

# **Living a Meaningful Life**

## **A Time for Everything**

*Ecclesiastes 3:1-15*

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# A Time for Everything<sup>1</sup>

## Scripture

The writer of Ecclesiastes, also known as “Qoheleth” and “the Preacher,” wanted to know how to live a meaningful life. He tried all kinds of ways to live a meaningful life. In today’s text he talks about how there is a time for everything.

Listen to how the Preacher put it in Ecclesiastes 3:1-15:

**<sup>1</sup> For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven:**

**<sup>2</sup> a time to be born, and a time to die;  
a time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is planted;**

**<sup>3</sup> a time to kill, and a time to heal;  
a time to break down, and a time to build up;**

**<sup>4</sup> a time to weep, and a time to laugh;  
a time to mourn, and a time to dance;**

**<sup>5</sup> a time to cast away stones, and a time to gather stones together;**

**a time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing;**

**<sup>6</sup> a time to seek, and a time to lose;  
a time to keep, and a time to cast away;**

**<sup>7</sup> a time to tear, and a time to sew;  
a time to keep silence, and a time to speak;**

**<sup>8</sup> a time to love, and a time to hate;  
a time for war, and a time for peace.**

**<sup>9</sup> What gain has the worker from his toil? <sup>10</sup> I have seen the business that God has given to the children of man to be busy with. <sup>11</sup> He has made everything beautiful in its time. Also, he has put eternity into man’s heart, yet so that he cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end. <sup>12</sup> I perceived that there is nothing better for them than to be**

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<sup>1</sup> This sermon is based on material found in Sidney Greidanus, *Preaching Christ from Ecclesiastes: Foundations for Expository Sermons* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2010), 69-87.

joyful and to do good as long as they live; <sup>13</sup> also that everyone should eat and drink and take pleasure in all his toil—this is God’s gift to man.

<sup>14</sup> I perceived that whatever God does endures forever; nothing can be added to it, nor anything taken from it. God has done it, so that people fear before him. <sup>15</sup> That which is, already has been; that which is to be, already has been; and God seeks what has been driven away. (Ecclesiastes 3:1-15)

## Introduction

We live in a time in which people do not stand in awe before God. We are so busy that we forget him. We are so consumed with our own agendas that we hardly think about God.

When the Preacher wrote this message to the people of God, they, too, were forgetful of God. They were busy buying and selling, making fortunes and losing them, and without much thought of God. They did not stand in awe before God. The Preacher began to counter this problem by reminding the people of God in his time—and ours—that there is a time for everything.

## Review

The Preacher opened the book of Ecclesiastes with an introduction of himself (1:1), a statement of his theme (1:2), and a poetic summary of his theme (1:3-11).

His theme is simple: *all is vanity*.

The Hebrew word for *vanity* means “vapor” or “breath.”<sup>2</sup> It refers to that which is meaningless, futile, ephemeral, and passing.

So the Preacher’s theme is that everything in life is meaningless. For twelve and a half chapters he demonstrates his theme.

However, the Preacher eventually gives a corrective. He says

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<sup>2</sup> James Strong, *The Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible: Showing Every Word of the Text of the Common English Version of the Canonical Books, and Every Occurrence of Each Word in Regular Order.*, electronic ed. (Ontario: Woodside Bible Fellowship, 1996).

that everything in life is meaningless *without God*. His ultimate purpose is to show that we can live a meaningful life *only* when we live it in a right relationship to God. If we don't live our lives in a right relationship to God, then indeed everything in life is meaningless. But, if we do live our lives in a right relationship to God, then everything in life is meaningful.

The Preacher explored several areas of life to demonstrate that all is vanity, that everything in life is meaningless without God. He explored wisdom (1:12-18), pleasure (2:1-11), wise living (2:12-17), and toil (2:18-26). And in each of these areas he discovered that apart from God, we do not gain anything.

In his continuing quest to find how to live a meaningful life, the Preacher turned his attention to time.

## Lesson

In today's lesson we learn that the sovereign God set the times forever so that people will stand in awe before him.

### I. **The Thesis Statement: For Everything There Is a Season (3:1)**

First, let's look at the thesis statement. The thesis statement is given in Ecclesiastes 1:1: **“For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven.”**

There is an appropriate time for everything. Human life is not haphazard. The Preacher proclaims that there is a proper **“time for every matter under heaven.”**

#### A. *A Poem About the Times (3:2-8)*

The Preacher illustrates his thesis that there is a time for everything with a poem about the times in Ecclesiastes 3:2-8. This poem mentions **time** twenty-eight times. There is a **time** for this, and there is a **time** for that—twenty-eight times. One commentator

says that “it sounds like a clock that, inexorably and independent of the wishes of the people, keeps ticking and striking. Whatever happens, and there is nothing you can do about it.”<sup>3</sup>

Let’s look more closely at the poem. It will be helpful to keep in mind that there are actually seven matching pairs of contrasts.

*Verse 2a* says, “**a time to be born, and a time to die.**” The poem starts with the times that begin and end every human life. We do not decide to be born, let alone the *time* to be born. The time to be born and the time to die are beyond our control.

The first pair is matched with a second pair, “**a time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is planted**” (3:2b). Again, we don’t control the time to plant nor the time to pluck up what is planted. We are free, of course, to plant at other than the appropriate time. We can decide to plant flowers in the middle of winter. We are free to ignore the appropriate time, but that would be foolish.

Notice that these two pairs in verse 2 are similar. There is a parallelism that is commonly found in Hebrew poetry. These two pairs are synonymous, basically having to do with beginning and ending.

*Verse 3a* says, “**a time to kill, and a time to heal.**” Again, we don’t control this appropriate time. We cannot kill whenever we want to do so. However, there are appropriate times to kill. It is appropriate to kill in self-defense or in time of war. But there are also appropriate times to heal, that is, to preserve life when the war is over and a peace treaty has been signed.

Paired up with “a time to kill, and a time to heal” is “**a time to break down, and a time to build up**” (3:3b). We can think again of a time of war. We can think of Iraq, for example. There was “shock and awe” as buildings were bombed and broken down. But after the hostilities ceased, they were built back up again.

*Verse 4* says, “**a time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance.**” There are appropriate times to

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<sup>3</sup> J. A. Loader, *Ecclesiastes: A Practical Commentary*. Translated by John Vriend (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1986), 35.

weep and appropriate times to laugh. The second line intensifies the time to weep: this is a time to mourn. At a funeral of loved one we not only weep but mourn deeply. But then, again, there is a time when it not just appropriate to laugh but to be so exuberant that it is appropriate to dance for joy.

*Verse 5a* says, **“a time to cast away stones, and a time to gather stones together.”** This verse has been interpreted in different ways. “Some commentators understand this as a time of war when one would throw stones on the fields of the enemy; others read this as an economic time for distributing wealth (precious stones); and surprisingly, several modern interpreters understand this as a time for sexual intercourse.”<sup>4</sup> Given the time in which the Preacher wrote this book, it seems best to understand this as a time of throwing stones on the fields of the enemy.

This line is paired with verse 5b, **“a time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing.”** We can again relate this to times of war and peace. In times of war there is no embracing, but after the war is over there is a time to embrace.

*Verse 6a* says, **“a time to seek, and a time to lose.”** This seems to suggest that there is a time to seek and acquire possessions, and then there is also a time to lose possessions. Sometimes we have so much that we should discard some of it.

This line is paired with verse 6b, **“a time to keep, and a time to cast away.”** This confirms what was said in the previous line.

*Verse 7a* says, **“a time to tear, and a time to sew.”** This line clearly refers to the ancient practice of expressing sorrow. When people mourned the death of a loved one, they would express their sorrow by tearing their clothes. For example, when Jacob thought that his son Joseph had been killed by wild animals, he “tore his garments” (Genesis 37:29, 34). But when the time of mourning was over, people would mend their clothes again.

This line is paired with verse 7b, **“a time to keep silence,**

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<sup>4</sup> Sidney Greidanus, *Preaching Christ from Ecclesiastes: Foundations for Expository Sermons* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2010), 69.

**and a time to speak.”** People expressed their sorrow for losing a loved one by keeping silent. The friends of Job “sat with him on the ground seven days and seven nights, and no one spoke a word to him, for they saw that his suffering was very great” (Job 2:13). When the time of mourning was completed, it was again time to speak.

*Verse 8* says, **“a time to love, and a time to hate; a time for war, and a time for peace.”** What we have here is inverted parallelism. Thus, **“a time to love”** links with **“a time for peace,”** and **“a time to hate”** links with **“a time for war.”** Here again we see the familiar theme of war and peace that we saw several times throughout the entire poem.

#### *B. Conclusion: The Worker Has No Gain From His Toil (3:9)*

As the poem concludes the Preacher raises the question in verse 9, **“What gain has the worker from his toil?”**

The expected answer is that the worker has no gain from his toil.

But how did the Preacher arrive at this conclusion?

Did you notice how one time cancels out another? “A time to be born, and a time to die.” Nothing left. “A time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is planted.” Nothing gained. “A time to break down, and a time to build up.” Nothing changed.

So, **“what gain has the worker from his toil?”** Absolutely nothing.

So far the Preacher has not said anything about the how and why of the times. He has merely illustrated that there is a time for everything and that these times cancel out each other. But who set the times? And why?

## **II. Reflection on the Business God Has Given Us to Be Busy With (3:10)**

In the next section the Preacher will answer these important

questions. He writes in Ecclesiastes 3:10, **“I have seen the business that God has given to the children of man to be busy with.”**

What is it that God has given us to be busy with?

A. *God Has Made Everything Beautiful In Its Time (3:11a)*

The Preacher said in Ecclesiastes 11a, **“He has made everything beautiful in its time.”**

God is sovereign. He is the one who **has made everything beautiful in its time**. The **“everything”** refers back to verse 1, “For *everything* there is a season.” That includes the times of birth and death, of planting and plucking up, of war and peace. God sovereignly set all these times.

God also set the time when Jesus would be born. The New Testament calls this “the fullness of time.” Paul writes in Galatians 4:4-5, “But when *the fullness of time* had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons.”

Jesus was very much aware of the times set by God. He began his ministry by preaching in Mark 1:15, “*The time is fulfilled*, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel.”

Jesus also knew that God had set a time for his death. Shortly before his crucifixion, Jesus told his disciples to “go into the city to a certain man and say to him, ‘The Teacher says, My *time* is at hand. I will keep the Passover at your house with my disciples’” (Matthew 26:18).

That night Jesus changed the Old Testament Passover into the Lord’s Supper. He “he took a cup, and when he had given thanks he gave it to them, saying, ‘Drink of it, all of you, for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins. I tell you I will not drink again of this fruit of the vine until *that day* when I drink it new with you in my Father’s kingdom’” (Matthew 26:27-29).

Jesus died and, at the appointed time (Mark 8:31), rose from the dead. Before Jesus ascended into heaven, he met with his disciples. They asked him, “Lord, will you at *this time* restore the kingdom to Israel?” He said to them, “It is not for you to know *times* or seasons that the Father has fixed by his own authority.” God has sovereignly set the times. And it is not for mere creatures to know these times. But the angels assured the disciples, “This Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven” (Acts 1:6-7, 11b). In God’s time, Jesus will come again to establish God’s kingdom on earth in perfection. God **“has made everything beautiful in its time.”**

*B. God Has Put Eternity Into Man’s Heart; Yet He Cannot Find Out What God Has Done from the Beginning to the End (3:11c)*

The Preacher continued in Ecclesiastes 3:11b, **“Also, he has put eternity into man’s heart, yet so that he cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end.”**

God has put a sense of past and future into our minds. And yet we do not know what God has done in the distant past nor what he will do in the far-off future.

One commentator says that “we are like the desperately nearsighted, inching their way along some great tapestry or fresco in the attempt to take it in. We see enough to recognize something of its quality, but the grand design escapes us, for we can never stand back far enough to view it as its Creator does, whole and entire, from the beginning to the end.”<sup>5</sup>

*C. Conclusion: There Is Therefore Nothing Better than to Enjoy God’s Gifts (3:12-13)*

Since we are unable fully to understand the meaning of

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<sup>5</sup> Derek Kidner, *A Time to Mourn, and a Time to Dance: Ecclesiastes and the Way of the World* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1976), 39.

God's times, the Preacher concludes in Ecclesiastes 3:12-13, **“I perceived that there is nothing better for them than to be joyful and to do good as long as they live; also that everyone should eat and drink and take pleasure in all his toil—this is God's gift to man.”**

This is an echo of the Preacher's conclusion in the previous section. In this case, he is saying that since we cannot understand the times God set, let alone control them, it is best to concentrate on the present: enjoy God's gifts of food, drink, and toil!

### **III. Whatever God Does Endures Forever (3:14-15)**

But there is more. Ecclesiastes 3:14 is the key verse in this passage: **“I perceived that whatever God does endures forever; nothing can be added to it, nor anything taken from it. God has done it, so that people fear before him.”**

Here we finally get answer to the question *why* God set the times. The Preacher said that **whatever God does endures forever**. Moreover, **nothing can be added to it, nor anything taken from it**. The point is “that what God wants to do will invariably be done, and no human being can hope to alter the course of things by sheer effort.”<sup>6</sup>

And all of this is done **so that people fear before him**, or stand in awe before him. God's times make us aware of our helplessness: we cannot control the times. God's times make us aware of our total dependence on God: we do not even know the times. Awareness of our helplessness and dependence makes us stand in awe before God. He is the sovereign God who controls all things. Jesus said, “Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? And not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father. But even the hairs of your head are all numbered” (Matthew 10:29-30). God set the times; he controls all things.

In Ecclesiastes 3:15 the Preacher reiterates one more time his

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<sup>6</sup> Choon Leong Seow, *Ecclesiastes: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (New York, NY: Doubleday, 1997), 174.

point that God controls the times: **“That which is, already has been; that which is to be, already has been; and God seeks what has been driven away.”** God is control of all times. The last phrase—**“God seeks what has been driven away”**—tells us that God seeks out the events of the past and brings them back into existence.

The point is that God is in control of the times. God is in control! The sovereign God set the times forever so that all should stand in awe before him.

### Conclusion

And so the question is asked: why is it that we often do not stand in awe of God? Why is that we forget about God? Why do we think that we are, as Ernest William Henley’s poem “Invictus” says, “I am the master of my fate: I am the captain of my soul”?

Could it be that we do not stand in awe before God because we cannot see him? When we see lightning strike close by, we stand in awe. When we see the fury of a hurricane, we stand in awe. When the people of God saw the lightning on Mount Sinai and heard the thunder, “all the people in the camp trembled” (Exodus 19:16). But when the signs of God’s awesome presence were gone, they soon forgot about God and rebelled against him.

Given our failure to stand in awe before God, the Preacher urges us to consider the hand of God we see all around us. God set the times to which we are subject. God set the time for our birth and the time for our death and every other time in between. In other words, God is in sovereign control and we are completely dependent upon him. When we reflect deeply on God’s greatness and our own dependence upon him, we are bound to stand in awe before him. May it be so for each one of us. Amen.



# Mission Statement

The Mission Statement of the Tampa Bay Presbyterian Church is:

*To bring people to Jesus Christ  
and **membership** in his church family,  
develop them to Christlike **maturity**,  
equip them for their **ministry** in the church  
and life **mission** in the world,  
in order to **magnify** God's name.*

## Sermons by Rev. Freddy Fritz

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**PRAAYER:**

Our Father, thank you for the book of Ecclesiastes.

You are in sovereign control of all the times. There is nothing that happens apart from your purpose and will.

Help us to stand in awe before you as we recognize that you sovereignly control all the times.

And all of this I pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

**CHARGE:**

As you leave here today, may the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all, now and always. Amen.