

## My Times Are in Your Hands

Ecclesiastes 3:1-13

David Sunday

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I have been looking forward to preaching on Ecclesiastes 3 since August. I was given a clock on my birthday and we hung it above the coffee pot in the church office. We use that coffee pot frequently, so we see this text from Ecclesiastes 3 every time we make a cup of coffee. Since the fall, I have been thinking how fitting it would be to conclude this year with a meditation on these verses. They were made popular in culture by The Byrds back in the 1960s, but they are full of rich, theological meaning today.

This is the Word of God in Ecclesiastes 3:1-13:

<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 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.*

Thanks be to God for His living Word! Amen.

The late, great Vince Lombardi said, "I never lost a game. I just ran out of time." Maybe that is how some of us are feeling here at the end of another year. There are many things we wanted to get done in 2014, but we have run out of time. Things will be left unfinished.

We have different reactions to time. At the turning of a year, some of us think, “I have all the time in the world,” and that is a wonderful feeling.

Others are thinking, “I have way too much time on my hands.” There is boredom and a sense of uselessness that goes along with that.

“Where did all the time go?” some of us are wondering with a sense of awe and loss.

“There are not enough hours in the day,” others are feeling with frustrating fatigue.

As a new year comes, many of us are thinking, “I’ve got to make the most of my time.” There is a sense of purpose and urgency to develop systems that will allow us to really get the most out of 2015.

Others are thinking, “I’ve been waiting for this time my whole life.” Maybe a great event is on the horizon in your life this year: a new marriage or child, a new job, a graduation.

Others are thinking with painful regret, “I’ve wasted so much time.”

Others are restlessly waiting: “When will my time come?”

Or some are cautiously fearful: “I don’t want this time to arrive.”

Others are just full of wonderful memories this time of year, thinking back, “Do you remember when we did this or that?”

Whether the turning of the year makes you nervous or nostalgic, regretful or re-energized, we cannot avoid the dominance of time. We are time-bound creatures. Zack Eswine, a commentator from whom I have drawn much insight for this sermon, says these words:

Time is lungs. Without it, nothing under the sun can breathe. Time forms the environment in which we live. Time is like a parent and we are its kids; it is always in our business. It is like a foreman and we are its employees; it has a say in our work and how we go about it. Time is like the sky; wherever we look, there it is. We cannot escape the constraints of time.

Many of us feel pressure and stress in our lives. We are always trying to race against the clock, but this is not the path of wisdom. Ecclesiastes teaches us three lessons that God wants those who fear Him to confidently believe. There are many things about the times of our lives that we cannot know, but God wants us to know these three simple lessons. I want to give them to you as we look forward to going into another year.

## **You Are Not in Charge**

You are not in charge of your time. You are going to be hearing a lot about time management, engineering your life, being productive, resolutions and things like that. Some of you, including myself, are hardwired to try to make the most of time this year. Others are

thinking, “I couldn’t care less. I just want to relax and enjoy myself.” There is wisdom in trying to make the most of every opportunity. The Bible says we are to redeem the time when the days are evil (Ephesians 5:16).

This is a matter of stewardship. A steward is someone who takes care of something that is entrusted to him/her. A steward does not own the goods. He is taking care of someone else’s possessions. That is the way time is. We are not the owners of our time. God is. He is the One Who created time to begin with.

Listen to these words from the creation story in Genesis 1:14: *“And God said, ‘Let there be lights in the expanse of the heavens to separate the day from the night. And let them be for signs and for seasons, and for days and years...’”* God is the One Who makes the times, seasons, days and years. He is the Ruler and the Owner of time. All of your time is God’s time. God owns you and your time.

Look at Ecclesiastes 3:1. There are a few words I would urge you to underline, either mentally or physically, as you think about this verse. *“For everything ...”* That’s the first one. The writer of Ecclesiastes did not believe in a randomly ordered universe. He believed in a providentially ordered universe. There are no accidents or surprises. *“For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven.”*

God is the Lord of time. He is God; we are not. We have been placed in a world we did not create. We live with rhythms that we do not determine. The times in which we live and the seasons that mark our lives are not ours to control. They are marked out for us. Vanity best describes all our attempts to engineer and control our time to make everything happen just the way we want.

Wisdom says, *“The heart of man plans his way, but the Lord establishes his steps”* (Proverbs 16:9). You make out your plans, but God is the One Who determines what is going to happen and what is not going to happen. Proverbs 20:24 confirms this, saying, *“A man’s steps are from the Lord; how then can man understand his way?”* Jeremiah 10:23 also says, *“I know, O Lord, that the way of man is not in himself, that it is not in man who walks to direct his steps.”* Lord, I know I am not the one who is controlling my life. My life and my times are in Your hands.

Think about it. Where were you when the date of your birth was being decided? What role did you play in that? Did you enter into heaven’s councils and say, “I’d like to be born to these parents on this day and in this place”? No. Boom! You were here. All of that was marked out for you.

It is the same with the day of our death. We don't have control over the day of our death. God knows how many days are marked out for us. God is the One Who determines our birthdate and our death date.

What Ecclesiastes is teaching us is that you have about as much control over what will happen to you in 2015 as you do over the date of your birth and the date of your death. But we feel like we have more control. We feel like we can take control over these days because we are smart and responsible. However, we have no more control over what is going to happen in 2015 than we have over the day we were born and the day we will die.

What a believer does is recognize, as Psalm 139:16 says, *"[I]n your book were written, every one of them, the days that were formed for me, when as yet there was none of them."* A believer humbly expresses his dependence on God and surrenders self to God's providential ordering of life. We do this by saying what the words of the psalmist in Psalm 31:14-15 teach us to say: *"But I trust in you, O Lord; I say, 'You are my God.' My times are in your hand."*

I would urge and encourage you to spend some time praying Psalm 31:14-15 this week. It is a wonderful affirmation of faith that should be on our lips and in our hearts often: "I trust in You, O Lord. My times are in Your hands." That is the first lesson in this passage. We are not in control of our time; God is.

### **You Do Not Get to Choose the Ingredients that Go into His Plan for Your Life**

He gives us a whole list of things in 3:2-8 that we should be prepared for in the course of our lifetime. Yes, even in the course of a year or a decade. The longer we live, we can expect to be experiencing the different seasonal changes and realities described in 3:2-8. There are 28 of them. That is how long the moon goes through its period of movement. It waxes and wanes in those 28 days.

Likewise, in the course of our lives, there will be a whole variety of seasonal, circumstantial changes that we are going to experience. Matt Chandler says, "Think of this list as a list of ingredients that God mixes together to serve His purposes in your life—in your allotted time; in your set boundary." He mixes the flour of birth and the sugar of planting with the vinegar of death and the sourness of plucking up.

God is going to mix together all these ingredients in the way He determines is best for His purposes in your life. He is going to choose the seasons and the times in which He brings these different ingredients into your life. But here is what we want to do: we want to treat this list like a buffet line. We say, "I will go through the list and choose the ingredients I would like to have in my life."

What would it take for 2015 to be a really good year for you? What are you wishing when you say, "Happy New Year!" to someone? Look back through the list in Ecclesiastes 3. Are you wishing they will have times of death? Times of plucking up? Times of killing? Times of breaking down? Times of weeping? Times of mourning? No! We are saying, "I want to see births in 2015. I want things to be planted in 2015. I want healing in 2015. I want building up; I don't want to break down."

Who wants to break down next year? We don't want that. We want to be building up. We want lots of laughter and maybe just a little bit of weeping (if any at all). How many of you want to dance in 2015? You are good, conservative evangelical Christians. You want dancing in 2015, not mourning. You want to be gathering things together, not casting them away.

We want to treat this like a buffet line, saying, "Give me these ingredients, God, and that will be a happy New Year for me." God says, "I love you too much to let that happen." What happens when you get everything easy, with nothing stretching you, causing difficulty or heartache? You become spoiled, arrogant, insensitive, selfish and pretty ugly to other people in your life. So God says, "I'm going to mix together the ingredients that are needed in your life. You just need to be prepared that, in the course of life under heaven, you are going to experience these things."

Don't think that it means God is suddenly unhappy with you if you are going through a hard time. It may be consequences for your sins, but, even there, it is God's love bringing those consequences into your life. And don't think that you are God's favorite child if everything is going well in your life. This is what it means to be human in a fallen world. You are going to experience these things. Everyone is going to experience these things. The path of wisdom is to adjust yourself accordingly.

Some of us spend our whole life trying to avoid some of the things on this list but that just makes us the type of people who are inflexible and unskilled. There are going to be different seasons for different circumstances in our lives, and God is weaving it all together in His wisdom.

Eswine is very helpful here when he says:

Our way of relating to God and our neighbors will have to adjust. For example, if your spouse is experiencing a time to mourn, to treat him or her as you did when it was time to dance and to expect this same way of relating is insensitive and unwise. Likewise, doing our work looks differently when it is a time to build up than what it does when it's time to tear down. Church will feel different when it is time to sow than when it is time to tear. But there is a time to sow and there is a time to tear. Prayer, when it is a time to be born or a time to laugh, will express itself differently

than when it is a time die. A time of war will change what peacetime would have allowed but now cannot.

Here is the problem: when we are unwise and resisting God's providential rhythms due to lack of trust in His goodness, when we are trying to avoid what we do not prefer, we become inflexible and unskilled in coping with life. Do you yield to the rhythms of God's providence in your life, or are you always resisting?

Eswine says, "Many of our frustrations arise from our blindness to the change of seasons or to the pain or joy of them, and we struggle to adjust our expectations." Surprisingly, some of us like to focus on the disquieting times. We know they are coming. We know there are times of death, plucking up, killing and breaking down, so we are always bracing ourselves, waiting for the next shoe to drop. We cannot really enjoy the birth because we are thinking about the death. We cannot really embrace because we are thinking of the relationships that are not going well in our lives right now.

We have an Eeyore complex. We think everything is going to eventually be bad, so why even enjoy anything good right now? On the other hand, most of us are probably more inclined to say, "I don't want to think about the hard things. I just want to live for the good things and for the pleasure." We miss the wisdom that God wants to weave into our lives through the hardship.

Look back on 2014 and look at this list in Ecclesiastes. How many of the 28 different times did you experience in 2014? Maybe there are still some things in 2014 that are unresolved. Maybe you have something from ten years ago that is still unresolved in your life. Can you give those things over to God today? Can you say to God, "My times are in Your hands. I'm not going to mourn and toil within, when it is my time to hope and trust in You, God"?

Some of you look ahead to 2015 and say, "Okay, I really want this year to go well." The question is can you trust God to weave into your life whatever ingredients He sees necessary to mold you into the kind of person He wants you to be? You may also look at the list and think, "How do I decide what time it is?" Some of us are always inclined to speak, but we need to learn to be silent. Others of us are too silent and we hurt each other by our lack of engagement; we need to learn to speak. So how do you know what time it is?

There are no rules. There is no formula I can give you, other than to humbly depend on God moment-by-moment because He is the One Who is weaving these times together. Do you see it? Humbly depend on Him so that you can be like the sons of Issachar, "*...men who had understanding of the times, to know what Israel ought to do*" (1 Chronicles 12:32). May you be someone who knows what you ought to do in a particular time.

Lesson number two is that you do not get to choose the ingredients; God is doing that.

## **God Knows Where Everything is Heading**

How do you rest in that? How do you rejoice in that? How do you not struggle with frustration over that? Lesson number three is that God has it under control. Nothing catches Him by surprise. He is not frustrated by the things that happen in this world. He is not wringing His hands. God is working it all together for good and for His glory. This is not a cliché.

Look what Solomon teaches us in 3:11: *“He has made everything beautiful in its time.”* We cannot see that now. We look at verses 9-10 and only see toil and busyness. We cannot figure out how it is all working together. We see things in our lives that are frustrating, painful and hard mixed together with things that are wonderful, happy and good. What we wonder as this tapestry is being woven above our heads is, “How is that knot and that loose thread and that snarl and that blemish going to come together to make something beautiful?” Some of you look back 50 years ago to painful things and you still don’t know how something beautiful is going to come out of that pain.

What you know and what you just celebrated at Christmas is 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.”* So you know that you are a child of the Heavenly Father if you trust in Jesus, and you know that God, in His providential ordering of things, worked so that a billion unknown circumstances came together at just the right time to bring the Redeemer into the world. Through that redemption, which was also mingled with killing, dying, hardship and pain, God brought forth beautiful redemption and salvation to a multitude no man can number. You know that. You believe that, right? Jesus came at just the right time and He will come again at just the right time. Creation is groaning, wailing and mourning in anticipation of that consummation when He will come again. When will it be?

Peter said, “With the Lord, a day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years are as a day. His timetable is not ours” (2 Peter 3:8). What we know is that He will make beautiful things out of the dust, the brokenness and the wreckage of this fallen world. He is making a new creation, a new heaven and earth in which righteousness dwells.

We are longing for that. Verse 11 says, *“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.*” There are things in our hearts that are only going to be resolved in eternity when we are no longer under heaven but in the new heaven and new earth.

Every joy, every sorrow, every mourning and every laughter you experience is an echo from a far away land. Here it is an echo from eternity, saying, “There is more to this life than what you can see under the sun. There is more than what you can see under heaven.”

C.S. Lewis described this so well when he said:

Creatures are not born with desires unless satisfaction for those desires exists. A baby may feel hunger. Well, there is such a thing as food. A duckling wants to swim. Well, there is such a thing as water. Men feel sexual desire. Well, there is such a thing as sex. If I find in myself a desire which no experience in this world can satisfy, the most probable explanation is that I was made for another world. If none of my earthly pleasures satisfy it, that does not prove the universe is a fraud. Probably earthly pleasures were never meant to satisfy, but only to arouse it to suggest the real thing.

Look at this list again. In 3:2-8, we see all the things that happen under heaven. Under heaven’s management here on earth, this is what we can expect. What will we expect in heaven? The list gets much happier and more delightful in heaven. In the new creation, there will be no time to die, to pluck up, to kill, to break down, to weep, to mourn, to cast away, to refrain from embracing, to lose, to tear, to hate or to war. Not in heaven! He will come again in His perfect time and He will make a world that satisfies the cravings and longings of our hearts—longings that cannot be fully satisfied in this time-bound existence we live in.

Here you are at a point in time—December 28<sup>th</sup>, 2014. What do you do? Do you just wait for heaven and grit your teeth and bear it until you get through this life? Or do you just party up New Year’s Eve and act like nothing matters and no judgment may come? What do you do?

I love the humanity and wisdom of the Bible. Look how Solomon answers the question in 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.”* Now, that is wise!

God is saying to you today, “You are not in charge. You don’t get to choose the ingredients. There are going to be things in your life you don’t really like and they are going to be hard. But look where it is heading. I make everything beautiful in its time.”

Here is what you do: you do your work with faith that it is not in vain; you drink your wine; you eat your food. You enjoy the blessings and the goodness that God has given you, realizing all things come from Him, through Him and to Him (Romans 11:36). You realize that

one day you will answer to Him for the way in which you enjoy the gifts He has given you, but you relax. You don't get overly serious about your life, as if everything depends on you, because it doesn't. Lighten up! Realize Who is in control. Submit to Him. Put your times in His hands and have a happy New Year! That is what God is saying. Take the gifts that He brings into your life, receive them from His hand, rejoice, do good and wait for Christ to come again and make all things new. That is God's Word to us today.

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