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Ecclesiastes 3: 1 *The Meaning of Time*

Text: Ecclesiastes 3: 1.

Reading: Ecclesiastes 2:12-3:15.

Singing:

Psalm 31: 1, 3.

Psalm 97: 6.

Psalm 94: 2, 4, 6.

Psalm 31: 7, 9.

Hymn 59: 1, 2, 3.

Theme and Points:

The LORD God reveals to us the meaning of time. We will focus on two aspects:

- 1) the appreciation of time*
- 2) the understanding of time*

Ecclesiastes 3: 1

The Meaning of Time

There is a time for everything, and a season for every activity under heaven...

As we follow the book of Ecclesiastes and discover its wonderful themes about life under the sun and everything being meaningless in itself, though not in Christ, we come to a third theme in this book, and that is the theme of *time*. It is very predominant in chapter 3 where we find the famous words, “There is a time for everything...” and then follows the list of activities that are done.

This passage was used by the folk-rock group “The Byrds” in the 1960’s, but they slightly altered the text to make it a peace-movement song. “a time for peace...is not too late.” Whenever we alter the text of Scripture, be it ever so little, we lose its real meaning.

Under the sun, which rises and sets, everything is subject to time. There are so many proverbs or sayings that focus on time that we cannot even begin to list them. But we know –or we should- that time is precious and should not be wasted, for once it is gone, we cannot get it back.

Time always moves on

Time always moves on, ticking off the days of our lives until we come to the end of those days here under the sun. We can, perhaps, stop the clock or change its settings, spring forward and fall back, but those are cosmetic measures, for we cannot really change time. But it does change us.

In the last chapter of Ecclesiastes, we read how time ravages us, how we face the breakdown of our bodies with the onslaught of age, and how finally the silver cord is severed and the golden bowl is broken, the pitcher is shattered at the spring and the wheel is broken at the well.

When you are younger, you do not so much feel the effects of the passing of time, but as you become older, you see it, experience it, and must come to accept it. It is hard, sometimes, to accept that we have become older, have passed a certain age, but we need not fear the ravages of time.

Sometimes we make jokes about our age. When we turn 50 or 60, for example, and someone asks us how old we have become, we say that we are 39 or perhaps 29, but we all know that it is not true. We cannot preserve the beauty and vigor of youth, not even with a facelift and a make-over. And why should we? To receive abundance of years is a great gift of the Lord, and should be appreciated as such, but we cannot preserve our youthful energy and looks.

This text tells us that time does not stand on its own as an unalterable force which sweeps us along. Time is something that is completely in God's hand. He grants time graciously and we have to use it wisely, for we may not take it simply for granted. Our time can soon be up. There is a certain tension in the whole idea of time: do what you must do *now*, because tomorrow may be too late.

It is from this angle that we approach Ecclesiastes 3:1, and I summarize it as follows:

The LORD God reveals to us the meaning of time. We will focus on two aspects:

- 1) *the appreciation of time*
- 2) *the understanding of time.*

The Preacher has already observed and noted in 2:14 that the same fate, death, overtakes both the foolish and the wise. Everyone's time here under the sun is limited, and we are all heading towards the same ending, death. One aspect that is particularly painful to the Preacher is that we have to leave everything behind, even to one who may not appreciate it. We worked a lifetime to gain something, but the one who comes after us disdains it or wastes it.

A time for everything

From that vantage point he also speaks about *time*. We read, "There is a time for everything and a season for every activity under heaven." And then follows a lengthy list of these activities which is not to be exhaustive, I think, but certainly comprehensive. We will take a closer look at that in a moment.

First, "there is a time for everything..." Who would disagree with that? Yet we must clearly understand what the LORD is making known to us here.

The word for "time", and I think also of the parallel word "season", means more than just time measured in hours or days, for it indicates the *right* time, the proper time. In that sense, the word comes close to our word for *opportunity*. The right time is the proper moment to do something. There

is not always opportunity to do what must be done. Sometimes we let the moment of opportunity pass, purposely or perhaps unwittingly, but it passes, and will not return as such. Or, on the other side of the coin, we may turn a moment of opportunity into a time of misfortune.

The gift of time

When we read that there is a time and season for everything, we must understand that this is not some general kind of truth, but that each “time” and each “season” is not only determined by God, but is *given by God* to us, so that we might use it to his glory and our neighbor’s benefit. The Preacher has seen that life under the sun is meaningless, but he does certainly want us to appreciate the gift of time. We must properly esteem the many opportunities that the LORD gives us in our life under the sun.

Time is a gift of God’s grace, not to realize only our plans and dreams, but to love him and our neighbor. Time is precious because it is God’s gift to us under the sun. Life may be meaningless in many ways and our toil may be vain, but times and seasons are still to be thankfully received from God’s hands.

When we see time as a gift of God, we learn not only to appreciate it, but also to utilize it properly. Time does not govern us, but we make thankful use of the time that God gives. I am never on my *own* time, but I am always on *God’s* time, not on *borrowed* time, but on *allotted* time.

Background of eternity

Now this talk about time must also be seen against the background of *eternity*. Note 3:11, second part: “[God] has also set eternity in the in the hearts of men...” I only refer to this passage to show you that there is more than time: there is also eternity. Time never stands by itself but is a movement towards eternity. We should never forget that. As time progresses, we are not standing still but moving forward to the great glory that we have in Christ.

There is a time for everything. The question is then: from where does this time come, or who gives this time and determines its duration? Time does not come from an unknown source for an unknown purpose. As a gift, it comes directly from God. Every day is a day given by the LORD, and it is also an opportunity opened by the LORD. Do we in our busy lives stop to think about this, to acknowledge this, and to take the new day from God’s hand as we lay the past day in his hand?

Do not waste time

The NIV footnote says that this passage tells us we have no control over time, and that is true in itself, but I do not think that is the main point here. The point is that God gives us time and we have to take this time, fill it, utilize it, and control it, in the sense that we make it fruitful. We may not let time slip by. We may not waste time, as if it means nothing. We have to appreciate it as God's gift to us on the way to eternal life. Despite the many trials and disappointments, and the apparent vanity of it all, we must esteem this life and all our times as wondrous opportunities from the LORD.

Does this mean that we always have to work? Not at all. The LORD has also instituted the day of rest for his people. We are not slaves of the clock or of our work, but we are stewards of time to fill it well. This stewardship begins with the appreciation that time is God's gift to us under the sun. We must now do what belongs to this life, for we cannot do it later.

When the Preacher has said that this life is vanity and meaningless, and that even toil and labor do not get us anywhere, he does not want to leave us with the impression that we had then better sit back and do nothing but let life pass us by. There *is* a time for everything. There *is* a season. Do what you must do, when the time is there to do it.

God never runs out of time

Note that the Preacher is quite inclusive. There is a time for *everything*, a season for *every* activity. God gives the time and the opportunity for all that needs to be done on the way to eternity. He does this according to his sovereign will and counsel, but not one thing that needs to be accomplished will be left undone. We who live under the sun can lose track of time or even run out of time, but this does not apply to the LORD whose throne is in the heavens, and for whom one day is like a thousand years. God never runs out of time nor is his schedule ever disrupted.

I think that we may take great comfort in this. We may sometimes think that something we ardently hope for will never happen, because it is too late, or that something will not succeed because in our view it is too early. "Late" is a big word and so is "early". "I should have said something or done something", we say, "but now it is too late." Or, "I never should have opened my mouth, it was too early."

But the LORD is not subject to our schedules under the sun. For him the sun never sets. For him a day never dawns. He is always working for our benefit, and He gives us the time He has allotted so that we may fulfill our

calling and destiny. We ought to appreciate this in every phase of our life. When you are young, remember your Creator. And when you are old, remember your Creator. Entrust your times to him alone. "My times are in your hands" (Ps 31: 15). Wisely use the times you receive.

My times are in your hands

We should never presume to tell the LORD God what time it is. "LORD, do this now. Don't you think it's time, LORD?" We may certainly express to him our grief and pain. We may say, "How long, O LORD?" The Psalms encourage us to do so. But we do so only in acknowledgement of his sovereignty. Our times are in his hands, not ours. We do so pleading on his covenant promises. "How long, O LORD, will you be angry forever?" (Ps 79:5) But we read also that man is a mere phantom, as he bustles to and fro (Ps 39:6). You have made my days a mere handbreadth. Have you ever checked how wide a grown man's hand is? It is about four inches at the widest.

Do you have a proper sense of time? I think we may say that our Lord Jesus Christ had this sense very keenly and strongly. His mother said to him at the marriage feast in Cana, "They have no more wine." In reality she was suggesting that surely it was time for the Lord Jesus to do something. But He said, "Dear woman, why do you involve me? My time has not yet come." How often in his life did it not become clear: "My time has not yet come." Jesus Christ is running on God's clock, not ours. When his time did come, He was ready. He said, "The hour has come". And it was not easy: "Now my soul is troubled."

Save me from this hour?

Then He added, "What shall I say? 'Father, save me from this hour?' No, it was for this very reason I came to this hour. Father, glorify your name!"(John 12:27) That is what He is all about. For everything there is a time, even for the Son of man to be crucified and cast into hell.

Father, glorify your name. Do this also in my anguish and suffering. The rest is meaningless, vanity of vanities. That is what we are all supposed to be about. Glorify his name, always, on his terms and never on our terms. Only when we fully accept this can we understand our times, and live in faith all the days of our life, no matter what happens.

Proper timing

I now ask your attention briefly for the amazing list in Ecclesiastes 3: 2-8. "There is a time", it says, "for everything and a season for every activity under heaven."

Then follows a list of *opposites*. You see it already clearly in the first example: “a time to be born and a time to die.” And this notion is carried through to the end: “a time for peace and time for war.”

It is part of life under the sun that we are engaged in all kinds of activities, even activities that run contrary to each other. What is the sense of it all? One day we build something, but the next day we tear it down. One day we do all we can to preserve the peace, but the next day we go to war.

This is the flow of life. Times change. Opportunities are never the same. The one day we can take a certain action, but the next day we must do the opposite. This depends on the situation. Time moves us along from one situation to another. We must develop an eye for the changing circumstances we face in life.

But we must also remember that the times and seasons are not decided by some vague lot or unknown destiny. All these times come from the hand of God, who controls the flow and outcome of history.

We need to develop a knack for *proper timing*. It is sad to see in life how often important things are said and done at the wrong time.

Make the most of every opportunity

I will not now deal extensively with all the examples given in Ecclesiastes 3: 2-8. Let it suffice to note that all these examples refer to things which are common to the lives of us all. What we need to do is develop a sense of proper timing. If we do not, we turn an opportunity into a disaster. We should always ask, “Is it now the right time?”

I had to think of what is written in Colossians 4: 5-6: “Be wise in the way you act toward outsiders: *make the most of every opportunity*. Let your conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how to answer everyone.” Make the most of every opportunity. Make sure that the time is right. Then whatever activity you do will have the right effect.

We may learn here from our Lord Jesus Christ. He knew when the time was right and He never wasted any God-given opportunity. Let us learn from him to fill our time wisely.

AMEN.