire to see the whole. Unlike the animals, we want to make sense out of the fragmented times of our lives. We have an inborn inquisitiveness to integrate the providential workings of God in our lives in a coherent way. He HAS SET eternity in our hearts. But this is precisely the nub of the problem. He has done it, yet we cannot fathom what He has done from beginning to end. Its ungraspable vapor. So we grope around in the dark trying to interpret providence, trying to count what can't be counted. We want to be in the FAA control tower, but we are simply on the plane. We are not the lords of our own time.

I always want to yell at the TV when the weatherman says something like "we've got great weather for your Tuesday." It's not my Tuesday. Tuesday doesn't know I exist. I don't possess it, or the wonderful weather forecasted for "our" weekend. We belong to time, it doesn't belong to us. So, the Rolling Stones were wrong: Time is NOT on our side. But we have great difficulty accepting this.

Say you are on a trip with your family in the car and you have the whole thing timed out. But then there is construction and the road is backed up for miles. What are you to do? You get out of the car and strain for a peek at what's ahead. You plan some clever alternate route, but you're stuck. You may realize, for a fleeting moment that you don't control the times. But, here is the problem. You think this is an anomaly, a minor setback. Just an irritating intrusion. You can adjust your Day-Timer and be back in control. But that is a form of self-deception. Let's try an analogy.

If life is your car ride, it has the following parameters. You are put in the car without your consent. You are then told three things. First, you can never get out of the car. Second, the car may blow up at any time without warning and you die. Third, if you are lucky to live a long time, then, when the car runs out of gas – you die. That is the actual situation. It not just that you will die and are dying, it's that you are subject to death at any time. And if you realize that, then the delay on the highway doesn't appear as an anomaly. It's a reminder of what is always the case. Your times are not in your hands, they are in God's. Our third point is Solomon's resolution in vv. 12-15, and he doesn't tell us to double down and focus on our life goals. He doesn't counsel beefing up our time management skills. How, then, shall we respond?

He says, in v.12, I know there is nothing better for men than to be happy and do good while they live. You can't alter the times. But you CAN be happy. You can live with your eyes open to the sober, mysterious reality of time. If you stop grasping, then, and only then, time is a gift. Solomon wants you to live in the moment. Not in the pagan sense of throwing off all restraint and grasping or seizing, but in a biblical sense of being happy in God AND doing good.

This IS redeeming the time. And the only time you can redeem is this moment. After all, there is no other place to live but in the moment. It is a tragic thing to live in the past or to pine for a future you can't grasp. So, in v.13 he repeats what he said last week: everyone should eat and drink and find satisfaction in all his toil. It's good to build sandcastles, the tide notwithstanding. But this ability to enjoy the given of life as it is here and now is the gift of God.

This is grace. Grace sufficient for this moment and no other. So again, we are being called to live with open hands. Don't occupy yourself with things you can't control – and that is just about everything. As Psalm 131 puts it, we are to calm and quiet our souls, like a weaned child with its mother.

Solomon's resolution continues in v.14: I know that everything GOD DOES will endure forever. Nothing can be added to it and nothing taken away from it. Time is not vapor for God; He CAN shepherd and control it, flawlessly. And He controls all things, not so we can grope in the dark, but rather, at the end of v.14, that men will revere of fear Him. This fear of God is our response to the frustration

and enigma of time. This is the posture of humility, the posture of the weaned child.

Finally, in v.15 we read: Whatever is, has already been, and what will be, has been done before. The point is that the seasons of human life in vv.1-8 are not new, they have come in the past, and they shall recur again. But, the last word is deeply encouraging. God will seek out the past; he will call the past to account. St. Augustine famously said: I think I know what time is, until you ask me, and then I don't know what it is. But, time presents no such unfathomable mystery to God. Time, which is lost to us, is not lost to God. He can grasp the past just fine, even as He grasps the future. There are no aborted enterprises or forgotten men in the plan of God.

Now that Christ has come as the new Adam, the new man, the new Israel, we can affirm this even more robustly. In Christ, God has laid hold of the past, our past, and everyone's past, and he will bring it forward, either into justice or into the re-integrated beauty of the new heavens and the new earth. God in Christ, has laid hold of our sinful past, our crumbling time, our guilt laden existence in the twisted world, and He has and He will make it beautiful. He is not only the Lord of time, He is its meaning. So enjoy the moment, do good. Eat and drink and find satisfaction in whatever you've been given to do. That is the redemption of time. That is the gift of God. Amen.

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