
Time Matters

Our text this week is listed as the first one in the Bible reading plan in the ESV Study Bible, and it is appropriate for the beginning of a new year.

Ecclesiastes 3:1-8

1 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.

Philosophers have debated for thousands of years the meaning of time: is it cyclical or linear? Is it a mere mathematical inference from space and matter, or is it substantial? The Bible, however, is not so interested in abstract definitions of time, but rather the theological and ethical meaning of time. In our text for today, the author articulates a beautiful truth: there are times and seasons for all sorts of experiences, and we must be prepared to enter into each one of those experiences by the grace of God. You will notice 14 contrasts in these eight verses, beautifully illustrating the full panoply of human experience.

Unless one examines Ecclesiastes carefully, however, one might not see clearly the frustration of “the Preacher,” the author of this text. We can look at 3:9 and see that he right away raises the question “What gain has the worker from his toil?” He expresses frustration for two primary reasons: 1) We cannot know everything we need to know in order to make timely decisions, and 2) We are all going to die, like the animals, regardless of whether we have lived a righteous or an unrighteous life. This frustration expresses itself in many ways, as the Preacher cites the futility of work, wealth, family, and even wisdom itself.

The answer to this conundrum, however, in the words of the narrator, who is speaking directly in Chapter 1:1-11 and 12: 8-14. In these verses, we see that “the Preacher” is referred to in the third person, clearly indicating that the speaker is another party. It is this party, the narrator, who gives to us a truly godly perspective on time and the frustrations of spending time in this life. In 12: 13-14, he summarizes the matter: “The end of the matter; all has been heard. Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man. For God will bring every deed into judgment, with every secret thing, whether good or evil.” If we turn to the New Testament, we can see in Paul’s writings some very explicit teaching about time. In Romans 8: 20-21, Paul says, “for the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of him who subjected it in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to corruption and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God.” Furthermore, the apostle teaches us to set our eyes on eternal things (2 Cor. 4: 16-18) and to set our hearts upon things above (Col. 3: 1-4). It is Christ Himself who has redeemed

time in this fallen world, for the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, that is, eternity entered into time and has set us free from the bondage to futility.

This implies at least two things:

I. We must live trustingly.

As we spend our days and years, we do not know what is coming next, but we can trust the One who has time in His hands. We need not be cynical like “the Preacher.”

II. We must live intentionally.

The things that matter most are obviously those things that pertain to eternity: worship, study of the eternal Word, and evangelism of the lost. The challenge for each of us is to establish priorities and to spend our time based upon the things seen momentous from the perspective of eternity itself.

Discussion Questions

1. What frustrates you the most in the management of your time?
2. How does the biblical perspective on time change our attitudes and actions?
3. What are your top four priorities for spending your time in 2014?
4. What action steps can you take to achieve success in these priorities?