



# The Time of My Life

## Introduction

Ecclesiastes 3:1-15

I am amazed at the variety of things that are offered to us every day to help us find the secret of successful living. Magazine articles by the dozens tell us how to cope with various problems; TV commercials -- dozens to a program it seems -- bombard us, telling us how to be successful in life, or at least how to look successful even if we really are not, health clubs offer us saunas and whirlpool baths to relax us so we can face life with equanimity; while various kinds of drugs are available to turn us on, turn us off, take us out, or whatever.

All this is evidence of the universal search for the secret of enjoyment of life. Billions of dollars are spent every day on this quest. That is the very quest that the book of Ecclesiastes tells us about. The greatest experiment ever performed in the history of mankind to test the various approaches to success, enjoyment or contentment in life is recorded in this 3,000 year old book.

We now have come to the third chapter, which describes the combination of opposites in our experience. We read, for instance, "There is a time to weep and a time to laugh" (Verse 4). Throughout this chapter the idea is propounded that there is an appropriate time for all of life's experiences. Have you ever laughed at the wrong time? I have. I was at a funeral once, and the leader asked all present to stand upon their feet. One of my friends whispered to me, "What else could you stand on?" I broke up -- and it was very obviously the wrong time to do so.

There is an appropriate time for everything, the unpleasant as well as pleasant experiences. That is the argument of Ecclesiastes 3. This is not merely a description of what happens in life, it is a description of what God sends.<sup>1</sup>

## Open It

1. **What is your favorite time of year and why?**

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.raystedman.org/old-testament/ecclesiastes/that-wonderful-plan-for-your-life>



## Apply It

### If I Could Turn Back Time...

If you look carefully you will see that these eight opening verses gather around three major divisions which correspond, amazingly enough, to the divisions of our humanity: body, soul, and spirit. The first four pairs deal with the body. Notice how truly verses 1-3 apply to the physical life. None of us asked to be born; it was something done to us, apart from us. None of us ask to die; it is something done to us by God. So this is the way we should view this list of opposites, as a list of what God thinks we ought to have. It begins by pairing birth and death as the boundaries of life, "under the sun."

The next pair deals with the supply of food: "A time to plant and a time to harvest." Everything must come in its appropriate time. If you get it out of synch you are in trouble. Try to plant a crop in the middle of winter when snow is on the ground and it will not grow. Half of the problem of life is that we are constantly trying to run this schedule ourselves. But God has already planned the schedule. There is an appropriate time for everything.

There is "a time to kill, and a time to heal." That may sound strange to us, but the process of dying goes right along with the process of living. Doctors tell us that every seven years all the cells in our bodies die. But our bodies do not die. What you are now is not what you were seven years ago, yet you are the same. Man's physical body is one of the miracles of human history. As the psalmist says, "We are fearfully and wonderfully made." How can we understand the fact that each cell seems to pass on to the cell which replaces it the memory of the past so that, even though our brain cells have changed, the memory goes back beyond the life of the cell itself? There is "a time to kill, and a time to heal." God brings it to pass.

There is "a time to break down, and a time to build up." Youth is the time for building up. Muscles grow, abilities increase, coordination gets better. Then, if you hang on long enough as I have and you reach that 65th milestone, there is a time when everything starts to fall apart -- "a time to break down." Type gets smaller and smaller, steps get higher and higher, trains go faster and faster, people speak in lower and lower tones -- "a time to break down." But that is appropriate. We should not fight it. It is not evil, it is right. God has determined this, and no matter what we may think about it, it is going to continue that way. That is what this is telling us.<sup>2</sup>

**8. When would you say was the best time of your life? Describe that time and why it was so good.**

**9. Which "time" or season listed in verses 2 and 3 have you found most difficult to accept as part of God's plan for your life? Why was/is this season so hard to see as a part of God's good plan?**

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.raystedman.org/old-testament/ecclesiastes/that-wonderful-plan-for-your-life>

## Turn Turn Turn...

Then the Searcher (Solomon) moves into the realm of the soul, with its functions of thinking, feeling and choosing, the social areas, and all the interrelationships of life that flow from that. All these things follow closely, and they are all appropriate. No one is going to escape the hurts and sorrows of life, is what he is saying here. God chose them for us. The proof of that is when God's own Son came. He was not handed a beautiful life with everything pleasant and delightful, free from struggle and pain. No, he was, "a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief," (Isaiah 53:3b). In a fallen world it is right that there will be times of hurt, of sorrow and weeping.

But there will be times too when it is right to laugh, to be happy and carefree. There is a time of grief and tears, "a time to mourn," but there is a time to celebrate and to enjoy a festive occasion. Jesus attended the celebration of the wedding at Cana of Galilee. He entered into it and even provided part of the feast.

Then there is "a time to cast away stones, and a time to gather stones together," (Ecclesiastes 3:5a RSV). There is a time to break things down, and a time to build them up again. This particularly has to do with our social structures, our relationships with others. There is a time when we need to embrace others, to show our support for them. But there is a time when we ought to refuse to embrace them, when our support would be misunderstood and would be tantamount to complicity with something evil. Those times come from the hand of God.<sup>3</sup>

**10. Using the following verses, make a list of the things that Scripture tells us are appropriate and good for us to do anytime or at ALL times:**

- a. Psalm 34:1
- b. Psalm 62:8
- c. Proverbs 17:17
- d. 2 Corinthians 6:2
- e. 2 Corinthians 9:8
- f. 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18
- g. 2 Thessalonians 3:16

**11. Which item on this list do you feel has been most neglected in your daily living? What steps can you take to foster greater faithfulness in this area?**

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.raystedman.org/old-testament/ecclesiastes/that-wonderful-plan-for-your-life>

## Time Is On My Side...

The last six of these opposites relate to the spirit, to the inner decisions, the deep commitments. There is "a time to seek [work, marriage, new friends], and a time to lose," (Ecclesiastes 3:6a RSV). There comes a time in life when we should curtail certain friendships, or change our jobs, for instance, and lose what we had in the past. It is proper and appropriate that these times should come.

There is "a time to keep and a time to cast away," (Ecclesiastes 3:6b RSV). There are values and standards which must never be surrendered, while there are other times when we need to throw away things -- clean out the attic, the garage, throw away the old clothes, etc. This is true of habits and attitudes at times. Resentments need to be thrown away. Grudges and long-standing hurts need to be forgiven and forgotten.

There is "a time to keep silence, and a time to speak," (Ecclesiastes 3:7b RSV). There are times when we know something, a piece of gossip, and we should not say it; we ought not to speak. There are times when we ought to speak, when something we are keeping secret would deliver someone or bring truth into a situation; a time to speak up.

There is "a time to love, and a time to hate," (Ecclesiastes 3:8a RSV). When is it time to hate? Think of young Abraham Lincoln the first time he saw human beings sold on the slave blocks in New Orleans. He felt hatred rising in his heart. He resolved that if he ever got a chance to smash slavery he would do so. Lincoln's hatred of slavery was perfectly appropriate. There is "a time to love," when it is right that we should extend our love to somebody who is hurting, someone who is feeling dejected or rejected, lonely or weak.

There is "a time for war, and a time for peace," (Ecclesiastes 3:8b RSV). We ought to remember this as we consider some of the issues before us today. When tyranny rides roughshod over the rights of men there is a time when a nation properly makes war. But there is a time when war is absolutely the wrong thing, when no provocation should be allowed to start one because war can explode into violence far beyond anything demanded by a particular situation. How much is permitted in that regard is a perfectly moot subject, one that is being widely debated today.

I point out that all of this is God's wonderful plan for your life. The problem, of course, is that it is not our plan for our life. If we were given that right we would have no unpleasantness at all in life. But that would ruin us. God knows that people who are protected from everything almost invariably end up being impossible to live with; they are selfish, cruel, vicious, shallow, unprincipled. God sends these things in order that we might be taught. There is a time for everything, the Searcher says.<sup>4</sup>

**12. What does the author say about these things in their proper context? How has God made them (v. 11)? Describe a season in your life that was very difficult at the time but in looking back on it you now can see beauty.**

**13. What truths about God's character or nature do you need to be reminded of that will help you through a potentially fearful or uncertain situation? What is a specific situation in your life right now in which you need to trust God's character in the face of fear or uncertainty?**

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<sup>4</sup> <https://www.raystedman.org/old-testament/ecclesiastes/that-wonderful-plan-for-your-life>

There is some debate about the translation of verse 11. The problem is the translation of the Hebrew word עולם. Traditionally, many have taken this verse to mean that God has given people the notion or imprint of eternity on their hearts - so that we have an instinct that this life is not all there is and that my life will not end at the grave. But there is another way to translate this word...

“The translation Gault prefers is darkness or ignorance rather than eternity, and he is not alone in his choice. To get this he must change the vowels of the Hebrew word, which is permissible because the original text was written only in consonants with vowels being added centuries after the text was completed.

Here is the entire verse (NIV):

He has made everything beautiful in its time. He has also set eternity in the hearts of men; yet they cannot fathom what God has done from beginning to end.

A paraphrase reflecting Gault’s preferred translation might read like this:

God has made everything appropriate in its time. He has placed darkness in the human heart so that people cannot discover all God has done.

This gives a very different conclusion. In times of difficulty, we are tempted to ask, “What is God doing?” or even “How could He have allowed this to happen?” The revised text offers this answer:

While God has created all the “times” of life (Ecclesiastes 3:2-8), each appropriate in its time (v.10), He has obscured humanity’s knowledge, placing darkness in their hearts, so that they cannot discover His divine program (v.11). But why? Because God wants humanity to enjoy the work He has given them (vv.12-13), to trust in His sovereignty and fear Him (v.14).”

***Focus on your task at hand; trust God for the future. That would be the message of the verse, and it fits the message of the larger book. It is simple and wise advice.***<sup>5</sup>

**14. After looking at all that man involves himself in, daily living and exploration of the greater world and what is beyond, what is Solomon’s recommendation (12)? Are you *joyfully* doing the work that God has given you? Are you finding *pleasure* in this season of life? What hinders you from enjoying this present time as one of the best times of your life?**

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<sup>5</sup> <https://www.ccef.org/eternity-our-hearts-ecclesiastes-311-revisited/>

15. Nostalgia can tempt us to look back on the different seasons of our lives with rose colored glasses, and yet sometimes the “good old days” were not as good as we remember. Why is it tempting to look back and long for days gone by?

16. What do the following verses tell us about why the best time is still yet to come for the Christian?

a. Romans 8:22, 23

b. 1 Corinthians 2:9

c. 2 Corinthians 4:17,18

d. Philippians 1:6

e. 1 Thessalonians 5:9-11

f. 1 Peter 1:3-5