

All in good time

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Preacher: Brian King

[0 : 00] So let's prepare ourselves to hear God's Word. For those of you again who are visiting, we are actually in a series. We are exploring this fascinating Old Testament book called Ecclesiastes.

And we're going to go on a journey where we're exploring what the preacher has to say about life.

And we're in chapter 3 this morning. So at this church, we are driven by God's Word.

That's one of our core convictions. And so we always want to look at the Bible and just to see what is in there to hear God speak. There's also a sermon outline that might help you follow along if that's helpful for you.

Let's pray. Let's ask God for his help. Heavenly Father, we pray again that you would speak to us through the words of the teacher in Ecclesiastes.

Please teach us how to live through every season, through every moment, so that we would give all of our days to you and trust you with them. All this we pray in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.

[1 : 07] Several years ago, the neuroscientist Sam Harris made an insightful, if sobering, observation. Because there will come a day when you will die, he says, life is full of experiences that one day you will do for the very last time.

There will come a day when you will eat your favorite laksa, enjoy your favorite TV show, or have a meaningful conversation with your favorite person for the very last time.

And most of the time, you wouldn't know it's the last time. You have no idea your moment has come. Same goes for so many other experiences in life.

There will be a last time when you will drive your child to school, a last time when you will visit your favorite kopitiam from your childhood before it's torn down, and so on.

Life is full of last times. So it's no wonder that we human beings are so desperate to maximize our time. Nowhere is that more obvious than in how we talk about time.

[2 : 21] Think about it. We say, let's try to save time. Learn to manage your time. Make more efficient use of your time. Don't waste my time.

And the words we use betray the fact that we see time as a thing to be used, a resource that we try to employ to make the most of our time, of our lives.

We think we can gain mastery over time, that we can tame it, control it, manage it, bring it under our rule. But can we? After all, the truth is, despite what we may think, strictly speaking, time isn't a resource we have that we can utilize as we wish.

It's not the same thing as having cash in our wallets. Time isn't something we control.

It's not so much something we use as something we are in. It's something that happens to us, perhaps even defines us.

[3 : 46] So what do we do with this fact? Most of the time, we probably try not to even think about it. But that's what Ecclesiastes refuses to let us get away with.

In the opening chapters of this book, the teacher's been reflecting on life in this fallen world. This world was created good, breathtaking even, filled with blessing after blessing.

But now it's been twisted, shattered, broken by our refusal to let God be God. And so life now has become Hebel.

That's the Hebrew word that we've been learning that's been coming up again and again, and will come up again and again throughout this series. And although it's translated meaningless in the NIV, it literally means vapour, mist, smoke.

To say life is Hebel is to say life is like a breath, here today, gone tomorrow. And it's like the wind, unable to be grasped, enigmatic and incomprehensible in so many ways.

[4 : 56] And nowhere is that Hebel nature of our lives more prominent than in our experience of time. After all, we live in fleeting moments which sometimes cannot be understood.

Back in 2004, I was a university student back in Kuching on holidays. And I still remember one night of that year vividly.

I was in Dr. Hompok's house, one of our elders now, with his home group. Some of you are here. And we were watching the very first season of Malaysian Idol, laughing at all the amusing auditions. It was a time of great joy, much gladness, true happiness, as we gathered around food and conversation. But then suddenly, late in the night, a phone rang.

And we learned for the first time that the helicopter carrying our then-beloved elder, Jason Eng, and the husband of our present deacon for social concerns, Dr. Jackson Tagal, had gone missing.

[6 : 04] In the blink of an eye, ecstasy turned to anxiety. Enjoyment turned to apprehension. And if we know the rest of the story, we know that there were many more tears in the days after.

Pleasure, then pain, one following the other in quick succession. So just how do we make sense of that kind of experience? How can I live in a life so full of changeable seasons?

Well, that's what the teacher in Ecclesiastes wants to reflect on today. In this time-bound, heb-bouled world, he says, this is how you should live.

Firstly, he says, discern the delights and disquietes of life. Discern the delights and disquietes of life. In verses 1 to 8, we gather a beautiful poem, a haunting one even.

The teacher considers every activity under the heavens, verse 1. He looks at life now, life after Genesis 3, life in all its richness and variety and contradictions.

[7 : 18] It's as if he's in an art gallery, and he's about to show us a giant painting depicting life as a whole. In fact, the whole poem is made up of multiples of seven.

It has 14 lines and uses the word time 28 times. And given that seven in the Bible often symbolises completeness, what the teacher is showing us is the sum total of an entire life.

This is life from the beginning, a time to be born, to the end, a time to die, and everything in between.

So what is life like? Well, the teacher says, life is full of beginnings and endings. The farmer and the builder knows this, verses 2 and 3.

There is a time to sow the seed, a time to construct something new. But then verses 2 and 3 again, plants get diseased, buildings fall apart, so there is a time to uproot, a time to tear down.

[8 : 28] There is a limit to one's lifespan, whether you're a non-living thing like buildings or even living like plants and humans. There is a time to be born and a time to die.

And beginnings and endings apply to all sorts of things, projects, possessions, even relationships. Indeed, life encompasses the entire relational spectrum.

Verse 4 in there is a time to weep and a time to laugh, a time to mourn and a time to dance. There will be sad times, a failed test, a polite rejection from your crush, a grandma who passes away.

And we will shed tears. We'll ask ourselves, what if? We'll feel empty. We'll hide ourselves away for a while. We'll refrain from embracing verse 6.

But then there'll be times where we'll be happy. A perfect coffee made. Final exams pass. A happy holiday break spent with good friends.

[9 : 39] It is the time for embracing. And these moments, they come and they go. They take you up the mountaintop and down into the valley.

The season's changing as the days pass by. That's life. And life is made up of judgment calls as well.

Verse 6. There is a time to search and a time to give up. A time where you say, I'm going to keep knocking on every door until I get that opportunity.

And I'm just going to keep praying like the persistent widow. And the time when you realize that it's time to move on. A time where wisdom dictates that you say, God, I accept that this is where you want me to be.

There is a time to store things, knowing that it will come in useful one day. But also a time to declutter, to make way for other, more useful things.

[10 : 42] But life is also made up of remedial actions. Things get torn, you need to mend them. Relationships get damaged, you need to speak.

But sometimes, you can't remedy stuff. You have to stay silent. You can only grieve. You have to tear your garments, so to speak.

This is life in a fallen world. You can't fix everything. And that's why, verse 8, not only is there a time to love, but a time to hate.

A time for war and a time for peace. We want love and peace. Of course we do. And sometimes, we get them.

But in this life under the sun, there are still things to hate. Sickness. Suffering. Sin.

[11 : 41] Death. And life in a fallen world means that those things will inevitably come. Seen most obviously whenever there is a war on.

Like in Ukraine right now. Do you see, the teacher says, how life is made up of many seasons. It is never all one season.

It is never always planting time or harvest time. It is never always all happiness or all gloom. There is a rhythm and all the repetition even to how our lives are governed.

There is a time for everything and everything has a time. And I think one of the reasons why this poem appeals to so many is because we realise that it captures reality accurately.

This is what life is like. And just like a wise farmer learns to recognise, submit to and plan according to the seasons he will face.

[12 : 53] So we too need to learn to do the same. And the teacher tells us that there are basically two kinds of seasons that we need to discern what one writer calls the delights and the disquiets of our lives.

Some Christians think that the Christian life is made up of just one season that is always dancing, always laughing, always building. But that's not what God's word says.

And if we fail to discern this, we will be unprepared for the times of mourning, the times of weeping, the times of uprooting. If we fail to discern that seasons can change, then when life gets hard, we might think it's because God is mad at me or because God is untrustworthy.

Or conversely, we'll falsely believe that if we are not facing the seasons of this quiet right now, well, that must mean that I've clearly done something to earn favour with God, that I'm doing something right, that I'm employing the right formula.

And that is the wrong preparation for the tough times to come. And the thing is, these seasons don't all necessarily come at the same time for everyone.

[14 : 20] What can be a season of delight for one person can be a season of disquiet for another. And if we want to be a true help to others, we must recognise that.

There can be a baby boom in our church. and what a delight it is to see the entrance of new lives into this world. And yet, amidst that baby boom, the happy times for the parents, well, there could be one or two of you who feel the struggle of unwanted singleness, the sadness of never having a family to call your own.

There could be one or two of you who feel the disquiet of infertility, the anguish doubled by the fact that it's hard to speak about such private pain. A season of delight for one, a season of disquiet for another.

As a pastor, sometimes I get a front row seat to this very reality. I still remember one occasion a few years ago where I conducted a wedding in the morning.

it was great, it was a very happy occasion. But then, straight after lunch, in fact, in the middle of the lunch reception, I had to switch gears. I headed to the hospital where I sat for a while with a parent who had received a diagnosis that their child had a rare disease.

[15 : 52] And it struck me how diverse the experience of life can be at any one time. Delightful one, disquiet for another. And so we must know what to do at the appropriate time.

For if we fail to discern the seasons, we will end up acting foolishly, which this poem implicitly cautions us against. A farmer, after all, is free to plant when it's not planting season.

But what would be the result? Well, it wouldn't be pretty. Similarly, embracing someone when you have COVID, breaking out champagne at the funeral, or telling someone who's just broken up with a long-term boyfriend or girlfriend that, oh, there are plenty more fish in the sea, isn't a good idea.

It just isn't the right time. One of my wives has a friend and her father fell sick and was eventually declared brain dead.

And she was ready to say goodbye to her father and as a Christian to praise and testify to God's goodness whatever the circumstances. But there were some Christian friends who kept insisting that God would perform a miracle, that their declarations in Jesus' name, no less, will guarantee the resurrection of her father.

[17 : 24] But all they achieved was to intensify the pain and discourage the family. These Christians had failed to discern the time that it was a season to allow the family to grieve, to offer

comfort to them, to encourage them in their continued trust in God.

In fact, this friend said in the end to my wife, she felt sad for these Christians because they had no sense of God's timings that actually perhaps it was time for her father to go home.

It was sad that their hope was too small for it was simply limited to physical healing in this life rather than resurrection hope for all time.

And so we must learn to discern the seasons. But what we mustn't do, which we will be tempted to do, is to attempt to master those seasons.

Instead, the teacher says, here's the next lesson you need to learn. Secondly, embrace the eternal God as we live outside Eden. Embrace the eternal God as we live outside Eden.

[18:43] You see, as we face the delights and disquiet of life, we can become very unsettled. We don't like the idea that they're out of our control.

We want to have certainty about how our life will unfold in the future. And that's why we pursue gain in the first place. If I can gain just a bit more knowledge, a bit more life experience, a bit more wisdom, then I can achieve the master plan for my life.

But as someone once observed, a plan is just a thought. It is in the end a statement of intent.

That's all it is. But the future is under no obligation to comply with your plans. So what do workers gain from their toil? Verse 9. Implied answer?

Nothing. So what can we do? Is the teacher simply recommending a kind of fatalism no? You see, yes, we can't control time, we can't bend it to our will, it's Hebel.

[19:50] But, there is someone who knows the future. There is someone whose plans will always come to pass. There is someone who holds time in his hands, who gives seasons of blessing and loss, who knows everything from beginning to end.

And he is the one that we should turn to. In verse 1, the teacher declares, there is a time for everything and a season for every activity. And the words time and season there carry connotations of an appointed time, of something fixed.

In other words, in God's universe, there is no randomness, no chaos. for God has ordered everything in love.

He has a perfectly streamlined design for His will. He alone is eternal, and verse 14, it is His master plan that will endure.

God alone is the master of time, He knows every second of our lives, and He orchestrates every single second, making sure that everything has a function and purpose.

[21:02] And my friends, He knows every season you are in, and every season you will be in. Some of you are experiencing sadness and disappointment right now.

Small ones, big ones, sick children, sick parents, bereavements, relationships that didn't last a distance, deals that are broken.

He knows it all. And of course, in such seasons, we want to know and understand all His workings. Why did this happen? When is it going to end?

What's next? What am I supposed to be learning? What good can possibly come from this? And some of you are having days of gladness right now, perhaps even months of gladness, long stretches where things are just going so well.

But perhaps you can't help but feel anxious. Is my season going to come to an end soon? Is something bad just around the corner? What could you be up to, God?

[22:10] And this, verse 10, is the burden that God has laid on the human race. We have this burden because, verse 11, God has placed eternity in our hearts.

We have an awareness that we're part of something bigger, a bigger story, a bigger reality. But, we can't see it all. We can't fathom it all.

And our sinful selves struggle with that. It's a bit like a jigsaw puzzle. You know, sometimes we get a piece of time here, a piece of time there, but it makes no sense.

You know, what in the world is this puzzle piece supposed to be? What picture is this? Or sometimes we want to know how it fits. Does this go into the corner? Does this go into the center of the picture?

And the thing is, we can only see piece by piece. God alone sees the whole picture. We don't. We can try to zoom out as much as we like, but still, we can't see it all.

[23:20] We are limited creatures, and we must be humble enough to accept that. But God does see it all. He alone transcends time.

You know, if we say that something is eternal, we usually mean that it has no end, but we still imply that there might be a beginning. But not God. He has no beginning and no end.

He cannot be measured by units of time. And that is good news because that means that God is infinitely good, infinitely all-powerful, infinitely wise.

And so, verse 11, we can be confident that he has made everything beautiful in his time. In fact, more precisely, verse 11 says that he has made everything fitting in his time.

That is, if we ever saw what God saw, we would see that the entire jigsaw puzzle fits together beautifully to present the most marvelous picture that you've ever seen.

[24 : 25] For he has made it all fit together. And your life and my life is just one part of that jigsaw puzzle that God is using to create this beautiful picture.

And he uses even the seasons of darkness, even times of hatred and war to do so. How? We don't know.

We can't fully comprehend. But we can be confident that he does so because of the cross. The cross tells us that God can use even evil for good without being at the same time the author of evil. And so the teacher says to us, embrace this eternal God. So what does it look like for us to embrace God?

Well, the remainder of today's sermon will be dedicated to exploring that and I think there are three things we can say. Number one, enjoy the gifts. Enjoy the gifts.

[25 : 33] Verse 12, I know that there is nothing better for people than to be happy and to do good while they live, that each of them may eat and drink and find satisfaction in their toil.

This is the gift of God. This, as I'm sure you are beginning to notice already, is a repeated theme in Ecclesiastes. The teacher says, look, life is full of ups and downs.

But while you're here, enjoy what you have. Enjoy what you've been given, the Sipeng special, Sarawak Laksa, a job completed, a deadline met.

Now, at this point, you might be beginning to ask, how is this different from those who say, eat, drink, and be merry and then you die? Well, here's the difference.

To just say, eat, drink, and be merry excludes God. To live that way is simply to say, oh, whatever, life is just what it is. I'll just live how I want.

[26 : 35] But to do as the teacher recommends is to say, yes, life is broken. We live in a fallen world. But God is still present and God is still good.

And so, whenever I get to enjoy glimpses of God's goodness in food and in drink and in a job well done, I say, thank you, God, for your gifts.

In fact, did you notice that the things mentioned, food, drink, and work, are actually things that God gave humankind in Genesis 2? In other words, these are good gifts he gave to us before the fall.

And in his goodness, he still gives us opportunities to enjoy these pre-fall gifts, even though they can be distorted by the curse of sin.

And sometimes, God allows us to enjoy his gifts so much that it gives us a glimpse of eternity. Think about it.

[27 : 42] You know how sometimes you have this experience of being so immersed in something that it seems as if all time disappears? You could be lost in a book and the hours fly by.

You could be a child happily playing with Lego all afternoon. You could spend a whole day chatting with friends without realizing it. You could be busy doing the gardening and then it's dinner time already.

God has placed eternity in our hearts and sometimes, when we enjoy his gifts, he gives us an experience of that glorious eternity.

Yes, even in a Habel world. number two, fear God. Verse 14, I know that everything God does will endure forever, nothing can be added to it and nothing taken from it.

God does it so that people will fear Him. Fearing God is the great theme of biblical wisdom literature. It involves a right recognition of who God really is, so much so that when we encounter Him truly, we will tremble.

[29 : 00] And it is right to tremble. This, after all, is the God who sees and knows billions of jigsaw puzzle pieces all at once when we can barely even see one. This is the God whose plans can never be stopped and this is the God who oversees our time here on earth.

But sometimes I wonder if we forget that. I wonder if sometimes we get so lost, so immersed in the little routines of our lives, you know, getting lost in our jobs, indulging in our hobbies, attending to

our babies, that we lose sight of God.

We forget to ask Him, am I doing your will for this season of my life? Am I paying attention to what you're doing in my life right now?

Am I fearing you? Or am I only following you when it's convenient? And perhaps sometimes God changes the season we are in to help us pay attention to Him.

To remember that God is not just someone we can call on or ignore whenever we want. We need to learn to fear Him. Now that doesn't mean being scared of Him.

[30 : 19] Not exactly. Rather to fear God is to say, God, I know that you're so big, so strong, someone to tremble before. And that is why I should trust you.

Precisely because you're so big, so strong, and I need to be on your side. You are the master of time, and so I should entrust my time to you.

fear God. Fear the one whom verse 17 will bring into judgment both the righteous and the wicked, who will ensure that there is a time to judge every deed.

Fear the one, verse 15, who alone can look back into the past, call to mind events long forgotten, and bring it to account. In verse 16, the teacher considers the law courts, the place of judgment and justice.

But what he realizes is that sometimes, instead of right judgment and justice, wickedness prevails. Now this is a theme that the teacher will keep coming back to in the future.

[31 : 25] But he says, even though human courts fail to be the place where justice is served at the appropriate time, often, the divine court will never fail to be that place.

This is where time is going. This is where the whole world is going to stand before one day. One day. Like the animals, verses 18 and 19, our time on this earth will come to an end.

That's what the teacher wants to remind us of. He is not saying that we are like animals in every way, as if he's forgotten that we're made in the image of God. But he is saying that we are like the animals in at least one way.

We breathe in the same air as them, and one day, that will stop. And as Ecclesiastes 12 verse 7 will remind us later, we will go to meet our maker.

And so this is whom we should fear. And this is whom we should entrust ourselves to. And we have even more reason to trust him than the teacher.

[32 : 35] Because unlike the teacher, whose limited view is on display in verse 21, we do have a wider lens from which to view life. We know what it means to embrace the eternal God finally, because we have the whole Bible.

And so we know number three that we should come to the Son. Come to the Son. There is a time for everything. And wonderfully, according to Galatians chapter 4 verse 4 to 5, when the sad time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those under the law that we might receive adoption to sonship.

At just the right time, Jesus came. And God made sure that his plan of redemption was all in good time. In John's Gospel, Jesus takes his time.

He performs his miraculous signs. He teaches his disciples. He even waits two days before he goes to raise Lazarus from the dead. But when the moment is right, he embraces the timing of his father. John chapter 13 verse 1. It was just before the Passover festival. Jesus knew that the hour had come for him to leave this world and go to the father, having loved his own who were in the world.

[34 : 03] He loved them to the end. And so he gets ready to show forth the true meaning of the Passover. In Matthew 26 verse 18 he says, go into the city to a certain man and tell him.

The teacher says, he's talking about himself, my appointed time is near. I am going to celebrate the Passover with my disciples at your house. And celebrate he does, ultimately in ways that we could never imagine, as at 3pm, on the first Good Friday, Jesus cries out, my father, why have you forsaken me?

And then he breathes out his last to become our Passover sacrifice. There is a time to die. And at that appointed time, instead of proving that this world is truly Hebel, he brings Hebel to an end.

And as He rises again, He is saying to us, you know, look again at the poem of Ecclesiastes chapter 3 verses 1 to 8. But know that one day, there will be a season where only half of them will be true.

One day, there will be a time for peace, and there will be no war. There will be a time to laugh, and there will be no weeping. There will be a time to dance, and there will be no mourning.

[35 : 27] But all in good time. And we know that time is not yet. For now, we still live life under the sun, life in which there are delights and disquiets, and so we learn to wait.

But here is what we can be confident of. We can be confident that Jesus knows what it's like to go through those delights and disquiets. For while He was here, He had plenty of times where He enjoyed His food, and drink.

Luke's gospel is full of meals. And yet He had times when He wept and mourned. Jesus knows. But here's the good news.

Because of Jesus, you are not trapped in your season. You know it won't last forever. And you are not imprisoned by your past. Whatever wrong you have done, God can make it right again in Christ. For Jesus has stood in the place of judgment where wickedness prevails for our sake. He has redeemed us.

[36 : 43] So yes, we continue to live in a world of delights and disquiets. We must understand that. But instead of trying to master time, instead of trying to control the seasons, let us receive what we have from God's hand.

Let us enjoy his gifts, fear him, and come to Jesus knowing that in his time, he will make all things beautiful.

Let's pray. Amen. Father, we thank you that you are indeed this eternal God, the one who has always existed from everlasting to everlasting, and we know that you hold all our days in your hands.

Father, we just pray that we'll be humble enough to accept our limits, to accept that we are your creatures, you alone are the creator, and to entrust our time into your hands.

Help us to learn to wait on your timing. Help us to learn to trust you, to fear you, to say thank you to you for every gift we have received from you, and help us to come again to the Son, to praise you for who he is, the Alpha and the Omega, and that in him, we know that he holds the keys to Hades, and therefore we can enjoy eternity, a lifetime of joy, a lifetime of laughing, a lifetime of knowing your goodness forever and ever.

[38 : 26] Help us to remember that as we live our lives here on earth. We pray all this in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.