

What Time Is It?

The wise person stewards time, realizing God controls all things.

How many times have people asked you, “What time is it?” The question reflects the significance that human beings place on time. Measuring time accurately can spell the difference between success and failure in anything from baking a pie to landing astronauts on the moon. Knowing what time it is shapes our lives in many ways. Football fans know the importance of the two-minute warning near the end of the game. Whenever two people plan to meet for conversation, they must specify a particular time or they may miss their rendezvous entirely.

On a philosophical level, people are finite beings—that is, they are intimately connected to time both at birth and death. People measure their lifespans in terms of years, months, and days. Like hours and minutes, these are terms of time measurement. Consequently, the question of what time it is can take on profound significance. The time span between the present moment and death is finite, limited. With each passing minute, the time grows shorter. How then should we employ the time that remains in our physical lives? What should we do during this time? Before answering, we each should remember that we are accountable to God for what we do. Therefore, the best answer to the question of our use of remaining time is to do whatever God wants us to do. This session focuses on a passage in Ecclesiastes that helps us contemplate God’s plan for how we can best live in the time He gives us.

UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

ECCLESIASTES 3:1–4:6

Ecclesiastes 3:1-8 is a poetic passage of Scripture with which a lot of people are familiar, even people who are not necessarily Bible readers. For centuries, writers have incorporated parts or all of the poem into secular literature, popular music, and theatrical productions. The passage lists a series of

favorable and unfavorable events that comprise human life. Unlike the wisdom literature in Proverbs, Ecclesiastes makes no effort to instruct readers in how to attain the best in life. Instead, the book—this poem in particular— simply acknowledges that both good and bad events occur in everyone’s life. Life is comprised of many opposites.

Ecclesiastes 3:9-15 probes the mystery of time. After a somewhat fatalistic description in verses 9-11, Solomon concluded by urging people to enjoy life as God’s gift to each person (3:12-13). This advice in turn drew his attention to the greatness of God’s activity (3:14-15). Often people cannot understand what God is doing. Rather than speculate about His plans, they should submit to them. Solomon’s statements about God directed his attention to the mystery of God’s sovereignty versus the widespread occurrence of evil and injustice in human experience (3:16-22).

Solomon’s discussion concerning death grew more somber in 4:1-3. He contemplated that death might be preferable to life in that the dead individual’s experience of oppression and suffering ended. Further, he suggested that never having been born might be even more desirable than living and dying since one who never exists logically never experiences evil.

Ecclesiastes 4:4-6 introduces a discussion of the loneliness of wealth. Solomon began this discussion by condemning selfish ambition.

EXPLORE **THE TEXT**

TIME AND PLACE (Eccl. 3:1-8)

Solomon listed a series of opposites, pointing out that each has a time and place in life.

VERSE 1

There is an occasion for everything, and a time for every activity under heaven:

Ecclesiastes 3:1-8 probably is the best known passage in the entire book. The passage can be characterized as wisdom poetry. The poem is best understood and appreciated when Solomon’s basic premise—people are finite, mortal beings—is kept in the forefront. Human beings are bound by time; they have a natural beginning (birth) and a natural end (death). Between these two brackets lies each person’s lifespan. And during that lifespan, each person will witness (and perhaps experience) a set of opposing realities. While people

naturally prefer a long life composed only of good things, in reality life contains both good and bad, beginnings and endings, life and death.

The word rendered **occasion** (“season,” KJV; ESV; “time,” NIV) actually is an Aramaic term. (Aramaic was a closely related language to biblical Hebrew.) The term did not emphasize chronological time but rather appropriate, or appointed, time. The word translated **time** (“season,” NIV) reflects the synonymous Hebrew term that also points to a proper, or designated, season for something to occur. Solomon’s point was that **everything** that happens in human life—good and bad (at least from the human perspective)—has been intentionally woven into the fabric of the human experience. Although unstated until verses 9-11, Solomon implied even in this verse that these events occur according to God’s purposes and on His timetable, not ours.

VERSE 2

a time to give birth and a time to die; a time to plant and a time to uproot;

In the previous verse, Solomon made a general declaration that “everything” and “every activity” have a proper time and place in life. Beginning in this verse, he introduced a list of fourteen specific activities and their fourteen opposites. All of these activities intentionally focus on human life and activity. Moreover, while the list does not cover every conceivable human activity, it is remarkably comprehensive in scope.

The first human activity pair is foundational to all the subsequent ones. There is **a time to give birth and a time to die**. The Christian Standard Bible translation *to give birth* is technically a literal way of expressing the verb form that appears in the Hebrew text. On the other hand, the translation “to be born” (see KJV; ESV; NIV) probably gives a better sense of the first activity. The phrase *to give birth* suggests a birth mother’s activity, while the translation “to be born” reflects the newborn child’s experience. In either case, the point of this half-verse is that every human life has an appointed beginning and ending.

Physical birth as well as physical death ultimately are in God’s hands and happen for every human being on His timetable. This truth does not ignore the reality that both the means of birth (human reproduction) and the means of death (aging; sickness; accidents; war) involve human aspects. Rather, it underscores that God the Creator is sovereign over His creation. Birth and death are first and foremost under His control and timing.

The second activity pair would be well-understood in ancient Israel’s semiarid agricultural environment. Every farmer and gardener knew there was **a time to plant and a time to uproot** (“pluck up what is planted,” ESV).

The ancient land of Israel was heavily dependent on seasonal rainfall for its crops. Raising food crops—grain crops in particular—had to be timed appropriately to take advantage of rainy seasons for growth and dry seasons for harvesting. Otherwise, disaster awaited. Proverbs 20:4 states, “The slacker does not plow during planting season; at harvest time he looks, and there is nothing.” In farming, timing is vital!

VERSE 3

a time to kill and a time to heal; a time to tear down and a time to build;

This verse contains the third and fourth human activity pairs. Interestingly, whereas in the previous verse positive experiences were listed first in each pair and negative experiences last, here the order is reversed: negative activities appear first, followed by their positive opposites.

Solomon declared that in the realm of human experience, there is **a time to kill and a time to heal**. The Hebrew word rendered *kill* in verse 3 is a different verb from the one used in the sixth commandment that is often translated “do not murder” (Ex. 20:13). Nonetheless, Solomon likely was not arguing the ethical aspects of just war or capital punishment. He simply stated that in a world where death is the universal fate of all living creatures (see Eccl. 3:2), some deaths inevitably will be the result of people getting killed, whether accidentally, criminally, or in a just war.

Conversely (and thankfully), there is also a time and place in human life to *heal*. We often associate this activity with the medical profession, and rightly so. In this activity pair, however, the likely reference is to healed relationships. Conflict among people is inevitable in this life. At the extreme, it can lead to killing, the very opposite of healing! Notably, Jesus later instructed His disciples to proclaim the kingdom of heaven to people. In so doing, they would be channels of God’s power to “heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse those with leprosy, drive out demons” (Matt. 10:8).

The fourth activity pair can be broadly applied: there is **a time to tear down and a time to build**. Tearing down something can be an act of obedience to God (see Judg. 6:25). In the context of Ecclesiastes 3:3, however, it represents the opposite of building something. Solomon’s point was simply that human life includes both realities. Sometimes we must tear down old structures so that new ones can be built. Both activities have a proper time and place.

VERSE 4

a time to weep and a time to laugh; a time to mourn and a time to dance;

The fifth and sixth activity pairs are closely related and may be understood as an example of synonymous parallelism. That is, the phrase **a time to weep** is another way of saying **a time to mourn**. Likewise, the phrase **a time to laugh** is parallel in meaning to the phrase **a time to dance**. Solomon's point in both activities alongside their opposites was to emphasize an obvious truth: life is a mixture of both sorrow and joy. Sooner or later, everyone experiences emotional highs and lows.

VERSE 5

a time to throw stones and a time to gather stones; a time to embrace and a time to avoid embracing;

The seventh activity pair (**a time to throw stones ... gather stones**) might seem unusual in modern human life. In ancient times, however, throwing stones might depict either military activity or judicial activity (execution by stoning). Conversely, gathering stones might describe the common practices of clearing a field for planting or obtaining raw materials for construction of a wall or building.

An ancient Jewish interpretation suggests that the first half of this verse refers figuratively to engaging in sexual relations versus abstaining from such activity. This rabbinic interpretation might have been based on seeing a parallel with the second half of the verse (and the eighth activity pair): **a time to embrace and a time to avoid embracing**.

VERSE 6

a time to search and a time to count as lost; a time to keep and a time to throw away;

The ninth activity pair involves seeking to obtain something versus giving up the search (**count as lost**). The Hebrew verb rendered **search** (“get,” KJV; “seek,” ESV) means “seek” or “seek to obtain or secure.” Depending on the context, it can refer either to gaining something new and desired or regaining something that has been lost or misplaced. The opposite activity, then, would be finally giving up on any effort to gain or find the item.

A similar set of contrasting actions (the tenth activity pair) is expressed in the second half of verse 6: **a time to keep and a time to throw away**. While the ninth activity pair concerned seeking (or giving up the search) something one wants or has lost, the tenth pair assumes the person has a particular item and must decide whether to hold on to it or dispose of it. In any case, the maximum time that an owner can retain possession of items is the span of his or her lifetime. At death—as noted in session 8—someone else will assume ownership of one's material possessions.

VERSE 7

a time to tear and a time to sew; a time to be silent and a time to speak;

This verse includes the eleventh and twelfth activity pairs. The phrase **a time to tear** may refer—at least in biblical times—to the practice of ripping one’s clothing as a public sign of mourning. Conversely, **a time to sew** would refer either to repairing one’s torn garment or producing a new garment.

The contrast between choosing **to be silent** and deciding **to speak** is a common theme in wisdom literature (see Prov. 10:19; 11:13; 12:18,23; 13:3). Wise people listen and learn. However, certain occasions demand that a wise person speak up—and speak the truth in love (see Eph. 4:15; Col. 4:6).

VERSE 8

a time to love and a time to hate; a time for war and a time for peace.

The thirteenth and fourteenth activity pairs are as relevant in modern human life as they were in Solomon’s day. In Scripture, **love** and **hate** not only have an emotional dimension but also a connection to decision making and action. Indeed, the human practices of waging **war** and making **peace** might be understood as the ultimate expressions of hating and loving. Importantly, the New Testament declares that love is the signature characteristic of Christ’s followers (see John 13:34-35; 1 Thess. 4:9; 1 John 3:23; 4:19-21).

Ecclesiastes 3:1-8 outlines a spectrum of typical activities that comprise the human experience during one’s natural life. We should not be surprised or overwhelmed when life presents us with either side of the spectrum. Believers can keep in mind Paul’s great declaration: “We know that all things work together for the good of those who love God, who are called according to his purpose” (Rom. 8:28). By doing so, we can use time as God made it to be used—doing the right things at the right time.

EXPLORE FURTHER

Read the article titled “Life” on pages 1015–1016 in the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary, Revised and Expanded*. How does knowing that God has made “an occasion for everything, and a time for every activity under heaven” help you face the ups and downs of life? How does a verse such as Roman 8:28 give you added insight about facing life’s ups and downs?

ENJOY LIFE (Eccl. 3:9-13)

Since God remains in control of time, believers can rejoice in the time God grants them on earth, knowing that eternity awaits them.

VERSE 9

What does the worker gain from his struggles?

Solomon now contemplated the nature of work in light of the reality that God has made “an occasion for everything, and a time for every activity” (3:1). Solomon wondered **what ... the** (human) **worker** truly gained in this life **from his struggles**. The Hebrew term translated **gain** comes from a root word meaning “a portion of that which has been divided.” The underlying question was whether human beings are better off trying to carve out their own portions or accepting the portions God gives them. We might paraphrase the question this way: “Who really controls my life: God or me?”

VERSE 10

I have seen the task that God has given the children of Adam to keep them occupied.

The words **I have seen** remind us that Solomon had undertaken an extensive investigation that employed careful, thoughtful observation of the world in general and human activities in particular (see 1:12-13). Much of what he observed left Solomon at times with a gloomy, almost fatalistic, view of life. Such pessimism is evident in Solomon’s description of work—if not life itself—as **the task that God has given the children of Adam to keep them occupied**.

The Hebrew word rendered *task* (“travail,” KJV; “business,” ESV; “burden,” NIV) refers to the various activities (see 3:2-8) that occupy one’s time. This unique term appears in Scripture only in the Book of Ecclesiastes, where it always connotes trouble, pain, and aggravation. The phrase *children of Adam* (“sons of men,” KJV; “the human race,” NIV) refers to all human beings. The idea that God gave human beings various activities *to keep them occupied* makes life on earth sound more like a day-care center than a venue where some grand, eternal purpose is being advanced. In the next verse, however, Solomon realized that something eternal was being invested in humanity.

VERSE 11

He has made everything appropriate in its time. He has also put eternity in their hearts, but no one can discover the work God has done from beginning to end.

The words **He has made everything appropriate in its time** indicate that God has a greater purpose for giving human beings the various activities listed in 3:2-8 than just keeping them occupied with meaningless busy work. In other words, human life is much more than simply killing time between birth and death.

While human life “under the sun” is finite and mortal, Solomon here expressed the remarkable insight that God **has also put eternity in human hearts**. Bible scholars have long debated the precise meaning of this revealed insight. To be sure, God’s people in Old Testament times did not possess the level of understanding about life after death that was later revealed in the gospel of Jesus Christ. Yet we know that a number of Old Testament passages give insightful glimpses into the eternal, heavenly realm (see Gen. 5:24; Job 19:26-27; Eccl. 3:11; Isa. 53:10; Dan. 12:2-3). In this simple confession, Solomon revealed a gap in his knowledge that he yearned to fill, but his time in history made it impossible to do so.

Today, believers experience the foretaste of eternal life even before physical death. Christians begin enjoying eternal life at the moment they are united with Christ through faith (see John 3:14-18). At the same time, this yearning for eternity remains in our hearts because we know that it is in heaven we will realize the fullness of life’s meaning as God intended.

Solomon’s conclusion that **no one can discover the work God has done from beginning to end** is absolutely true. The finite can never fully comprehend the infinite. However, this reality should serve as a reason for exultation rather than hopelessness. We can rejoice that the God we serve is too great for the human mind to comprehend fully (see Isa. 55:8-11). Further, such a reality calls for us to trust in Him and follow His plan for life, not ours.

VERSE 12

I know that there is nothing better for them than to rejoice and enjoy the good life.

A lack of complete knowledge concerning God’s eternal plan is no reason for disillusionment. The words **I know** hint that Solomon’s faith had once again led him to the brink of a more hopeful view of life than the prevailing philosophy that everything is meaningless. If human beings operate with an embedded longing for eternity in their hearts, then life on this side of eternity is not without purpose but rather the prologue to a magnificent story yet to unfold. Thus, Solomon declared that during life’s prologue here on earth, **there is nothing better ... than to rejoice and enjoy the good life**. This statement should not be understood as an early form of hedonism; rather, it is an honest recognition that as creatures of time, human beings

can choose either to wallow in self-pity and empty hopelessness or see our days on earth—both the good days and bad ones—as part of God’s design to prepare us for eternity. From a Christian perspective, rejoicing is a choice a person makes. It is not dependent on external circumstances but rests on one’s deep-seated faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. Indeed, the New Testament teaches believers to rejoice even in bad circumstances (see Rom. 5:3-4; Jas. 1:2-4).

Solomon’s phrase **the good life** simply affirms that life with its entire spectrum of human activities is good in the sense that it comes from God. Conditions such as affluence or poverty, wellness or sickness, and peace or war do not determine the ultimate quality of goodness; God does. Therefore, the choice is between doing good or doing evil, realizing that one’s decision in this regard has eternal consequences (see Matt. 6:19-21).

VERSE 13

It is also the gift of God whenever anyone eats, drinks, and enjoys all his efforts.

Next, Solomon focused on three crucial elements of human life: food, drink, and work. He asserted that both individually and collectively, these essential elements represent **the gift of God** to humanity. Food and water are essential to the continuation of physical life. Without them, people would soon die. Yet, God created the earth in such a way as to provide both elements in bountiful supply. It is no small thing, therefore, to offer a prayer of gratitude at each and every mealtime.

The phrase **enjoys all his efforts** refers to the human need for meaningful work and accomplishments. We desire to be like our Creator in the sense of looking back on a day’s work or a project and saying, “Well, that is good!” (See Gen. 1:4,10,12,18,21,25.) The New Testament emphatically states that “every good and perfect gift” comes from God (Jas. 1:17). Time is a gift, and believers should make the most of the time granted to them by God. Because of the promise of eternal life in Christ, believers can find joy in their lives now, whether their circumstances are easy or difficult.

EXPLORE FURTHER

Memorize Ecclesiastes 3:11. In which of your present circumstances does this verse offer encouragement and/or guidance? What would it mean for you as a believer to view the situation through the lens of eternity that God has placed in your heart?

GOD WORKS (Eccl. 3:14-15)

Solomon concluded that God is not bound by time. Therefore, His works should produce awe in people.

VERSE 14

I know that everything God does will last forever; there is no adding to it or taking from it. God works so that people will be in awe of him.

Solomon asserted that **everything God does will last forever**. Human activity and accomplishments are consigned to life “under the sun.” All of God’s activity produces eternal results. Furthermore, finite human beings cannot overrule or change God’s sovereign activity: **there is no adding to it or taking from it**. God’s plan remains eternally consistent.

Second, God’s activity has one unchanging, eternal purpose: **so that people will be in awe of him** (“fear him,” NIV). God knows that when we worship anyone or anything other than Him, we destroy ourselves. To be *in awe of God* is one way the Old Testament describes being in a right relationship with God. The New Testament further clarifies that a right relationship with God comes when we repent of our sins and trust in Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord (see Acts 2:38; Rom. 3:22-23; Eph. 2:1-10; Titus 2:11-14).

VERSE 15

Whatever is, has already been, and whatever will be, already is. However, God seeks justice for the persecuted.

God’s creation will ultimately reach the destination He designed for it. He established its governing rules and destiny. In this regard, then, Solomon concluded that **God seeks justice for the persecuted** (“God seeks what has been driven away,” ESV; “God will call the past to account,” NIV). Although Bible translations differ, this statement asserts that while sinful humanity corrupts themselves and the world, God will not leave His creation to its own destruction. Consistent with His nature and plan, He will victoriously pursue the redemption and restoration of His fallen creation (see 1 Cor. 15:51-58).

EXPLORE FURTHER

Read the article titled “Time, Meaning Of” on pages 1571–1572 in the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary, Revised and Expanded*. In what ways do Christians experience the foretaste of eternity in this present life?