

Only Time Will Tell

Westview Church | Ecclesiastes 3:1-15 | Pastor Brett Toney | October 12, 2025

Time Consumes

The alarm goes off. You open your Bible as you ask for new mercy. You say, “Soul, awake the dawn with praise” (cf. Ps 108:2). As you get in the shower, the kids stir. The toast burns. You’re out of eggs. Tears are shed. The chorus is sounded, “Hurry and get dressed. We’re gonna be late.” You spill coffee on your shirt. Oy—it’s only 8am. You slog through the day. Grab a quick bite for lunch—maybe. The unending question is put out there, “What’s for dinner?” The house is a mess. Homework needs to be done. The kids are finally down. You take a breath. The dishes have piled. The meeting needs prepped. The friend needs a phone call. As you put your head on your pillow you think, “We’ll try again tomorrow.”

Each day brings such expectation of accomplishment and opportunity. Yet each day is marked by struggle and frustration. And each day often looks like the last one and the next one. The drum beat carries ever onward. Tolkien masterfully captured it with his famous riddle, “This thing all things devours / Birds, beasts, trees, flowers / Gnaws iron, bites steel / Grinds hard stones to meal / Slays king, ruins town / And beats mountain down.”¹ Time—we can’t escape it. We can’t change it. We can’t get our minds around it. We can’t understand it. And so Solomon asks on our behalf, “What gain has the worker from his toil?” (v.9). What are we to do with the daily grind that can feel, at times, like an unending monotony without any progress? Solomon is leading us to lay down our vain grasp on control and trust in God. You can’t hold vapor in your hand or shepherd the wind, so “fear God and keep his commandments” (12:13). We do that by relating to time in three ways: recognize the time, accept you can’t tell time, and trust God orders time.

Recognize the Time (Ecclesiastes 3:1-8)

The opening poem of the chapter is well known. If you're not a Christian and have never read Ecclesiastes before, you have perhaps nonetheless heard v.1-8. If we will find joy amidst life's struggles in the vapor, we need to recognize the time. All that happens, "every matter under heaven" (v.1), has its appointed season or time. Solomon provides these fourteen contrasting couplets to illustrate that point of the opening verse. By doing so, he does not mean to say we need wisdom to know what time it is—is right now the time for planting or harvesting? For breaking down or building up? We do need such wisdom, but that isn't his point. Nor is it a mere observation of the different seasons we experience. This is perhaps how these verses are most often read. It is true, life has a rhythmic nature to it. There is a beginning and an end. There are repeated refrains that become familiar. There are stretches of time that are challenging and demanding. And there are seasons that are steady and calm. But the inspiration of the Spirit is not necessary to observe that.

Rather, Solomon is directing us to recognize the time. This word is repeated twenty-nine times in eight verses. The cadence is to direct us to One who is governor over time, who has appointed the right time for every matter under heaven. We need to recognize that time is not random or an impersonal force. It is not merely some kind of sandbox for theoretical physicists or filmmakers. Time is a tool, a tool of God who determines its use. There is a *right* time for birth and for death, a *right* time to kill and heal, a *right* time to love and hate. According to whom? Who is the one who supersedes all time and is not tossed to and fro by its seasons but regulates it all? As we go through life, day by day, we need to recognize the time we are in has been appointed and ordered. We set SMART goals and have dreams and objectives. We mark birthdays and anniversaries. We make plans and keep calendars. And we slide the dimmer up on

our mastery over our time as we slide down the dimmer on the One who actually is over it all. We didn't mean to. It happens slowly. But we think life with all its regularity and rhythms is determined by Me.

Accept You Can't Tell Time (Ecclesiastes 3:9-13)

But you and I—we can't tell time. And we need to accept that. Look at how Solomon transitions out of this opening poem. Why is v.9 *this* question? “What gain has the worker from his toil?” Solomon already told us in 2:11 that the gain of all *his* toil, *his* work, all that *he* set his hand to do was nothing. There is no profit to the daily grind that can deliver us from the vapor. Time carries ever onward apart from our agency or control. Springtime comes and harvest-time goes. We make our rounds to the funerals and weddings. God has appointed us with this toilsome business. What then are we to do? Just like the mountains, Time will eventually beat us down back into the dust. And that is the very thing we need to learn. We need to accept that we cannot tell time. You and I are not God, nor do we “find out what God has done from the beginning to the end,” v.11.

Yes, God “has put eternity into man's heart”—we know there is something more, something beyond the grave, something more to life than weeping and laughing and seeking and losing. But this isn't a sentimental affirmation about non-Christians having a God-shaped hole in their heart. His point is we're creatures. Here we are carried along by forces beyond our control, yet God has plans that we cannot discern. He is at work from beginning to end. And “he has made everything beautiful in its time.” Every tear, every giggle, every embrace, every restraint, every moment of silence, every word spoken—governed, ordered, planned, ordained by God and beautifully so.

You might have one of two reactions to that. The first might be that you hate that. You lost that baby, your child. Weeping and mourning have prevailed in your life. The thought that God would have appointed such a time is despicable to you. “How could a good God be responsible for the death of my child?” Or maybe yours would be another reaction. How could the unending struggle of life, how could the dark clouds of depression and anxiety that will not lift, how could all of the toil put in at work that yields no reward—how could these profound hardships be *beautiful*? Governed by God? Ok, yes, God is sovereign over all. But *beautiful*? I think both reactions are helped by looking at a painting you can find at the Minneapolis Institute of Art. Go to the third floor to find Monet’s “Grainstack” painting. It’s an impressionist painting of a large mound of wheat on a fall morning. It’s described as a “flickering patchwork of broken brushstrokes.”² Now, imagine a friend covers yours eyes before seeing the painting. You’re carefully walked up to within inches of the painting. You open your eyes and see ... smudges of oranges and yellows. “This is supposed to be beautiful? This is a work of a master artist?” It’s not until you step back to observe it that you see how each individual brushstroke plays a part to capture something truly beautiful.

Each brushstroke is beautiful in its time. The Master Artist has done something from the beginning to the end that we cannot find out. The strokes, colors, shading, method—we don’t know all that is going into the painting. We’ve not been given that insight. We’re not the Artist; we’re Sons of Adam and Daughters of Eve. We live day by day, not by eternity. And like what we saw last week at the end of chapter two, Solomon exhorts us to embrace our place as creatures, receiving God’s gifts in this life for what they are. Rejoice and do good with what God has given. Eat, drink, and see good in all your struggle. That isn’t a message to either grin and bear it nor just, “Buck up—it’ll feel better when it quits hurtin’.” Rather, it’s a rebuke and

encouragement. A rebuke because you're not God. And an encouragement because he has been most gracious to you amidst life under the sun.

And that grace has extended to us beyond what Solomon could have known. For us, here, from our vantage point in redemptive history, we have greater insight into what God has done and thus greater reason to receive God's gifts with gladness and gratitude amidst the day to day struggles. Church, we are on the ones "on whom the end of the ages has come," 1 Corinthians 10:11. Because "when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons," Galatians 4:4-5. Time has come to its intended goal and purpose, the revelation of redemption in Christ. "The plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God" has been proclaimed in us, Church, so that "through the church the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places," Ephesians 3:9-10. We have been given far more insight into God's plans revealed in Christ and by his Spirit. And that ought to give us greater assurances that we can lay down our idolatrous clinging to control over our lives and receive the gifts of each day as gifts.

Trust God Orders Time (Ecclesiastes 3:14-15)

Solomon concludes this section in v.14-15 by directing us to trust that God orders time. All that he does, v.14, is fixed. Whatever he purposes, he will accomplish. He sets the forms and pours the concrete. He orders all so that people would fear before him. He orchestrates time and seasons and the revelation of his Son so that we might know he is God, and we are not. We ought to read v.1-13 and be confronted with our creatureliness. We are mere mortals. Yet we would think to question the ways and purposes of our Maker? Have no doubt, what was and is and is to come, it is appointed by God. And he will "seek what has been driven away," v.15. Or as your

footnote may indicate, he “seeks what has been pursued.” The idea being one who is persecuted, pursued or driven away unjustly. It is the theme that Solomon moves to address in the next passage. I think his point here being that God does not forget the wrongs done. He seeks justice for the persecuted. The Sovereign of Eternity will be faithful to make all things beautiful. And what has been out of place, the wrongs and injustices done by us and to us, will be made right. Listen to how one commentator captures the significance of our mortality and God’s sovereign justice,

“One of the ways we learn to live by preparing to die is by realizing that death means judgment, and that this is a good thing. it gives my present actions meaning and weight, and it gives my experienced losses and injustices a voice in God’s presence ... What difference would it make to our *now* to begin to live in the light of the fact that there will be a *then*?”³

Church, we trust God orders time, so let us fear him and keep his commandments.

The good news of Ecclesiastes is the wise summons to lay down your striving, set aside the lust for control. Such efforts are the same kind of reaching out to take and eat forbidden fruit that you might be like God (cf. Gen 3:5-6). Friend, it is the same summons as the gospel. Repent and live a life in keeping with repentance, with turning from your vain efforts to be master of your fate and captain of your soul.⁴ And believe on Christ afresh, that what you never could do, he has done. And that “all authority in Heaven and Earth has been given to [him]” (Mt 28:18). You can trust him in all the seasons and times he ordains. He is painting a masterpiece you cannot comprehend. And we know this to be the case because that’s what this Table testifies to. God has a plan that has been revealed in Christ, through his death and resurrection to create a people, the Church. And Christ will come again to seek justice for the persecuted. He will make all things right. Only time will tell—its inescapable force devours all day by day. But we put our trust in God who orders it all.

¹J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Hobbit* (New York: Ballantine, 1982), p77.

²Minneapolis Institute of Art [accessed online](#)

³David Gibson, *Living Life Backwards* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2017), p56,61.

⁴Cf. William Ernest Henley's "Invictus"