

Ecclesiastes 3:1-15

SI: We’re spending a few weeks looking at the book of Ecclesiastes. I’m not preaching through the whole book, only on four selected passages that touch on the message and theme.

This morning we’re reading the best known passage in Ecclesiastes.

INTRO: In *The Lord of the Rings* there’s a scene where the wizard Gandalf tells Frodo the history of the ring of power.

He tells him how it had been lost for ages, how it was accidentally found by Frodo’s uncle Bilbo, who gave it to Frodo, and how all the forces of evil have been awakened and are trying to get the ring.

Frodo says:

“I wish the Ring had never come to me. I wish none of this had happened.”

Gandalf replies:

“So do all who live to see such times, but that is not for them to decide. All we have to decide is what to do with the time that is given to us. There are other forces at work in this world, Frodo, besides that of evil. Bilbo was meant to find the Ring, in which case you were also meant to have it. And that is an encouraging thought.”

What theology do you hear behind that scene?

Tolkien was a believer and I hear his Christian faith loud and clear.

He’s saying there is genuine evil in this world.

None of us want hard times and painful things. Of course not.

We lament them when they come into our lives.

We wish we didn’t have to face them.

We wonder why they’ve come. They don’t make sense.

But God has his reasons. God has a plan for your life and the world.

So make the most of the times and seasons he has given you and be encouraged.

I’ve mentioned the past two Sundays that there is profound disagreement over the interpretation of Ecclesiastes.

Some people argue that the writer of Ecclesiastes was either an unbelieving skeptic, or a depressed, cynical, backslidden believer, or a believer who is depicting life from an unbelieving viewpoint.

So the intent of the book is to show what life is like if you don’t know God, if you don’t know Christ—life is meaningless.

The other side says he’s a believer with a deep and unshakable faith in God.

He's describing life as we actually experience it in God's world, which is a fallen world so it's frequently confusing and frustrating.

But it's still a world controlled by God.

So he's giving believers a perspective for living wisely and happily by accepting God's mysterious ways.

That's the way I read the book and it's passages like this one that convince me that's the correct interpretation.

Just like that scene in *The Lord of the Rings*, biblical faith and worldview is loud and clear. The writer of Ecclesiastes definitely has a unique voice and style. He says things in an original and creative way that doesn't sound like other parts of the Bible. But everything he says is found elsewhere in Scripture.

You could even say that Ecclesiastes 3 is the OT version of Romans 8:28.

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.

Let's look at this passage under two headings,
what it is telling us and how we are to apply it to our lives.
The message and the application.

MP#1 First, the message

Verses 1-8 are a poem, verses 9-15 are a commentary on the poem.

What's the structure of this poem?

Every line is a pair of things, each introduced by the phrase "a time to."

A time to be born, a time to die. That's the first pair.

How many pairs are there? Go ahead, count them. 14. Which is a multiple of 7.

And seven, as you know, is the number of completeness in the Bible.

Seven days of creation.

Back to these pairs. You certainly noticed they are opposites.

All the circumstances of life are described in terms of the contrasts or the polarities of human experience.

In other words, the writer of the poem is saying:

I'm presenting you a comprehensive portrait of life under the sun.

Now let's look at each pair individually.

A time to be born, a time to die.

He starts with the most momentous events in human life—birth and death.

When people are depressed or overwhelmed they sometimes ask:

Why was I born? and Why can't I die?

When life boils down to the basics, we go back to birth and death.

The next three pairs have to do with creative and destructive human activities.

A time to plant, and a time to uproot.

A time to kill, and a time to heal.

A time to break down, and a time to build up.

Planting and uprooting up makes you think of farming, but it's more than that.

Sometimes you feel the need to plant yourself in a place or a job, then other times you feel you need to uproot yourself. And of course, sometimes you can't uproot yourself when you want to and when you want to stay planted, you're uprooted.

Is there ever really a time to kill? Yes. Just war, self-defense.

God's law mentions both. There are also times to heal.

And certainly you can see that killing and healing are also figurative.

There are times when a relationship might be killed, or healed—and you might even have to do the killing or the healing.

A time to break down, a time to build up.

Demolition is sometimes necessary before construction.

Sometimes the decks have to be cleared.

The next two pairs cover human emotions.

A time to weep, and a time to laugh. Personal emotional responses.
A time to mourn, and a time to dance. Public displays of emotion.
In one sermon I read the pastor mentioned a family in his church who suffered
the death of a child and he saw them collapsed with grief and weeping.
But a few months later their daughter married, and they were dancing, laughing.

The next two pairs have to do with friendship and enmity, accepting, confronting.
A time to scatter stones, and a time to gather stones.
A time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing.
Nobody is sure what the casting and gathering stones line means exactly.
Embracing and refraining from embracing is more clear.

One commentator says:
There are occasions when we need the embrace of a friend who pulls our head close and
whispers in our ear words of understanding, encouraging us not to quit, reminding us that life
will go on, we will make it. And then there are times when that same person may take us by the
shoulders, hold us at arm's length, and confront us with the hard truth, "Now listen to this, I
can't agree with you. What you are doing is wrong." That is not a time for embracing. That's a
time stones are thrown.

The next three pairs reflect on our possessions and our connection to them.
A time to seek and a time to give up (in other words, to give up something as lost)
A time to keep and a time to throw away (think of church rummage sale)
A time to tear and a time to mend (do you repair something, or tear it up?)
You can see that these would apply symbolically to many different things.

The next pair is about our speech and it stands alone—
probably to emphasize the enormous power of this area of life.
A time to be silence, and a time to speak.
Don't you wish you always knew the difference? I do!

The last two pairs express the two poles of human relationships and interaction
A time to love and a time to hate. (that's the private side)
A time for war and a time for peace. (a national expression of love and hate)
So the poem presents the scope of human life with all of its extremes.
Sometimes we're jerked from one to the other so quickly it makes our heads spin.
We hear some news or something happens to us good or bad and lives feel
completely changed. What are you to make of that?
The writer asks that question next: What gain has the worker from his toil?
What the profit of this? What's the purpose?
A fatalist would say that we're just pawns.

We're just jerked around by good luck or bad luck and there's nothing more to it. But the writer of Ecclesiastes doesn't think it's luck or fatalism.

He says it's God. Life with all these crazy contrasts makes him think of God. Here's his commentary on the unexpected twists and turns of life.

It's almost like a fire hydrant of thoughts in verses 9-15.

God has put eternity in our hearts but we cannot know beginning and end of plans.

We have a God-given curiosity, an insatiable need to know why.

Why did this event happen in my life or in the world?

Even Jesus asked on the cross: Why have you forsake me?

But when it comes to the specifics of God's plan, we don't know.

We don't know why a family buries one child and marries another in same year. We don't know why someone who wants to uproot finds himself planted in a place and a job he can't leave, while someone who wants to plant himself forever and put down roots is forced to uproot and move.

Here's what we do know: God makes everything beautiful in its time.

It doesn't say everything is beautiful.

Just like Rom 8:28 doesn't say all things are good.

Killing, weeping, giving up for lost, tearing, casting stones aren't beautiful or good.

But God can make them beautiful. He can work all things for good.

And in the meantime, in the day to day, what has God given us?

He's given us the ability to receive and enjoy life,

the ability to do good for other people,

an appetite for food and drink,

and the capacity to work and support ourselves by our labor.

Life not all the negative side of the equation.

There's not just weeping, there's laughing. Not just tearing down, building up.

The ability to enjoy good things is from God.

Finally, he's given us the capacity to fear him and trust him.

The Lord himself orders the events of our lives and he has seen fit to include times and matters of all kinds.

There is nothing wrong with the fact that have to experience very different kinds of circumstances, feel very different emotions, and do very different things.

Or life is made up of extremes and God has made it that way.

Accepting this is liberating.

How are we to apply this to our lives?

MP#1 Let's consider the application

I want to do so through three examples—
a trivial example, a sober example, and what I'll call the example

Trivial

You've heard me mention Martyn Lloyd-Jones many times.

He was a leader in the evangelical movement in Great Britain throughout the mid twentieth century. He was greatly influential in reviving expository preaching, particularly preaching through books of the Bible.

For three decades he was pastor of Westminster Chapel in London, but before that he was a pastor in Wales, where he was from.

There's an anecdote about his ministry in Wales.

One Sunday evening, after the evening service, Lloyd-Jones and his assistant pastor were called to the home of a member to deal with a family crisis.

It was a difficult issue that required both sympathy and straight talking, so they were with this family for a demanding hour or two.

After preaching three times, it was an exhausting end to the Lord's Day.

But the assistant pastor said that as they left the house, Dr Lloyd-Jones clapped his hands together and said: "Now, some ham and eggs!"

There's something very right about that response.

A Christian shouldn't always live in gloom, and on the other hand a Christian shouldn't always live in sunshine. There is a time for both.

There are times for hard, late night conversations that wear out your emotions and twist your stomach into knots, and there are times for ham and eggs.

And when God gives us good, simple, pleasing things that divert us from the the weighty stuff of life, take them up, switch gears. Make time for that.

It's not always as easy as walking away and clapping your hands but Ecclesiastes tells us to be joyful and take pleasure in the gifts and diversions from God.

That's the trivial example, now the sober one.

There's a famous church in Virginia called The Falls Church.

The city of Falls Church, Virginia is actually named after the church which was there before long before the city itself was incorporated.

The church started in 1734, before America was a nation.

Thirty years later, the congregation discussed the need for a new church building, one made of brick rather than wood, and guess who was present for that meeting?

George Washington. He spoke in favor of the new building. This what he said:

The building matters only as it serves a purpose. It is a place for the faithful to gather. It is a house of worship, and this old one is rotten and unfit for repair. We know there will be wars

and rumors of wars. But we also know the church has only one true owner. The Great Architect of the Universe will lay our plans.”

In 1776 the Declaration of Independence was read aloud from the front steps of the Falls Church. Fast forward about 225 years to the early 2000s.

The Falls Church was one of the largest Episcopal congregations in America.

It was a vibrant, faithful, Christ-centered church led by an exceptionally godly minister named John Yates.

The old, historic church was way too small, so a beautiful, new, multimillion dollar sanctuary was built on the property and the church continued to grow.

But within the American Episcopal denomination, there were problems.

The church leadership was denying the fundamental doctrines of the faith, approving and celebrating sexually immoral behavior and putting pressure on the biblically faithful congregations to accept these changes.

John Yates and the Falls Church refused and eventually realized they had no option but to withdraw from the Episcopal denomination.

The denomination sued them for their property.

The case lasted several years and the congregation lost.

They lost the church grounds and the historic sanctuary.

They lost the new sanctuary they had paid for and built.

They lost all endowments and their bank account with two million dollars.

And of course they lost this particular place where, for some of them, their families had worshipped for generations.

They were a congregation of 3,500 members.

One Sunday they had a home and the next Sunday they didn't.

Several of the Ecclesiastes 3 negatives come to mind.

A time to uproot. They were certainly uprooted.

A time to give up. They lost the lawsuit and there was no more recourse.

A time to tear. Being torn away from a place with such deep connections.

A time to weep and mourn. You get the picture.

For three years they met in rented facilities, until finally, in 2015, they moved into their own new home.

Let me read you an introduction to a book written recently about their history.

Not long ago a historic church in Virginia took a stand for its faith and lost everything—its priceless property that George Washington had graced, its entire savings, even its communion silver. But the church did not fade. It had been pruned of material things. It was ready to grow and thrive as never before, planting new churches and proclaiming the gospel of Jesus Christ.

This church's experience has echoed throughout the world. Somehow the story of its stand and its losses caught the imagination of people near and far. Biblical faith faces persecution but promises eternal reward, as it always has. Times of cultural drift call for renewal and awakening. They call for powerful stories of God's sovereign work. This is one of those stories.

Did you notice how often the word story is used.

The point being that this painful episode is now part of the Falls Church story.

It's a story written by a sovereign God. It might seem random or unfair.

And it is from our perspective. But not from his.

He's writing a story of your life too—and its not all the sunny sides of the equation.

It can't be. It's the negatives too. But that's ok. It's your story to live and tell.

We've looked at a trivial and a sober example, now let's look at the example.

There is a time to be crucified, and a time to rise from the dead.

Try to imagine being a disciple on the Saturday after Jesus' death.

After an exhilarating start to the week with the triumphal entry and the crowds shouting Hosanna, all of them feeling on top of the world, a stunning reversal.

Their messianic hope not just killed, but crucified. A shameful, cursed death.

“Cursed is everyone who is hung on a tree.”

Confusion, fear, depression—knowing the disciples, probably arguments.

No word from heaven on Saturday. Just silence. No miracles.

After three years relying on Jesus for direction, it seems they were abandoned.

It's not too hard to imagine that, because there are Saturdays like that in your life.

Times when you know God was with you yesterday, but what about today?

You trust, faintly, that there will be miracles tomorrow. But what about today?

Where is the Lord today?

Ecclesiastes as a book is really about those Saturdays, and how to understand them through the eyes of faith. This passage reminds you that there is a time in God's plan for Saturdays, but it also reminds you that God will give you plenty of Easter Sundays as well. Christ's resurrection guarantees that.

Because in God's plan there was a time for the resurrection, you can trust him to work all things for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.