



An Occasion for Everything

2 August 2020 – Steve Stanis

Sermon Series: Ecclesiastes

'An Occasion for Everything'

Ecclesiastes 3:1-14

Introduction:

3000 year-old words of poetry in Ecclesiastes Chapter 3 aptly recorded in the lyrics in song by 'The Byrds' - 'Turn! Turn! Turn!' Our sermon series title!

The song was originally written in 1961 by folk singer and social activist, Pete Seeger. 'The Byrds' popularised it in 1965 and challenged a generation to become active for change. It topped the chart in the US.

Some of the older people will remember that these were the revolutionary words of their generation. It changed lives, sweeping all around the world. Discontent with the past forged an urgency that we all should become activists for change.

The theme crystallised again in the Australian election in 1972 that led Gough Whitlam to power with its electrifying theme song, 'It's Time'.

It's time for the sermon:

The words of Ecclesiastes Chapter 3 capture on urgency for change. It's time!

This energy galvanised Jesus' ministry as the evangelist Mark begins his account – 'The time has come' (1:15).

This is God's time for change, for an ending to all that binds people to the past. This is the moment of awakening when the Holy Spirit brings new life and new hope. The past can be forgiven.

It is time for *you* to embrace life's opportunities. Start a fresh journey where you embrace life's possibilities for an explosion of generous restorative love of God at the centre of your being.

Begin this reflection by holding close to Mark's words - they are the lasting and themed focus of Ecclesiastes Chapter 3: "*The time has come,*" said Jesus. "*The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news!*" (1:15).

This 'good news' meant 'message of victory', 'a powerful overcoming'. This transforming 'good news' comes at a critical moment when all seems lost.

So, be people transformed; this is your immeasurable grasp of possibility and transformation. Hold tight to this moment; don't let anything else that will be meaningless distract you. Live as if this instant with your neighbour, with your family, with your friendships, opens you to deeper love, to fresh hope, to reconciliation with your past. Don't hesitate, you may miss the opportunity!

This is time for courage to be people whose faith opens you to sharing everything you hold dear with others.

It is time to be more socially aware, to love beyond racial, religious and gender stereotypes – *this* is God's good news.

It is easy for this to be preacher talk.

How have you felt inwardly as you listened to this wisdom literature?

Has some life experience left you feeling discouraged?

In a way, the themes of Chapters 1 and 2 may just have underscored the vanity and futility of human existence.

The *time* of Ecclesiastes 3 unpacks:

Now, as Chapter 3 unfolds you may be wondering if today's address will offer more of the same.

- Time is short. Is there any way we will have time to do everything we want to do?
- OR We are governed by the tyranny of time.
- OR Time is fleeting. Once it is gone it cannot be recovered. We are running out of time.

We hear the text this way and we are locked as the centre-piece of our world. We already know that life from there is empty and futile. But the urgency of this wisdom literature is to offer us a pathway to wisdom.

This is the driving theme of Chapter 3. As we grasp its wider intention, it teaches us about the generous love of God expressed through his Son. The consequence of this is a realisation that discipleship is about how we live as stewards of time.

This is not a moral lecture on good deeds. The teacher draws on our imagination shaping his thoughts poetically (v2-8) – much the way we often do when we use metaphors or verbal images. He wants to emphasise the orderliness of time as God ordained it.

Some of us know this poem well because it was made famous in the 1960s in the song by the Byrds; I played it to introduce this address:

“There is a time for everything, and a season for every activity under the heavens.”

The next verses, as read to us by the children, explain this. Yes, there is a time for this and a time for that, for every action, but it is all outside our control, no matter how hard we try.

Is this perspective after all just pessimism? Are people simply imprisoned by time? By no means! The teacher understands that we are not at the centre of our world. If we believe that God is sovereign, we grow in encouragement and hope that all time, my time and your time, is held in God’s hands.

As Chapter 2 emphasised, the presence of God fills us with joy at God's gift of life's blessings.

Today's reflection on the poem in Chapter 3 draws our mind and heart to God as sovereign over time and eternity. This meeting with God is explored subtly. Almost gently the teacher says, "There is a time for everything, and a season for every activity *under the heavens*."

This is almost a modern way of speaking, a generalisation, a way of pointing to reality beyond our limitations. We are not the centre of this text; it is as if 'the universe' holds clues to life's destiny - these things are happening 'under heaven'. This is a different expression to what has previously been used, 'under the sun'.

God is vaster, more all-inclusive, than simply to be confined to a single instant in time. Throughout Ecclesiastes the Teacher is explicit that God dwells in majesty – above all things and in all things - so everything that happens in this time-bound universe happens under the authority of the God who rules over all.

God is sovereign over time and over what happens during time. Nothing happens outside the will and timing of God.

The poetry of *time* for everything:

The poem pairs up parallel opposites. We find the same language device in the earliest Bible stories: 'God created the heavens and the Earth.' In other words, God created the whole universe.

Similarly, each of the pairs in this poem make up a larger whole. When you speak of birth and death, you are really speaking about the whole of human existence. Weeping and laughing is the whole range of human emotion. These 14 pairs cover our human

experience. Each pair is comprehensive in showing the scope of God's sovereignty:

God is Lord of Time.

God regulates our minutes and our seconds.

God rules our moments and our days.

Everything happens when it happens because God is sovereign over time. There is an orderliness and precision to God's sovereignty which has been true from creation. It is true in nature as season follows season. It is true in our lives.

The teacher is not fatalistic, describing an arbitrary god. Rather, God does everything at exactly the right time.

Secondly this poem connects us to the work of Jesus Christ. A poem that teaches about the character of God also teaches about his Son, who shares all his Father's divine perfections. God, sovereign over the seasons, declares Jesus Christ as Lord of Time.

The famous hymn reminds us that God has 'Crowned him the Lord of years, the potentate of time'. Jesus is sovereign over time and eternity.

Jesus, in the Gospels, shows he understood time. There was a time for him to be born and, as the Scriptures say, 'when the fullness of time had come', there was a time appointed for him to die.

Jesus rose again at the right time - on the 3rd day - just as the Scriptures had promised.

From his birth to his death and resurrection, Jesus was timely in his saving work. Jesus is the Lord of Time. He has perfect timing.

This example of Jesus calls us to make the best use of our time. Here is one of the best ways to avoid the vanity of life without God. It is by knowing what to do with your time. The way we spend our time is the way we spend our lives with others.

Three practical applications challenge us from Ecclesiastes Chapter 3 to toil within the *times* for everything God gives:

1) **Waiting on God's sovereign timing (v9-11)**

If it is true that God is sovereign over time and that Jesus Christ always makes perfect use of time, then we should trust God to know the right time for everything.

This list set out in verses 1-8 is pretty much out of our control and yet most of us want to manage our own agenda, making us critical of God's timing. Instead of getting impatient with God or pushing ahead of his timetable, it would be better for us to wait on God.

As Isaiah said, *"Those who wait on the Lord renew their strength."* In Psalm 31 David said, *"I trust you Lord, my times are in your hand."*

This should be the prayer of every believer, for whatever God is doing in your life right now. It can only be our prayer if we trust in the sovereignty of God over time.

2) **Grasp the contrasts of worldly timings, live with assurance... (v14)**

...knowing that there is a time for you to die.

Hebrews 9 reminds us that after death, we face God. Will you be ready to face God?

Death is our ultimate union with Christ; heaven is our inheritance; live so as to grasp the assurance that you are ready to die at any time.

We can be secure about our future because of our faith in Jesus. Now is the day of salvation so today, put your trust in Jesus, the Lord of Time.

3) **Seek God's timely wisdom to act. (v22)**

Jesus is the full revelation of God. His words and actions show us what a wise life looks like. So be thankful throughout life's pleasant seasons, humble yourselves before the Lord and don't despair when the extremities of life are oppressive.

Whatever you do, do it in the name of our Lord.

Pray for wisdom from the Holy Spirit.

Seek to be....

...timely in your emotional responses.

...timely in your relationships.

...timely with your speech.

...timely with your possessions.

...timely with your commitment to justice.

Building each and every life, 'turn, turn, turn' to the eternal time when all will be harvested as God has ordained.

There is *a time* for every matter under heaven.

