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BEING HUMAN

THE WISDOM OF ECCLESIASTES FOR TODAY

study guide : part four





Being Human?

Time : How **Not** to be Time Travelers

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Being Human | The Wisdom of Ecclesiastes for Today | Time (How Not to be Time Travelers)

We may think that time travelers only belong to sci-fi/fantasy movies like Back to the Future and Harry Potter. But the text in Ecclesiastes we're studying in this session reveals that *time travelling is something that we try to do all the time*.

There are at least 3 ways we try to control time:

Fast-forwarding – We want to skip ahead past the moment we don't like (eg. to get to the weekend or to when we already have the knowledge or the job/promotion we need).

Rewinding – We want to go back to a time when things were simpler and not so busy (eg. when we were kids, before COVID-19, or a particular time when we were “on fire” for God).

Pausing – We enjoy our moment so much that we don't want to let it end (eg. at Christmas, we just want it to last forever).

And so as human beings, we have this interesting struggle with time. It seems that we're seldom happy with the situation we are in. Instead, we often want to be in a different one. We think the grass is greener somewhere else (whether in the past or the future). And when we finally are happy in our moment, we're disappointed that it'll only last a short time.

So, is this just the way things are? This is what our text in Ecclesiastes is going to help us address today.

I. Know What?

There is a time for everything,
and a season for every activity under the heavens:

...

What do workers gain from their toil? 10 I have seen the burden God has laid on the human race. 11 He has made everything beautiful in its time. He has also set eternity in the human heart; yet no one can fathom what God has done from beginning to end.

- Ecclesiastes 3:1, 9-11



There are two key things God wants to teach us about time through this passage:

i. The Times are Beautifully Fitting

First, the Teacher is saying that the way God has made the times is beautifully fitting. (“He has made everything beautiful in its time.”) In other words, the way time works is beautiful. And every time fits somehow within God’s design. Even those times that we may think of as undesirable or insignificant (death, mourning, silence, hatred, war see Eccl. 3:2-8) God weaves into the beautiful tapestry of the times.

ii. The Times are Beyond our Control

Beautiful as it is, time is completely beyond our control. On one hand, the Teacher says, God has given human beings a sense of time – he has set eternity in the human heart. Yet at the same time, “no one can fathom what God has done from beginning to end.” In other words, God has placed it beyond our reach to change the way that time works.

The problem we have as human beings is that while God has told us the times are beautifully fitting, even if we aren’t in control of them, we don’t trust God. We don’t trust what he has said about time.

II. So What?

This is where our time travelling problem comes from; we think we can or should be able to escape the times we don’t like or control them. But whenever we try to time travel – to escape our moment and get to a different one, it leads to frustration. Because no matter how much we may want to be in a different moment, we can’t. We can’t change the way God has made the times.

Worst of all, when we try to time travel, we act in ways that are utterly sinful. In the movie, “Click” Adam Sandler’s character gets what we all want: a remote that lets him control time. But whenever he uses it, he becomes unreceptive to all enjoyment and unresponsive to the people around him. He operates in auto-pilot mode. In the same way, when we focus our attention on escaping our moment, we operate in a sort of auto-pilot mode. When our goal becomes getting out of our present moment, we become blind to what is right in front of us. And that includes being blind to the people around us and of their needs. It even includes being blind to God in how he may want to interrupt our schedules to work beautifully in our lives.

C. S. Lewis tells us in his book the Screwtape Letters that this is one of the devil's craftiest schemes. It's to focus the human's attention on the past and future – anything to make him blind to the blessings and opportunities that come when we are focused on the present and on eternity.

If it's true that God has made the times beautifully fitting, then by always focusing on a time other than the one we're in, we miss the beauty of what God has for us in that moment.

But the good news is there is another way to live!

A Better Way

I know that there is nothing better for people than to be happy and to do good while they live. That each of them may eat and drink and find satisfaction in all their toil—this is the gift of God. I know that everything God does will endure forever; nothing can be added to it and nothing taken from it. God does it so that people will fear him.

- Ecclesiastes 3:12-14

This text shows us a way of life that is the complete opposite of auto-pilot mode. Because instead of having our attention fixated on the moment we'd rather be in (future or past), it involves seeing the good right in front of us. And not only does it involve seeing good, but also being good—to “do good while [we] live” instead of passing by the opportunities to love others around us.

But What About When Times are Bad/When I'm Suffering?

Sometimes when times are especially bad, like when we're suffering, we just want to go back to when times were better. For instance, when COVID-19 first hit us, everyone's goal was to “get back to normal.” But Ecclesiastes warns us against this...

Do not say, “Why were the old days better than these?” For it is not wise to ask such questions



...

Consider what God has done:

Who can straighten

what he has made crooked?

When times are good, be happy;

but when times are bad, consider this:

God has made the one

as well as the other.

- Ecclesiastes 7: 10, 13-14

And so even if your moment is full of suffering, your goal shouldn't be to try to escape it. Instead, recognize that the season is somehow a gift from God and let the season run its course. And choose to draw near to God in that moment. Even though your circumstances might not be good, God is good. And that means that no matter what season you are in, you can see good and be good in your moment, as Ecclesiastes urges us.

Like the apostle Paul, we can say “I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. I can do all this through him who gives me strength.”

- Philippians 4:12-13

How can we know this joy and contentment? Only as Paul does, by resting in Christ's finished work.

For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God— not by works, so that no one can boast. For we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.

- Ephesians 2:8-10

Paul reminds us in Ephesians that we always do our work in response to Christ's already finished work. We don't work to earn his favour. God freely gifts salvation to us. And so we can work from a place of security.

As Iain Provan puts it, *"Only when what is done under the sun takes account of and responds to what is done by God can it be other than 'pointless.' To struggle for anything other than harmony with this reality is to act insanely and with the utmost futility. Instead, the only rational response to reality is to 'revere [God],' issuing in a life centered on God."*

III. Now What?

And so what does this look like practically? What can we do to practice this joy?

Here's what we do:

Rejoice always, pray continually, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus.

- 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18

Notice the text doesn't say rejoice when things go well. Pray when you're not busy. Give thanks when you're productive. It says always; continually; in all circumstances. How is this possible? Only through the Gospel, only by resting in his finished work that Paul speaks of in Ephesians 2.

The beauty of the gospel is this. In our efforts to time travel, we have all said to God, "I'm not satisfied with the time you've given me to live in; I want to be in another time... I'm not satisfied with your presence; I want more." We have all shut God out. We have all walked without him and chosen to follow our own path. But Jesus came to forgive us so that we can have a relationship with God, so we have complete access to God's presence again. He died, and he rose again to offer us new life with him – a life of meaning and purpose. Where even our everyday work has meaning because God is there in it.

In the midst of your moment right now, and whatever work you are doing, God is calling you to fix your attention on this gospel. And to do your work in response to his work of salvation.

As Eugene Peterson paraphrases Romans 12: Here's what I want you to do, God helping you: Take your everyday, ordinary life—your sleeping, eating, going-to-work, and walking-around life—and place it before God as an offering. Embracing what God does for you is the best thing you can do for him.

- Romans 12:1 (MSG)

So, if you've been going through the motions, your task is not necessarily to change the motions, but the motive behind them. It's to choose to stop trying to escape the moment you're in or to seize control of the moment to make it something that it's not. It's to let God seize you in the moment, to stand in awe of him and what he has done.

Your one task, in whatever moment you are in, is worship.



You may wish times were different. You may wish that you had more time. But as Gandalf reminds us in *The Lord of the Rings*, “*That is not for us to decide. All we have to decide is what to do with the time given to us.*”

So, will you choose to worship him in whatever moment you are in? **I pray that you will!**

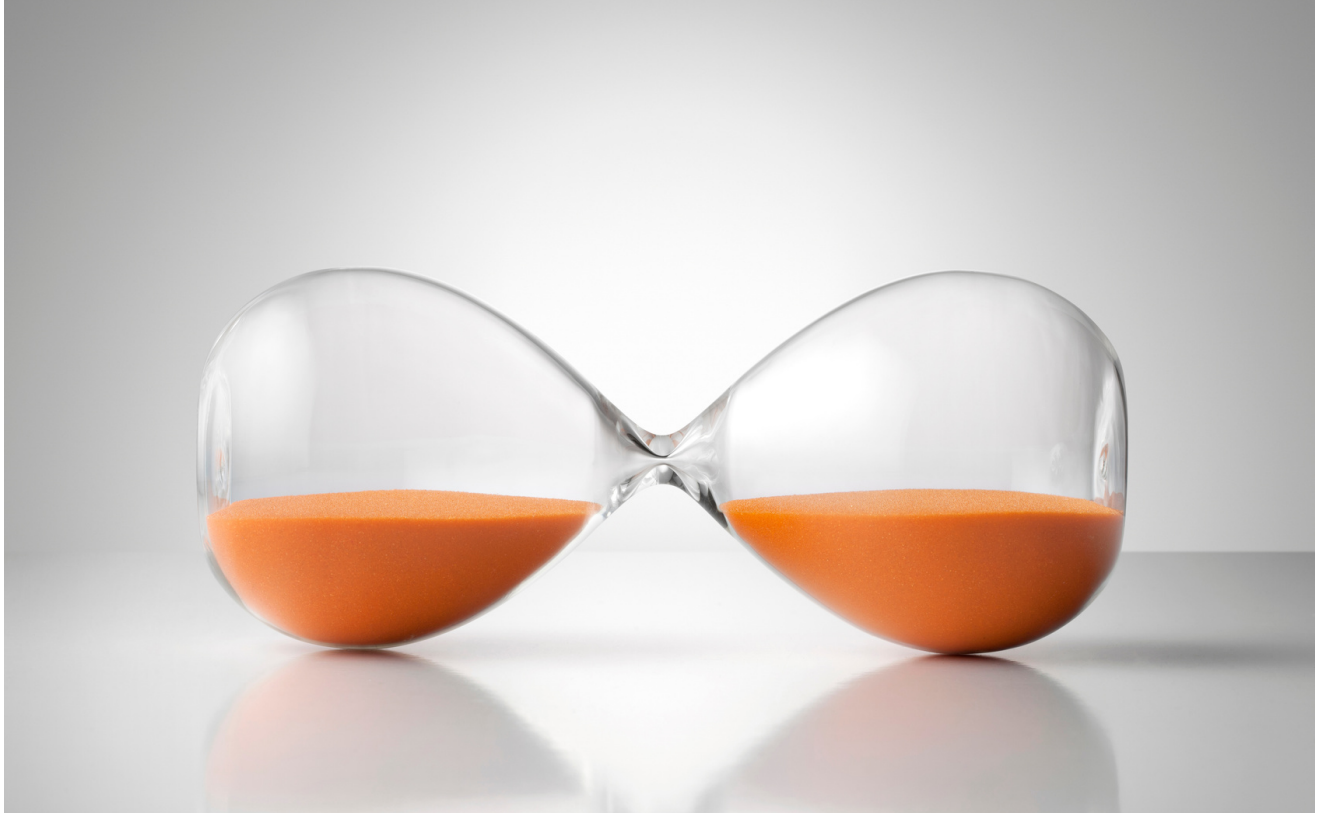
LIFE GROUP QUESTIONS

Open Up: Jacob mentioned three ways that we as human beings try to control time: *fast-forwarding*, *rewinding*, and *pausing/stopping time*. How have you seen people try to control time in these ways? What about you personally?

1. Read Ecclesiastes 3:1-11 & Ecclesiastes 7:13-14.
 1. What do you think of what the Teacher says in these passages (that there is a time for everything, that God has made everything beautiful in its time, and that God has made the good times as well as the bad)? What do you think he means by saying that even bad times come from God? Do you agree with his assessment?
 2. In your experience, how does failing to embrace “bad times” lead to a failure to live well in the present moment? Give specific examples.

2.
 1. Read Ecclesiastes 3:12-14. According to the Teacher, the best way to respond to every moment we are given is to receive whatever times come our way – the good times and the bad times – rather than trying to control or escape the moment we are in. What is a specific area in your life where you need to learn to do this?
 2. Read Philippians 2:14-15 & Philippians 4:12-13. Here the apostle Paul provides some practical encouragements for how we can learn to be joyful and content in every situation, even the bad times. What are his encouragements? And how can you apply these to your own life?





3. Read the Message Version of Romans 12:1. What would it look like for you to take your everyday, ordinary life and to lay it before God as an offering of worship. Be specific. Here are some examples Jacob shared in the message...

- **Purpose** - Begin each day not just by making a to-do list, but to ask “why am I doing this?” and “how can I worship God through this?” Stop working just to be productive or just trying to get through it to get to the weekend. Learn to see your work as good, as a gift from God.
- **Patience** - There is a time for interruptions! Stop shutting God out. Instead learn to pray when you’re interrupted. “God, I thank you for this interruption (which you’ve taught me to see as a gift from you) and I invite you into it. I admit it frustrates me a bit, but may Your Spirit give me the strength to do good and to enjoy this moment as a gift from you.”
- **Prayer** - Pray every time you start a new task/between tasks. Pray when you’re interrupted. Pray at regular intervals and during your breaks. Pray as you drive.
- **Perseverance** - Don’t give up even though the desire to time travel (eg. to busy ourselves to make time go by faster, or to work for the weekend) is so prevalent in our culture. Ask God to transform your mind so you can find out what pleases the Lord.
- **Presence** - Choose to do everything with God – to invite his presence into your work. Like Mary chooses to do in Luke 10:38-42, sit at his feet. Listen to him instead of busying yourself. And choose to be present in your moment to those around you.

Prayer: Ask each person to name one area in their life where they need God’s help to stop trying to control time and to instead receive their situation as a gift from God. Then pray that God would help each person with that request by giving them the joy that comes from depending on Jesus and living in response to his finished work.