

Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

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Valuing what God has given to us: The time God gives us

The human heart is an incredible organ. By the time you are 66 years old, it will have completed around 2½ billion beats. What is also astonishing is that your heart begins to beat 21 days after you are conceived in your mother's womb!

Heartbeats are also a reminder of the passage of time. Each second, minute, hour, day, month and year can never be repeated. They mark out the journey we take through life and ultimately measure our days. Job described his days as being "swifter than a weaver's shuttle" Job 7:6.

In this morning's passage in Ecclesiastes 3:1-8, the writer takes up the subject of time. He begins, "To everything there is a season, a time for every purpose under heaven". We associate seasons with nature. These are spring, summer, autumn and winter. The cycle of life is expressed in birth and development, maturity and fruitfulness, aging and finally death. What we see in nature we also see in our human experience. Our lives are subject to the passage of time and the variety of experiences we pass through. Today we hear a lot about eating seasonal foods. When I was a child, certain foods were only eaten at certain times of the year. Now the food industry has changed so much that virtually every type of fruit and vegetable is available throughout the year. But the basic pattern of life - birth, maturity, ageing and death - remains consistent.

This is true now and it was true in the days of the writer of Ecclesiastes. He understood this pattern and he understood human experience. But the Bible brings in another dimension, the spiritual dimension. Instead of just being an observer of the pattern of physical life, the writer of Ecclesiastes implies a spiritual journey. This journey also begins with new life, it develops and it is fruitful and it is completed.

Ecclesiastes does not simply teach that there is a time for everything but also that there is a purpose to everything. God allows us to pass through a whole range of experiences but these are not random or accidental. They have both meaning and purpose. "And we know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are the called according to His purpose" Romans 8:28.

The beginning and ending of life is highlighted in verse 2, "A time to be born, and a time to die; a time to plant, and a time to pluck what is planted." This verse sets the two great boundaries of the human life, "a time to be born" and "a time to die". This emphasises the moment of birth and all the potential that life has and also the moment of death when a life is completed. Interestingly, the writer compares this with a farmer planting a seed and later receiving a harvest. It is interesting to look at God as the farmer, the seed as our life and the harvest as our death. It is not simply that life begins and ends abruptly but that it had a purpose – to produce fruit. It was valuable.

The Lord Jesus uses the same picture in regard to His own experience of life and death: "Jesus answered them, saying, 'The hour has come that the Son of Man should be glorified. Most assuredly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the ground and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it produces much grain'" John 12:23-24.

So, at the outset of our passage we see that human experience of time has an eternal context. What we do with this most precious commodity is of the greatest importance. A colleague pointed out to me recently that wheat is now three times the price it was a year ago. Wheat is one the greatest staple foods of the world and we are beginning to understand how vital it is to our survival as we cope with the feeding the world. We need to understand how precious the time is that we have been given by God and consider, when our life has run its course, what value it has produced. "Do not be deceived, God is not mocked; for whatever a man sows, that he will also reap." Galatians 6:7.

Verse 3 reads, "a time to kill, and a time to heal; a time to break down, and a time to build up." This verse compares killing and demolition with healing and construction. He argues that there is a time when we need to put to death or destroy something with a view to healing and building up. This concept is not foreign to the New Testament. In Colossians 3:5-13 Paul writes, "Therefore put to death your members which are on the earth: fornication, uncleanness, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry. Because of these things the wrath of God is coming upon the sons of disobedience, in which you yourselves once walked when you lived in them. But now you yourselves are to put off all these: anger, wrath, malice, blasphemy, filthy language out of your mouth. Do not lie to

one another, since you have put off the old man with his deeds, and have put on the new man who is renewed in knowledge according to the image of Him who created him, where there is neither Greek nor Jew, circumcised nor uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave nor free, but Christ is all and in all. Therefore, as the elect of God, holy and beloved, put on tender mercies, kindness, humility, meekness, longsuffering; bearing with one another, and forgiving one another, if anyone has a complaint against another; even as Christ forgave you, so you also must do. But above all these things put on love, which is the bond of perfection" (Colossians 3:5-14).

This shows the importance of the capacity to discern between good and evil and to be able to destroy evil influences and encourage what is good. Life is about choices. In Deuteronomy 30:19, Moses put before the Children of Israel a profound choice, "I call heaven and earth as witnesses today against you, that I have set before you life and death, blessing and cursing; therefore choose life, that both you and your descendants may live." We are to invest in the life God has given us.

In verse 4 the subjects of joy and sorrow are addressed, "A time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance." These extremes are an integral part of our lives. The joyous experiences of love, passion, marriage, parenthood, birthdays and the many, many other times when we enjoy the blessing of our own lives and share in that of others. And, on the other hand, the disappointments, sadness, pain, loss, and bereavement we know. In Romans 12:15 we are encouraged to, "Rejoice with those who rejoice, and weep with those who weep."

Joyful and sorrowful times are part of our lives. What is important is how we learn from these experiences. Do we enjoy our blessings selfishly? Do we allow difficulties to embitter us? Or do we share the joys God gives us and allow the pain to shape us into compassionate, understanding and caring people? "Let love be without hypocrisy. Abhor what is evil. Cling to what is good. Be kindly affectionate to one another with brotherly love, in honour giving preference to one another; not lagging in diligence, fervent in spirit, serving the Lord; rejoicing in hope, patient in tribulation, continuing steadfastly in prayer; distributing to the needs of the saints, given to hospitality. Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse. Rejoice with those who rejoice, and weep with those who weep. Be of the same mind toward one another. Do not set your mind on high things, but associate with the humble. Do not be wise in your own opinion. Repay no one evil for evil. Have regard for good things in the sight of all men. If it is possible, as much as depends on you, live peaceably with all men. Beloved, do not avenge yourselves, but rather give place to wrath" (Romans 12:9-19).

Verse 5 is an unusual verse, "A time to cast away stones, and a time to gather stones; a time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing." One of the things that struck me when I visited Israel was the number of stones everywhere. Stones are often referred to in the Bible whether they were the great stones which were used to build the temple or the illustration Peter uses of "living stones" to describe the members of Christ's church. Stones are essential to building. But at other times, for example when making a road, we need to remove stones to get a flat surface and make the journey simpler. Some things are necessary and build up the Christian, prayer, studying the word of God, fellowship with God's people and simply doing good. Other things can clutter our lives and make our spiritual journey more difficult and painful. Our time can be wasted on selfish occupations. It is not that what we occupy ourselves with is bad the question is whether it has value. Does it help or does it hinder?

Equally, there are times when it is legitimate to enjoy intimacy, "a time to embrace." And on the other hand, there are times when we need to be free to get on and do things. The Lord gives us an example of this with Mary in John 20. She was overjoyed to see the Lord in resurrection and held on to Him. But the Lord said, "Do not cling to Me, for I have not yet ascended to My Father; but go to My brethren and say to them, 'I am ascending to My Father and your Father, and to My God and your God.'" (John 20:17). It was not that He did not value her affection but there were things to do.

This theme is continued in verse 6, "A time to gain, and a time to lose; a time to keep, and a time to throw away." In the Gospels the Lord Jesus constantly reminds us of the importance of this process. In regard to salvation He says, "For what profit is it to a man if he gains the whole world, and loses his own soul? Or what will a man give in exchange for his soul?" (Matthew 16:26).

In the previous verse, the Lord Jesus says, "For whoever desires to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake will find it" (Matthew 16:25). He uses a similar expression in all the Gospels (see Mark 8:35, Luke 9:24 and John 12:25). This emphasises how important this concept is to salvation and discipleship. The Christian pathway on the one hand involves sacrifice but on the other enjoys the gain of spiritual blessing.

Paul describes his own discipleship in terms of losing and gaining. "But what things were gain to me, these I have counted loss for Christ. Yet indeed I also count all things loss for the excellence of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them as rubbish, that I may gain Christ and be found in Him, not having my own righteousness, which is from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which is from God by faith" (Philippians 3:7-9). He also describes the peace of walking with God and

the experience of contentment in terms of “great gain”, “Now godliness with contentment is great gain” (1 Timothy 6:6). This pattern of losing and gaining is further emphasised in Philippians 4:11-12, “Not that I speak in regard to need, for I have learned in whatever state I am, to be content: I know how to be abased, and I know how to abound. Everywhere and in all things I have learned both to be full and to be hungry, both to abound and to suffer need.” This contrasts vividly with the obsession with material gain that we are often confronted by in today’s world.

In verse 7 we read, “A time to tear, and a time to sew; a time to keep silence, and a time to speak.” The tearing of clothes was a practice in the Old Testament that was a sign of repentance. For example it says of Ezra, “At the evening sacrifice I arose from my fasting; and having torn my garment and my robe, I fell on my knees and spread out my hands to the LORD my God” Ezra 9:5. To repent is not simply feeling sorry for what we have done wrong. But it is about doing something about it. It means to change for the better. The physical act of tearing one’s clothes expressed the genuineness of a repentant heart.

Sewing on the other hand is about repairing and gives the sense that what was torn was of value. I remember when I was a child my grandmother darning socks which had become worn. She would say there was no shame in a darned sock, only in a sock with a hole in it. We worry today about being a “throw-away” society. Often it is not worth repairing something because it is cheaper to buy another product. But thankfully we do not yet think of fellow human beings in those terms. Everything will be done to save a life. We naturally seek to do all we can heal sickness and disease. The Bible also refers to spiritual healing. The first public words that Jesus read in the Gospel of Luke were, “The Spirit of the LORD is upon Me, because He has anointed Me to preach the gospel to the poor; He has sent Me to heal the broken-hearted” (Luke 4:18).

Paul highlights the importance of restoring those who have made mistakes, “Brethren, if a man is overtaken in any trespass, you who are spiritual restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness, considering yourself lest you also be tempted” Galatians 6:1. Taking time to help and restore those who are in need of spiritual care is essential to Christian fellowship.

The writer of Ecclesiastes places “a time to keep silence” before “a time to speak.” James has a similar thought, “So then, my beloved brethren, let every man be swift to hear, slow to speak.” James 1:19. The Lord Jesus preached and taught for three years but during His trial He kept silent. As Isaiah describes Him, “And as a sheep before its shearers is silent, so He opened not His mouth” (Isaiah 53:7). At times, the wisest course of action is to remain silent. Often our words can add fuel to a fire. Throughout history men have used the power of speech inflame peoples’ passion and persuaded them to follow a path which has done the world great harm. The tongue, as James reminds us, is a small part of the body but capable of doing untold damage.

On the other hand, there is a time to speak. There are times when something needs to be said and it is important that we say it. On occasions, it may be painful when a friend, at some personal cost, speaks to us in love and points out things which may be hurtful but are true and need to be said. Proverbs reminds us, “Faithful are the wounds of a friend, but the kisses of an enemy are deceitful” (Proverbs 27:6).

Finally there is, “A time to love, and a time to hate; a time of war, and a time of peace.” Psalm 45:7 says prophetically of Christ, “You love righteousness and hate wickedness.” Isaiah warns of those who call evil good and good evil when he writes, “Woe to those who call evil good, and good evil; who put darkness for light, and light for darkness; who put bitter for sweet, and sweet for bitter!” (Isaiah 5:20).

It is a dangerous moral path we tread when we overlook what is evil and, even worse, convince ourselves it is good in spite of all the evidence to the contrary. To go further and undermine good by portraying it as evil will ultimately end in moral bankruptcy. The Christian should never be surprised by the contortions of the human mind when it attempts to justify moral failure. What is vital is that the Christian lives a life consistent with his faith in Jesus Christ.

This process is described as a war. In Ephesians 6 Paul outlines this conflict and what we need to be victorious. “Finally, my brethren, be strong in the Lord and in the power of His might. Put on the whole armour of God, that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this age, against spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places. Therefore take up the whole armour of God, that you may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand. Stand therefore, having girded your waist with truth, having put on the breastplate of righteousness, and having shod your feet with the preparation of the gospel of peace; above all, taking the shield of faith with which you will be able to quench all the fiery darts of the wicked one. And take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God; praying always with all prayer and supplication in the Spirit, being watchful to this end with all perseverance and supplication for all the saints” Ephesians 6:10-20.

John Bunyan in his classic “*Pilgrim’s Progress*” describes the Christian’s pathway as a conflict but that does not obscure the countless blessings which we enjoy. One the greatest of these is peace. The writer of Ecclesiastes

finishes this remarkable passage with, “a time for peace.” It is a fitting end to the insights he brings before us. The Christian has peace with God, the Christian enjoys a peace which passes all understanding and finally the Christian knows the God of Peace. The Lord Jesus is described as the Prince of Peace and in John 14:27 He says, “Peace I leave with you, My peace I give to you; not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your heart be troubled, neither let it be afraid.” This is the peace God wants us to enjoy and which has been assured for us in the future.

We all need time. Time to worship and pray, time for ourselves, time for each other, time for our children, our family, our fellowship and our fellowmen. We need time for rest and leisure and we need time to reflect and consider the journey we are taking in life.

If you broadly break down each week there are 24 hours in a day times 7 days. That is in total 168 hours. If we allow with travelling 46 hours at work and around 54 hours for sleep that leaves 68 hours less about 20 hours for preparing and eating meals. I reckon that leaves around 48 hours or about 7 hours a day free time. I am sure you will all come up with a slightly different answer but the compelling question is, How do we spend our time? Do we even consider the question?

We are encouraged to reflect on and take action in regard to our use of time. “Redeeming the time, because the days are evil” Ephesians 5:16. “Walk in wisdom toward those who are outside, redeeming the time.” Colossians 4:5. God has given us one life with which to honour Him and one day that life will be complete. He has planted us and one day our lives will have a harvest. John Wesley said, “I am not careful for what may be a hundred years hence. He who governed the world before I was born shall take care of it likewise when I am dead. My part is to improve the present moment.”

That present moment is today!

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