

“A Time For Everything,” Ecclesiastes 3:1-15 (October 16, 2016)

For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven:

- 2 a time to be born, and a time to die;
- a time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is planted;
- 3 a time to kill, and a time to heal;
- a time to break down, and a time to build up;
- 4 a time to weep, and a time to laugh;
- a time to mourn, and a time to dance;
- 5 a time to cast away stones, and a time to gather stones together;
- a time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing;
- 6 a time to seek, and a time to lose;
- a time to keep, and a time to cast away;
- 7 a time to tear, and a time to sew;
- a time to keep silence, and a time to speak;
- 8 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.

<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.

## PRAY

We are working our way through the book of Ecclesiastes this fall, and here we come to one of the most beautiful and famous parts of the book, the first eight verses of chapter three, where the Preacher, the author of Ecclesiastes, wrote fourteen couplets arranged around the subject of time. It’s a very famous piece of poetry, not least because Pete Seeger wrote a song about this passage which was later a huge hit for The Byrds. John Grisham got the title for his first book, the one he wrote while sitting, bored, through sessions of the Mississippi legislature back in the eighties: *A Time to Kill*.

So, it’s pretty, but what can we learn from this passage? A lot of things, not least of which is this: God has a plan for your life. He has a plan for all of our lives. There are no accidents, there are no coincidences. There is a time for every matter under heaven, including all the matters of your life. Everything is a part of God’s plan.

Three things about God's plan: first, the goodness of God's plan for your life. Second, the inscrutability of God's plan for your life. Third, trusting in the God of the plan.

First, the goodness of God's plan for your life. 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; <sup>13</sup> also that everyone should eat and drink and take pleasure in all his toil—this is God's gift to man."

If there is one message that is consistently clear in the book of Ecclesiastes, it is that your life is a gift from God and that he means for you to enjoy it. *The goodness of God's plan for your life is that it will ultimately bring about your joy.* We see here, in verses 12-13, and we see it at the end of chapter two. "There is nothing better for a person than that he should eat and drink and find enjoyment in his toil. This also, I saw, is from the hand of God, <sup>25</sup> for apart from him who can eat or who can have enjoyment?" Ecclesiastes 2:24-25.

And we see it most poignantly perhaps in chapter nine: "Go, eat your bread with joy, and drink your wine with a merry heart, for God has already approved what you do. <sup>8</sup> Let your garments be always white. Let not oil be lacking on your head. <sup>9</sup> Enjoy life with the wife whom you love, all the days of your vain life that he has given you under the sun, because that is your portion in life and in your toil at which you toil under the sun." Ecclesiastes 9:7-9.

Now, when the average person thinks of the Christian faith, or maybe even when you think of what it means to be a Christian, you don't typically hear, "God wants you to really enjoy your life." Or, when you do hear it, you associate it with the "health, wealth, and prosperity" heresy that's plagued so much of the church for so long. The average person when they contemplate "Does God want me to enjoy my life?" answers "No, he doesn't." God wants us to be good, obedient, but he's not really interested in our happiness. He might even prefer it if we weren't happy. As one character in a movie once put it: God gives you instincts but then insists that you cannot act on them. He says, "Look, but don't touch. Touch, but don't taste. Taste, but don't swallow."

But Ecclesiastes says that is all a lie, a lie of the devil, the oldest lie in the world, the first lie. The serpent came up to Eve in the Garden of Eden and said, "Did God actually say, 'You shall not eat of any tree in the garden'?" Genesis 3:1. The devil said, basically, "God can't possibly want you to be happy, because look at this wonderful fruit he won't let you eat." Never mind that there were a thousand other trees Adam and Eve could have eaten from, every bit as good as that one tree. The devil has always tried to paint God as someone who suppressed joy, but in fact God wants us to enjoy our lives.

If you are ever going to get very far at all into Christianity, you must become convinced that God is more interested and committed to what will truly bring you joy than you will ever be. Not just that he knows better than you what will bring you joy (though of course that's true), but he's committed to making it happen. Our God is a God of joy. Paul says at one point: "Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice." Philippians 4:4. For

a long time I thought that was just something Christians were supposed to say, those words were put to an upbeat little tune you were supposed to sing on Sundays. But Paul is making a profound point here – the Christian has more reason to be joyful than any other type of person who has ever lived, because his God is a God of joy and he is determined to bring about your joy.

But of course it's hard to believe God is all about our joy when we are going through hard times, when pain is more common in our lives than pleasure. What do we make of that? "It is for discipline that you have to endure. God is treating you as sons. For what son is there whom his father does not discipline?" Hebrews 12:7.

What's he saying? He's saying that every good father brings just enough discipline into his child's life to help them grow up, mature, and become the kind of person who can know what real, true, lasting joy is. One of my children loves to go to Ya-Ya's on the Square, and get strawberry yogurt with gummy bear and worms. If this child had it his way, that's all he'd ever eat – that and hot dogs. But of course, we would be awful parents if we allowed him only to eat that. So we try to bring just enough discipline into his life so that he is in a position where he must eat other things, healthier things to be sure but also better tasting things, so that one day he can really enjoy food in a way he cannot possibly imagine now.

When we hurt, that's what our Father in heaven is doing with us. We need to mature. We need to grow. There are things about us that need to change. The suffering we go through is not random or meaningless, but is part of God's good plan for our lives to bring about joy. That's the goodness of God's plan.

Second, the inscrutability of God's plan. I'll just read a few of the verses now from the beginning of chapter three: "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 ..." Ecclesiastes 3:2-4.

The author of Ecclesiastes, the Preacher, is saying that it's not just that there are no coincidences or accidents in your life, but that every moment of your life – every day, every hour, every minute – is perfectly arranged by God. It's all mapped out by him. He's in control of it all, and nothing is hidden from his sight. And it's all beautiful. That's verse 11: "He has made everything beautiful in its time."

God has a beautiful, perfectly timed plan for your life. Everything is included in it – even the times to die, the times to weep, and the times to mourn. It all, together, is beautiful - but you'll never see it, you'll never understand it, not in this life.

'Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable [inscrutable means "impossible to understand or interpret"] his ways!' Romans 11:33.

All Christians that know Romans 8:28 love Romans 8:28. It says, “All things work together for the good of those who love God.” But we’ve got to be very careful with that verse because it is so easy to trivialize it. We read that verse and tend to think, “If something bad happens to me, well I just need to sit back and wait, because God will bring something good out of it for me.” And we think we will be able to see the connection. We’ll figure out what it is.

So we hear stories from other people like this: a woman says, “You know, I had to drop out of graduate school, because I was in a car accident and I fell into a coma, but when I woke up my very handsome doctor was at my bedside, and we fell in love, and now we’re married and it’s been wonderful.” You hear these Lifetime movie stories and you think, “Oh, that’s how Romans 8:28 works; that’s how God’s plan works. There was a time to mourn (in the week after my car accident), but then there was a time to rejoice (the rest of my life with Dr. Heartthrob)!”

Here’s the deal: big picture, in God’s plan, that is probably is how it works, but rarely will you be able to connect the dots between the pleasure and the pain in your life. That might indeed have been one reason why you got into that car accident, but there were at least 100,000 other reasons you have no idea about.

God’s plan is inscrutable, and I want to warn you against three ways people try to piece together God’s plan for their lives: *first, don’t think you can figure it out.* That’s the end of verse 11: “[man] cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end.” You won’t know.

In the Westminster Larger Catechism, which is a document written by men who thought long and hard about the Bible and how to apply it to our lives, we are told at one point that one of the things forbidden in the Scriptures is the “curious prying into and misapplying of God’s decrees and providences...” In other words, don’t poke around too much into what you think God’s plan is doing in your life. Don’t try to connect the dots too closely between the mourning and the rejoicing, the weeping and the laughing, because you will certainly connect them wrongly.

Don’t sit back and say, “I’ve thought about this a lot, and *I know why God let that happen.* This is why this suffering happened.” No, you don’t. Don’t say that about your life, and certainly don’t try to explain away someone else’s suffering that way, either. You can’t figure out God’s plan, and if you try and say, “Yes, this why that happened,” there is a good case to be made that you are dishonoring God. You’ll be attributing things to him that are not true, and thereby impugning his character.

Proverbs 25:2: “It is the glory of God to conceal things...” Deuteronomy 29:29: <sup>29</sup> “The secret things belong to the LORD our God...” Don’t think you can figure out God’s plan.

*Second, don’t think you can profit from God’s plan.* “What gain [or, as we saw a few weeks ago, you can translate that word as “profit”] 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.”  
Ecclesiastes 3:9-10.

This is one of the great temptations for us as modern people living in a modern world with modern technology. We tend to think that if we are just organized enough, just disciplined enough, we can profit from this life. We say, “If I just get enough exercise, if I just eat right, if I just get enough sleep per night, if I maintain a healthy balance in my life between work and relaxation (that’s a word I hear a lot: “balance”), then I can sort of get in tune with God’s plan, and avoid a lot, most, all of the bad stuff, avoid the weeping and mourning, and just enjoy the rejoicing and laughing.” We may not connect our schedule and God’s plan that explicitly, but that’s what we’re saying.

That won’t work – the Preacher says, “There is a time for weeping, there is a time for mourning, there is a time to die, and you can’t avoid it. You can’t block it out through slavish devotion to your Google calendar.” Suffering will come.

Here’s the truth: there is no such thing as “balance” in your life. There will be seasons where it seems like you’re hitting it, but it’s just an illusion. If you have a parent who is dying of cancer, and who spends the last six months of his or her life in and out of the hospital, there is no healthy work/rest balance in your life. There is no balance when you’re in a hospital that much. If you just have a busy season at work or if you have kids who are going through a hard time, you can forget about balance.

Because if you don’t, to the degree you are determined to keep to your schedule to maintain what you think of as “balance” in your life, to that degree everyone around you will hate your schedule. They won’t feel loved but instead they will feel like they are bit players in the great drama that is you trying to maintain what you think is the proper “balance” in your life.

And, if you approach your life that way, if you think it’s all about “balance,” all you will ever do is whine about how hard your life is. “Man, it’s been forever since I’ve had a vacation. No, not a family vacation, not with the kids, that doesn’t count, but just me and my wife. No, not something with me and my wife, but a guys’ trip. I can’t remember the last time it was just me and the guys. No, not me and the guys, but just me, alone, in a hotel room overlooking the mountains with no one to bother me, no phone ringing. That’s why I’ve been so grumpy lately – I’m working too hard; no balance in my life.” If you think you can profit from this life, I promise you will blame so many of your sins – your impatience, your short temper, your lack of focus at work or at home – on your inability to maintain the proper “balance” in your life. It’s a wonderful scapegoat. See, you’re not really responsible at all – it’s life’s fault you act the way you do.

*Don’t think you can figure out God’s plan, don’t think you can profit from God’s plan, and third do not think you can deny God’s plan for your life.* Some people say, “Well, if all that’s true, then let’s just be hedonists. Let’s just live for pleasure.” You might call this the “bum around” syndrome, where you say you actually believe that it’s always five

o'clock somewhere and all you need is a beach and a tropical drink and you're not going to worry about anything at all.

But that won't work either. Ecclesiastes 3:11: "[H]e has put eternity into man's heart ...". You know, I know, we all know that our lives have a purpose and a plan – we are all made in the image of God, and we know that time and this world is all there is. We know eternity awaits us. You could summarize the difference between human beings and animals as “we know there is an eternity and they don't.” And since we know that, we can't live like animals, seeking pleasure without reference to any plan or purpose to life, and be happy. You might be tempted to think if you go live at the beach with your toes in the sand everything will be ok, but it won't. Your problems will follow you to the beach. Hedonism won't work. We can't make ourselves deny the purposefulness of life.

So, what's the answer? How can we in light of God's plan for our lives?

Third, trusting in the God of the plan. “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.” Ecclesiastes 3:14. Four times we are told in Ecclesiastes to “fear” God.

The “fear of God” is a huge theme in the Bible, and often misunderstood. When we thinking of “fear” of other people, we think in terms of being afraid – afraid of what they might do us. That's the way a lot of people think of God, too – afraid of what he might do to them. He's up there with a quiver-full of lightning bolts ready to strike us down if we step out of line.

That's not what the “fear of God” means in the Bible. That's servile fear, the fear a slave has for a ruthless overseer that's only interested in getting production out of the slave, and that's not who God is. One way to understand the “fear of God” in Scripture is to think of it in terms of tremendous respect.

Some of you, hopefully a lot of you, know people, have worked for people, or are the children or grandchildren of people who are very wise, loving, and caring. And for them you have tremendous respect. They don't speak rashly. They act with purpose. You've seen it demonstrated year after year after year. You admire them, you trust them. You “fear” them.

That's what “the fear of God” is like – you've been around him long enough, and seen him do enough in your life, so that you have tremendous respect and admiration for him. You trust him, even if in the moment what's happening to you in the plan of your life makes no sense whatsoever and, in fact, hurts like crazy. You can't know the plan, but you can trust the God of the plan. You can fear him.

In Philippians 1, we read how Paul is in prison in Rome. His plan, his goal, was to go throughout the Roman world and preach the gospel, start churches, create a movement. But instead, he's chained up to these Roman soldiers and he can't move.

“I want you to know, brothers, that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel...” Philippians 1:12. Why can he say that? He’s in prison! His plans for advancing the gospel are in shambles! How can he say that?

Because, though he’s not currently in person spreading the gospel throughout the Roman world, he is spreading it all throughout Rome and, specifically, the household of Caesar. Paul is apparently locked up in Caesar’s palace – not the one in Vegas, but the actual Caesar’s palace. So his mission changed, his plans changed, from preaching to the Roman world to preaching to the Roman praetorian guard.

Paul had a captive audience. These hard-bitten, rough, tough, veteran soldiers are chained to the most persuasive evangelist that has ever lived in the history of the world, and one by one, they’re following Christ. And then they leave the palace guard, and go back to their units, their legions, whatever, and they are taking the gospel personally all over the Roman world, in ways Paul could never have done.

Paul, of course, says, “I could never have planned this.” No, he couldn’t have. And Matthew Henry, in his commentary on this part of Philippians, says that God is the world’s only alchemist. Do you know what alchemy was? Back in the Middle Ages, alchemists were people who were trying to find the secret for turning lead into gold. Lead was plentiful and basically worthless, gold rare and valuable, so these men, these proto-scientists, were trying to figure out some process whereby you could convert lead to gold.

They didn’t find it, but Matthew Henry says God does that all the time with the circumstances of your life. He has a plan, a plan you’ll never figure out, a plan you’ll never understand, whereby he takes circumstances in your life that look absolutely hopeless, and turn them into gold.

And we are called to fear, to trust, this God. But how can we trust him? Because he’s already performed the alchemy on himself. In Jesus Christ, God became a man. He lived a perfect life (unlike you and me – our lives are far, far from perfect), a life that earned God’s blessing. But on the cross he instead received the curse we deserve for our lives.

Now, can you imagine the disciples on the Saturday between the first Good Friday and Easter Sunday? You know they had to be thinking, “What are you doing, God? Jesus said he was the Messiah, God’s own Son, and we had good reason to believe him because no one ever spoke the way he did, no one ever loved the way he did, no one ever understood us the way he did. But, now, he’s dead – and in such a horrible way. A cross! God, what are you doing?”

But now we know –the mystery of God’s plan in the world was revealed and we know now that through the alchemy of God’s plan God is reconciling this sinful, broken, messed up world to himself.

God has a plan for your life. Corrie ten Boom, who certainly had a lot of “What are you doing, God?” moments during her time in a World War II concentration camp, after the war wrote a poem called “The Master Weaver’s Plan.” And this is what she wrote: “My life is but a weaving, between my God and me. I cannot choose the colors; He weaveth steadily. Oft’ times He weaveth sorrow; And I in foolish pride forget He sees the upper and I the underside [you know, in a tapestry of any sort, only the top looks good – the bottom part, the part you don’t see, has all the loose threads and looks like a mess]. Not ‘til the loom is silent, and the shuttles cease to fly, will God unroll the canvas, and reveal the reason why.”

I can’t tell you, nor can anyone tell you, what God’s plan for your life is, nor can anyone tell you why this or that is happening in your life right now, but we can be sure of this: the master weaver is at work, and one day you will see the reason why, and you will rejoice. You can trust the alchemist of heaven with your life.

One last thing: what should we do in response to this? I preached a sermon on Ecclesiastes years ago in my first church and afterwards, one of the men who attended my church came up to me and said in a really nasty, sarcastic voice, “So, I guess you’re just saying we need to quit our jobs and go on welfare?” He didn’t like me for some reason, and honestly I didn’t really like him. And I really wanted to set him straight there on the front porch of my church, but I didn’t, mainly because he was 6’6” (probably 6’9” in his boots) and at least 275 lbs. so I chickened out.

Just because God has a plan doesn’t mean you can’t plan, you can’t work, you just have to give up. No, you have to plan. You are supposed to work. The Preacher is clear about that. If you’re in high school, you’ve got to plan to some degree to go to college. If you’re in college, you’ve got to make some kind of arrangements for when you graduate. At work, if you run a business or a church for that matter, you do have to prepare for the future. You need to plan for retirement. And at my house, with four kids and two parents working, we don’t get out the door in the morning without some kind of plan and discipline.

So I’m not saying don’t plan. I am saying, though, “Don’t kick the dog.” What do I mean? I came home Friday after all that rain and saw what I dread seeing: wet plaster, from my ceiling, on my floor. Somewhere on my roof I knew there was a leak. And my first reaction whenever I see wet plaster on the floor is: “Let me go kick the dog.” Now, let me be clear: I have never kicked the dog. We don’t even have a dog right now, but anger is how I naturally react to stress.

My plan when I got home Friday night I can assure you was not to hop around my attic like Spiderman looking for a leak. *But it was God’s plan.* And I think, looking back over a couple of days, that I might see a few things that God might have wanted to teach me through that one incident.

Now, that's a small inconvenience – it wasn't a cancer diagnosis, a divorce, or the death of a loved one. But, still, when your plans for your life are disrupted in painful ways, can you slow down and humbly ask God: what are you trying to teach me through this?

Make your plans, but do not get angry when they don't work out, and don't get frustrated at all the “interruptions” that come into your life. Instead, trust the Master Weaver. Trust God's plan. After all, he's already entrusted his Son to you. He has a perfect plan for your life, for every season under heaven. Amen.