



What Time Is It?

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

ECCLESIASTES 3:1-15

MEMORY VERSE: ECCLESIASTES 3:11

STUDY Ecclesiastes 3:1-15, focusing on how the verses poetically describe time and what characteristics of God are revealed. Consult a Bible dictionary or commentary to clarify the meaning of any of the opposites presented.

CREATE a teaching plan for your group using the ideas on pages 100–102. Consider the seasons of life representative of your group and how this study might intersect with their lives.

GATHER the following items:

- Extra Personal Study Guides (PSGs)
- Chart paper and markers or white board markers

Prepare to Display:

- Pack Item 2** (*Outlines of Job and Ecclesiastes*)
- Pack Item 3** (*Map: Solomon's Building Projects*)
- Pack Item 4** (*Poster: Worthwhile Pursuits?*)

Make Copies of:

- Pack Item 9** (*Handout: Memory Verses Bookmark*)

CONSULT *QuickSource* for additional questions to use during the group time and review the *Explore the Bible Adult Commentary* for additional biblical insights (available for purchase from LifeWay.com).

REINFORCE the study by evaluating your own use of time to determine adjustments that you might need to make to be a better steward of your time. Share your findings with the group to encourage them to do the same evaluation.

FIRST THOUGHTS

KEY DOCTRINE

Stewardship

Believers are under obligation to serve God with their time, talents, and material possessions and should recognize all these as entrusted to them to use for the glory of God and for helping others (John 9:4).

Time is one of the most valuable commodities we have. Once it is gone, we can never get it back. It seems like something is always vying for our time. Additionally, constantly being busy has become a status symbol, and we may fear being looked down upon for failing to keep ourselves busy. Consequently, many view time as a taskmaster. However, Ecclesiastes 3 reveals that time is a gift from God. Instead of being slaves to time, time is meant to give us the freedom to enjoy God and glorify Him in the opportunities He gives us as we move from one season of life to the next.

(In PSG, p. 82) **Would you rather have a greater quality of time or quantity of time? Explain.**

UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

BIBLE SKILL

Use a Bible or theological dictionary.

Review articles about eternity in a Bible or theological dictionary. Examine Bible passages included in the articles. Note the contrasts between God being identified as eternal and humanity as being created but looking toward eternity. How does this contrast impact your understanding of Ecclesiastes 3:11?

ECCLESIASTES 3:1–4:6

Ecclesiastes 3 contains one of the most famous poems in the Bible. In this poem, Solomon outlined the truth that there is a time for everything, including a time for birth and a time for death (3:2). Knowing that God has ordered creation within seasons and proper times for everything, the Teacher encourages the reader to search for God who exists beyond time and whose purposes are eternal. In fact, God has made this known by establishing eternity in the hearts of all men and women. If all things “under the sun” are vanity and futile, then humans should seek refuge in God and properly enjoy the good gifts of life that He has granted all people.

Chapter 4 provides a powerful reminder to those who might view the pursuit of the good things in life as an end in itself. All people are bent toward a sinful desire to make good things the ultimate things. Solomon urged people to open themselves to the momentary gifts that God grants. He warned that some would be motivated by envy and greed. He argued, “two are better than one” (4:9). The point being, people can work together to accomplish more and can take care of one another in times of need. To work selfishly to gain all the pleasures of the world rather than properly enjoying them as God intended is vanity.

The reality of divine justice and worldly injustice serves as a fence to curb the sinful propensities of people to reach for more than they are granted. Rather than becoming bitter because of what God has not granted, one should enjoy the gifts God has given. Some people are given more than others, and that is a choice of God. Some suffer more than others, and that is a choice of God. One might be tempted to equate gifts and suffering

with righteousness and wickedness (remember Job's friends?), but there is a warning in this line of thinking. Human justice is not always complete and lacks the perspective of God. According to Solomon, God will be the One to reward the righteous as well as punish the guilty.

EXPLORE THE TEXT

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

Verse 1

Solomon began his exploration of time with the observation that ***there is an occasion for everything, and a time for every activity under heaven.*** With this, the Teacher summarized the completeness of life. He utilized a specific structure in this poem that is outlined in pairs, ideas that communicate the completeness of his reflections. Solomon listed a series of opposites, pointing out that each has a time and place in life.

Verses 2-4

First, there is ***a time to give birth and a time to die.*** We are born and we die; both of these times are out of our control. Birth and death are times ordained by God. He has numbered our days.

Second, there is ***a time to plant and a time to uproot.*** Plants grow, and they die. For the most part, these things are out of our control. For example, we cannot plant flowers in the dead cold of winter, so this activity is dependent on the appropriate seasons, which are ordained by God.

Third, there is ***a time to kill and a time to heal.*** In times of self-defense or national defense, we react to things that threaten us. Again, these are things that we do not necessarily control. We also heal in response to being injured.

Fourth, there is ***a time to tear down and a time to build.*** We tear down, and we build because the materials we use are not eternal. These things have their time and wear out, break down, and decompose—all part of God's creation order.

Fifth, there is ***a time to weep and a time to laugh; a time to mourn and a time to dance.*** These two are appropriate responses to specific times in life, times that we react to and do not necessarily control when they come.

Verses 5-8

Sixth, there is ***a time to throw stones and a time to gather stones.*** Bible teachers debate the meaning of this pair. If taken literally, it is probably a reference to clearing a field and removing stones for plowing and planting. The idea of gathering stones would be for the purpose of building walls around the field or the walls of a house. This pair may also indicate a season of war. In the ancient world, one method of warfare was to render farm fields useless by covering them in the countless stones around Palestine.

VERSE 1

¹ There is an occasion for everything, and a time for every activity under heaven:

VERSES 2-4

² a time to give birth and a time to die; a time to plant and a time to uproot; ³ a time to kill and a time to heal; a time to tear down and a time to build; ⁴ a time to weep and a time to laugh; a time to mourn and a time to dance;

VERSES 5-8

⁵ a time to throw stones and a time to gather stones; a time to embrace and a time to avoid embracing; ⁶ a time to search and a time to count as lost; a time to keep and a time to throw away; ⁷ a time to tear and a time to sew; a time to be silent and a time to speak; ⁸ a time to love and a time to hate; a time for war and a time for peace.

When Israel was at war with Moab in 2 Kings 3, they were instructed to ruin every piece of good land with stones until it was covered. Other scholars, however, understand these expressions euphemistically from an ancient Jewish interpretation, interpreting “to throw stones” as sexual union and “to gather stones” as sexual abstinence (Lev. 18:19).

Seventh, there is **a time to embrace and a time to avoid embracing**. This may relate to the interpretation above that views the first pair of verse 5 as a reference to sexual union and sexual abstinence, indicating that there was a time for a married couple to embrace and a time for them to avoid embracing, since anyone who touched a woman during her menstrual cycle was deemed unclean according to Old Testament law (Lev. 15:19-33).

Eighth, there is **a time to search and a time to count as lost; a time to keep and a time to throw away**. It was a custom to tear one’s clothing in times of sorrow and grief—clothing that would need to be sewn when the time was right. In difficult times, it is often hard **to speak**. After time, we are able to talk about things reflectively.

It is important to note that the Teacher began this poem with the bookends of birth and death. He then summarized the time between birth and death in the last two lines of the poem as **a time to love and a time to hate; a time for war and a time for peace**. Much like the cycles of nature in chapter 1, in the rhythm of our lives between birth and death, we experience the panorama of seasons involving different emotions, experiences, and events. We know they are coming, but we do not know when these seasons will come.

There is a sense in which we have little say in the seasons of life we face, so how we face them is important. Generally speaking, we have two responses to the seasons of life. First, we can view our time as oppressive. That is, we have no control, and we fear what will come next. So we pull away and become bitter. Second, we view time as an opportunity. That is, an opportunity to trust that God is in control and to know that all things are working toward our sanctification, depending on how we respond. We can fall into His arms and become an instrument for good. If we view the experiences of our lives as oppressive, we will take the stance of a helpless victim and become bitter toward God. But if we view our experiences in this life as opportunities to bring God glory in how we respond to and act, in time it changes everything.

According to Romans 8:28-29, we could argue that God uses all things in our time to work together for our good, namely, to conform us to the image of His Son. Every season of life is designed to be used by God—whether it is learning patience and faith in the times of suffering or learning joy in the times of laughter. Paul encouraged us in Ephesians 5:15-17 to make the best use of our time by understanding what the Lord’s will is. God intends for us to redeem our time for His purposes. Believers must use time as God made it to be used: doing the right things at the right time.

How does understanding that God ordains different times in our lives for His purposes help us respond to those circumstances better?

ENJOY LIFE (ECCL. 3:9-13)

Verses 9-11

Up until this point, the Teacher has said nothing about the “how” and “why” of time. He has merely offered a reflection on what is. But then he set his mind on who establishes these times and why the times are set the way they are.

It is God in His sovereignty who has set the times. **He has made everything appropriate in its time.** God has also **put eternity in the hearts** of mankind. In other words, in every situation we are called to look beyond the here and now—through the trajectory of eternity. There is a divine, eternal, design for our lives. Moreover, most of the time we cannot fully understand God’s design **from beginning to end** from our limited perspective.

You can illustrate it this way: kids often enjoy playing with building blocks. These blocks often come with sets specifically designed to build a certain pre-designed product, a product that is displayed on the box and in the instructions. As the box is opened, all the child has is a pile of blocks. At the same time, the instructions show what the end product will look like. In order to achieve this end, one must follow the designer’s instructions. The difference between real life and building blocks is that we are not the ones with the blueprint laid out before us; God is. We have the individual pieces in our hands. We have a general idea of what the finished product is going to look like but not in its fullness. There are seasons in our lives that will shape how we become what we become, and most of that is out of our hands; it is in God’s. This is why Solomon said that **no one can discover the work God has done from beginning to end.**

We don’t need to understand the seasons of life to live faithfully. This is difficult because it means at least two things. First, God’s sovereignty over time makes us aware of our helplessness; we cannot control our lives. Second, God’s sovereignty over time makes us aware of our dependence on Him. We do not know what will come or when it will come. Therefore, in light of our helplessness and our dependence, our only response is to stand in awe of God and live according to the directions He has given us for a life of faith. When we consider the set times of God that He has ordained for life, we are humbled to see the hand of God over all of our time. We are dependent on Him. He has authority; we are subject to Him. He controls the times; we are subjects who respond in time.

VERSES 9-11

⁹ What does the worker gain from his struggles?

¹⁰ I have seen the task that God has given the children of Adam to keep them occupied. 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.

VERSES 12-13

¹² I know that there is nothing better for them than to rejoice and enjoy the good life. ¹³ It is also the gift of God whenever anyone eats, drinks, and enjoys all his efforts.

Verses 12-13

Because God has placed eternity in our hearts, we realize that life under the sun is not all there is. Since God remains in control of time, believers can enjoy the time God grants them on earth, knowing that eternity awaits them. Time is a gift, and believers should make the most of the time granted to them by God. Here Solomon answered the question that was asked in verse 9, namely, what does a worker gain from his toil? In verse 12, Solomon stated: ***I know that there is nothing better for them than to rejoice and enjoy the good life.***

No person can understand the times that God has set, let alone control them. If one cannot fully understand the time that God has set, if we are ultimately dependent on God and not in control, then isn't it best to enjoy the present for what it is? Therefore, the Teacher urges his readers to consider the hand of God in the world around them. God has given us a sense of past and future, and food, drink, and enjoyment in our toil. We are to view life—the good and the bad—as a gift from God.

What are a few intentional and practical ways that you can enjoy the times that God has given you as a gift in this temporary life?

VERSES 14-15

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. ¹⁵ Whatever is, has already been, and whatever will be, already is. However, God seeks justice for the persecuted.

GOD WORKS (ECCL. 3:14-15)

Verses 14-15

There was a Scottish minister by the name of Alexander Whyte who was known for his uplifting prayers in the pulpit. He always found something for which to be grateful. One Sunday morning the weather was so dark and gloomy that one church member thought to himself, "Certainly the preacher won't think of anything for which to thank the Lord on a wretched day like this." Much to his surprise, however, Whyte began by praying: "We thank Thee, O God, that it is not always like this." This is a perspective on life that is rooted in the goodness of God and the good gifts He has given us to enjoy in this life. In spite of our current situation, there is a sense in which we know there is nothing better for us than to rejoice and enjoy the good life.

The truth is, God is personally involved in the everyday affairs of His creation—in sustaining all things and working all things toward His perfect goals. In that security, we can enjoy life as a gift as we eat, drink, and labor (v. 13). As strange as it may seem, this is a call to actively pursue good things in life. In a sense, these verses are all about perspective. Though life can sometimes feel like a dark and gloomy day, God has given us good things that break through the clouds like the morning sun. There are still rainbows in our fallen world. They are often the simple things,

the things we take for granted. How we view time affects how we live our lives. In God's providence, our joy is offered in the time of the lives that we have.

Even though humanity is the grammatical subject of this section of Ecclesiastes, the Teacher made it clear that God is the One who determines. God is the primary Actor in the natural world, and we are dependent on Him. The clock of time is powered by the providence of our sovereign God. We make real, responsible decisions every day, but in reality we know that the seasons of life are almost completely out of our hands. In this, we learn to accept that we have very limited access to the big picture. Perhaps God intends us to be like children who trust their father to know what's best because we cannot see what He sees, and we cannot know what He knows.

The question is, do we trust God? Our lives are full of broken characters, unexpected joys, jarring interruptions, unexplained contradictions, unanswered questions, and unfinished chapters. We will not always be in the seasons we are in, but they are being used by God to prepare us for the seasons that we have yet to experience. It is only God who knows exactly where everything is meant to go, in which order, at what time, and why.

In this sense, Solomon reminded his readers that God is not bound by time. In contrast to the futile accomplishments of humans, everything God does endures. What God has done may not be improved upon or diminished. So what is God's ultimate purpose for the occasions and seasons in our lives? It is so that we ***will be in awe of him***. It is to have what the Bible often calls the fear of the Lord. The fear of the Lord is a deep-seated reverence and awe for God that causes men to want to please Him at all costs.

Make a list of the good gifts that God has given you in this life (family, friends, resources). Spend some time thanking God for these things as a way to refocus your heart on thankfulness.

LEAD GROUP BIBLE STUDY

FOCUS ATTENTION

INTRODUCE: Prior to the group time, write the following words on a white board or chart paper: *sudden death, extra innings, yellow flag, overtime, rain delay, and clock management*. Call for the group to determine what all of these words have in common.

EXPLAIN: *All of these words relate to the concept of time. In every sport there are specific guidelines for time. In basketball and football, clock management directly impacts the game. Coaches try to save their time outs so they can maximize the final few seconds. A yellow flag in auto racing slows the speed of the race.*

ASK: *Would you rather have a greater quality of time or quantity of time?*
Explain. (PSG, p. 82)

TRANSITION: *As we study Ecclesiastes 3 today, we will see how time is a gift from God and begin to understand that wise people maximize their time, recognizing that God is in control of life.*

EXPLORE THE TEXT

REVIEW: Remind the group that in the previous study we identified Ecclesiastes 1:3 as the central question. The Teacher (Solomon) asked, “What does a person gain for all his efforts that he labors at under the sun?” Directing attention to **Pack Item 2** (*Outlines of Job and Ecclesiastes*), highlight that Ecclesiastes 3 focuses on time and the seasons of life. Utilize Understand the Context (p. 83) to set the stage that people have a limited amount of time, but each season of life is a gift.

READ: Invite a volunteer to read **Ecclesiastes 3:1-8**, as the group listens for the opposites presented in the verses.

HIGHLIGHT: *Verses 1 reveals that God has a time for everything and He is in control.*

LIST: Guide the group to list on a white board or chart paper the opposites found in verses 2-8. Read aloud Psalm 139:16 and Psalm 31:15, clarifying that God’s timing is perfect in all seasons of our lives.

IDENTIFY: Guide the group to identify the season of life representative of most of the group.

DISCUSS: *Do you find understanding the seasons of life comforting or worrisome? What challenges must a person overcome if he or she is to embrace all of life’s seasons and situations?* (PSG, p. 84)

MINI-LECTURE: Briefly address some of the opposites that people might find the most confusing, for example the throwing and gathering of stones. Direct attention to the pair in verse 6: “a time to search and a time to count as lost.” Remind the group of the parable of the lost sheep that pictures Christ coming to seek and to save the lost. There will come a time when the window of opportunity to accept Christ as Lord has closed.

ASK: *How should recognizing that there are complementary seasons of opportunity that open and close in life impact how one lives?* (PSG, p. 86)

HIGHLIGHT: Call attention to the large quote on page 85 of the PSG: *The sooner we come to grips with mortality, the more we are able to recognize the preciousness of life.* Invite volunteers to respond to this statement.

READ: Direct a volunteer to read Ecclesiastes 3:9-13, as the group pictures the characteristics of God described in these verses.

PARAPHRASE: Direct the group to form pairs and share the characteristics of God they identified and then work together to paraphrase verse 11. Call for volunteers to share their paraphrases.

SHARE: Distribute copies of **Pack Item 9** (*Handout: Memory Verses Bookmark*) to those who need one, encouraging each person to memorize Ecclesiastes 3:11 over the coming week.

STUDY: Help explain these verses using the paragraphs under Verses 9-11 on page 87 of the PSG. Note that because we can't grasp eternity, we must depend on God's guidance for how to spend our time.

ASK: *How does having a healthy sense of one's mortality help one be a faithful steward of one's time?* (PSG, p. 87) ***What are some practical ways of seeing good in the work and investments of time we make in this life?*** (PSG, p. 88)

READ: Invite a volunteer to read aloud Ecclesiastes 3:14-15, as the group listens for additional characteristics of God.

GUIDE: Lead the group to discuss how Solomon's words reveal his understanding of God. Emphasize that a wise person is a good steward of his or her time.

DISCUSS: Call attention to **Pack Item 3** (*Map: Solomon's Building Projects*) and the topics Solomon discussed throughout the Book of Ecclesiastes, noted on **Pack Item 4** (*Poster: Worthwhile Pursuits?*). Then ask: ***Consider Solomon's experiences with pleasure, wisdom, wealth, and power. How does recognizing that God is at work in the time granted and situations faced give a person hope and comfort?*** (PSG, p. 89)

TRANSITION: *God is enduring, complete, and just, and we are called to stand in awe of His mighty works. Ecclesiastes 3 reminds us that God is in control in all aspects of our lives and encourages us to keep an eternal perspective as we face different seasons of life.*

SUMMARIZE AND CHALLENGE

REVIEW: Call on someone to read the Key Doctrine (Stewardship) on page 89 of the PSG. Lead in a discussion of how the group has seen time, talents, and material possessions used for God's glory. Ask: ***How has your understanding of stewardship changed as a result of today's study?***

EVALUATE: Lead the group to complete the first question set under Apply the Text (PSG, p. 90): ***List activities and actions you have been putting off or avoiding. How can you embrace the items listed, looking for God's work in each?***

PRAY: Close in prayer, asking the Lord to lead each of us to make honoring Him with our time a priority.

OPTIONS

Use these options to supplement and enhance the group plans on the previous pages.

MUSIC

Secure a copy of “Without Him,” by Mylon R. LeFevre, available in the *Baptist Hymnal*. Pre-enlist two volunteers. Close the study by directing each volunteer to read an assigned verse of the song. Lead the group in singing the chorus.

CREATIVE WRITING

Gather pencils and paper.

After examining Ecclesiastes 3:1-8, divide the group into teams, providing each team with pencils and paper. Instruct each team to develop their own poem of opposites related to time. Indicate that they can be serious or humorous. Examples might include: a time to be dirty and a time to be clean, or a time to diet and a time to feast. Allow time for each team to share their contrasts with the group.

OBJECTS

Gather objects that represent time, such as a watch, a clock, a stopwatch, a timer, an hourglass, a calendar, or birthday candles.

Call attention to the display of objects. Invite the group to identify how each object represents time. Ask if they ever feel like time is moving too slow or too fast. Direct everyone to stand. Using the timer or stopwatch say, “I will say go, and when you think the timer or stopwatch is getting close to one minute, please sit down.” Note that some of the group had a feel for one minute while others didn’t. Discuss whether anyone let someone else influence them to sit down. Note that Solomon’s words in Ecclesiastes 3 picture the gift of time as limited and should be used to honor God.

NATURE/PRESENTATION

Pre-enlist someone to research the agrarian society of Solomon’s time and how the seasons of life closely follow the agricultural growth cycle. Allow time for the group to ask about the information presented. Point out that Ecclesiastes 3:2 states specifically that there is “a time to plant and a time to uproot.” Discuss how this cycle might be lived out in our lives.

MINI-LECTURE

Pre-enlist a volunteer to complete the Bible Skill activity on page 88 of the PSG and prepare a mini-lecture on eternity. Call for the volunteer to present his or her findings to help the group better understand Ecclesiastes 3:11.

VISUAL

Gather paper and pencils.

Provide paper and pencils for the group. Call attention to the three statements under Apply the Text (PSG, p. 90). Instruct the group to select one of the statements and sketch an illustration that depicts the statement they chose. Invite volunteers to share their sketches.