

Church for a Change

Part One

Ecclesiastes 3:1-15

1. The tides of time.

- Job 14:5, Hebrew 9:27; Galatians 4:4; Proverbs 16:9; Romans 12:15; Matthew 11:17

2. The weariness of work.

- Ecclesiastes 2:10-11, 18-23, 3:11-15

3. The power of purpose.

- Romans 8:28-32

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Every year for eight years from 2009-2017, we loaded up our boys to take them to college. They were two years apart, and all three went to college. For eight years that was our August ritual. Some of you parents are going through that right now. Empty nest syndrome is a real thing! At least while they were in college, I could count on them coming home during breaks. But I knew it also brought us closer to the inevitable: when they graduated college, they would be headed into graduate school or their careers, where they would have very little time off, so we would be less likely to see them.

I miss my boys like crazy. I'm happy for them and proud of them, but I genuinely miss them. They are fun and engaging to be with. So the change from them being in the home to out on their own is a hard one. Granted, that change does have its positives, like being able to keep food in the house, and I like knowing that where I put my tools is where they stay. But the boys' leaving meant change, and I didn't like it.

Think about it: we spent our boys' life preparing them for the moment they left. That was our goal from the moment they were shoved into this world. We were intent on raising them to be productive, contributing adult Christians. But when the time came for them to leave—the very thing we'd been planning for—it hurt! That's because we love our boys and we most definitely miss them. The point is this: their leaving was change we'd anticipated and even planned for years, but *I didn't like it*. Even though that change was right, it wasn't pleasant.

The reality is that life is full of changes. We cannot live this life for even a few minutes without having to deal with some kind of change. We can avoid it, or we can accept it. We can deny it, or we can drive it. We can complain about it, or we can capture it. We can ignore it, or we can embrace it. The question is not, "How can I avoid change?" The question becomes, "How can I benefit and grow from change, for my sake and the sake of others?" And even more, "How do I need to change in order to become all God wants me to be?" Change is inevitable, it's what we do with it and why we do it that matters. It is true in our individual lives as Christians, and it is true for us collectively as the church.

All of life involves changes. So we are in this sermon series designed to help us understand and deal with change. We are going to do it from a book about change: that book is called the Bible. If you think about it, the Bible is *all* about change, isn't it? The Bible *starts* with change. The fifth word in the Bible is a change word: created. Change from nothingness to creation. Change from alone to having a mate.

Change from husband and wife to a family. The Bible is filled with stories of change from cursed to blessed. Change from not being a people to being the people of God, then of rejecting God, then to changing their community to return to God. Change from death to life. Change from dark to light. Change from sinner to saint, of life transformation. Change from a broken-down world to a brand new eternal world. The Bible is a book entirely about an unchanging God who *always* brings change for the better, so honestly, *anytime* I preach – if I am preaching from the Bible – it is about change. We come to church for a change: for our lives to change to become more and more like Jesus. For our church to change to become more and more the Kingdom of God.

Our church has been through some changes, even lately, haven't we? In the last few years we went through the pandemic together. That was a change that nobody liked, but we made it. We changed from being a church with a million-dollar debt to being a church that is debt free – all within one year! This room we are in has changed. While that was happening, we had to change and worship in the gym for two months.

We experience change whenever we welcome new people and say goodbye to people who move on.

Right now you, as you sit here, we are in the midst of change, as we are ramping up our plans to accomplish our vision: to be a church that is multicultural: one church with two languages, with two morning worship services – one in each language. There are some of us who don't know what that means. There are others who think it means something that it does not. So to help us as we move further into that direction, we're going to look at the nature of change and get our direction from the Bible itself, so we have the right understanding and context for change. There are some things we must not change – and other things we must. We are rooted in truth but ready for change.

For today, I want us to see this in a famous passage in the Old Testament that talks about change. It's Ecclesiastes 3:1-15. From it, we'll learn about the reality of life change. Would you stand with me to honor God's Word, and listen with your spirit as I read it for us:

“For everything there is a season, a time for every activity under heaven. A time to be born and a time to die. A time to plant and a time to harvest. A time to kill and a time to heal. A time to tear down and a time to build up. A time to cry and a time to laugh. A time to grieve and a time to dance. A time to scatter stones and a time to gather stones. A time to embrace and a time to turn away. A time to search and a time to quit searching. A time to keep and a time to throw away. A time to tear and a time to mend. A time to be quiet and a time to speak. A time to love and a time to hate. A time for war and a time for peace. What do people really get for all their hard work? I have seen the burden God has placed on us all. Yet God has made everything beautiful for its own time. He has planted eternity in the human heart, but even so, people cannot see the whole scope of God's work from beginning to end. So I

concluded there is nothing better than to be happy and enjoy ourselves as long as we can. And people should eat and drink and enjoy the fruits of their labor, for these are gifts from God. And I know that whatever God does is final. Nothing can be added to it or taken from it. God's purpose is that people should fear Him. What is happening now has happened before, and what will happen in the future has happened before, because God makes the same things happen over and over again." (Ecclesiastes 3:1-15, nlt)

Thank you – you can be seated.

While this is a famous passage of Scripture, and very poetic, it can be confusing. It sounds like it's a depressing statement about life – like it's fatalistic. Fatalism is the philosophy that all the circumstances of life have been predetermined by some unseen force and no matter what we do, we can't change them for the better. It's a very depressing perspective on life. Fatalism resides in statements like "Que Sera, Sera, whatever will be, will be." Or, "You can't fight city hall," "There's nothing we can do about it, why try?" Those are all reflections of a fatalistic attitude. And that's what many people choose whenever they are faced with change of any kind in their lives.

But you don't have to dig very far below the surface of this passage to see that fatalism is the negative attitude that a person can choose; there *is* another attitude that is being demonstrated here – that will help us get a right perspective of how to deal with change in our lives. Let's start by looking at...

1. The tides of time.

Time itself brings change; change from one second or minute or hour or day to the next. And you can't stop it. If you've figured out how to stop time, tell me because I'd really like to know how. The great theologians of the seventies – the Steve Miller Band – said, "Time keeps on ticking, ticking, ticking, into the future". And that alone is stressful (not the rock band—I mean the changing events of time is stressful).

Did you know that there is a psychological test you can take called the Holmes-Rahe Stress Analysis? Two psychiatrists, Thomas Holmes and Richard Rahe examined the medical records of over 5,000 medical patients as a way to determine whether the stress of change events might cause illnesses. They came up with a list of 43 change events in life, and gave them a point value. You check each one that applies to you within the last year, and then total up your score. If you have a total of 300 points or higher, you are at high risk for some kind of illness. It could be depression, or ulcers, or cancer, or headaches, or the flu—on and on. On that list is everything from the death of a spouse, which has the highest point value, to getting a parking ticket, which has the least. But what's interesting is that in between those two are numerous change events that we would consider to be positive things. Things like getting married or getting a promotion or a raise at work, getting pregnant, or even a holiday or a birthday. The point is that as the tides of time change in our lives, even the *good* changes result in stress in our lives. That's why the first eight verses

of Ecclesiastes talks about the tides of time that bring good things and sometimes not so good things.

We often have this underlying goal that we want to always be happy, which we think means things will be peaceful and calm and pleasant. The reality is, that's not reality! There is a season for everything in our lives—good and bad. That's why the beginning of this passage says, "For everything there is a season, a time for every activity under heaven." So let's take a quick look at the tides of time listed in these verses. They are listed in "couplets," and it is a common Old Testament idiom or way to express the totality of something:

A time to be born and a time to die. The most momentous events and changes of human life start off the list. We typically get excited about the first, but spend much of our lives avoiding and denying the second. Yet both are inevitable. Job, in the Bible, rightly says:

"You have decided the length of our lives. You know how many months we will live, and we are not given a minute longer." (Job 14:5, nlt)

God knows exactly our days from birth to death. That's something we can't change.

The pain and grief of death is inevitable, at least in this world. Yet we are terrible about accepting this. "A commercial came on (TV) for life insurance. This guy walks (in) all somber-looking and explains the benefits of their policy. Then he says we should sign up so our family will be taken care of "in case the unthinkable should happen." Of course, by "the unthinkable," he means "in case you die." But the thing is, death isn't unthinkable; it's inevitable."¹

From the moment we are born, we will experience change until the final one—and that is death. This passage and the rest of the Bible deals with this bluntly:

"And just as each person is destined to die once and after that comes judgment." (Hebrews 9:27, nlt)

God knows this himself because he subjected his own eternal Son to the tides of time: The Bible says about Jesus:

"When the right time came God sent his son to be born of a woman" (Galatians 4:4, nlt)

God understands.

The next three couplets deal with the creative and destructive aspects of human life; we change things by creating, healing, and building up, and we destroy things by uprooting or harvesting, destroying or killing, and tearing things down:

A time to plant and a time to harvest. A time to kill and a time to heal. A time to tear down and a time to build up.

I was fortunate to have grown up in the same town and the same house all my school years. My parents lived in their house from 1961 until my mom died in 2020

¹ Steven James, ([Sailing Between the Stars](#) (Revell, 2006), pp. 130-131)

and we moved dad up here to assisted living. I lived from the time I was three until I left for college. I went to Keizer Elementary school for six years, Whiteaker Middle School for two years, and then to McNary High School, then I left for college. After several years of being away, I went back to my hometown and drove the route that I always used to walk to grade school (uphill both ways, knee deep in snow). But when I got to my grade school, it was gone. The entire thing! I had to check and see if I'd gone the right way. In its place was a parking lot and a grocery store. I didn't like that change, but that's progress, right? "A time to tear down and a time to build up." The Bible acknowledges the reality of change. God uses the examples in these three couplets not as a list of specific events, but to show in general all the pursuits of people, both constructive and destructive, and to make the point that for all our effort to keep things the same, we can't. We can try to control things, but they still change. We can try to change things, but God is still in control. That's why the Bible says:

"We can make our plans, but the LORD determines our steps." (Proverbs 16:9, nlt)

The next two couplets deal with the range of our changing emotions: *A time to cry and a time to laugh. A time to grieve and a time to dance.* The first pair refers to our personal emotions (weeping and laughing) and the second two deal with our public emotions (grieving and dancing). These emotions change, and much of the time we have no control over them, depending on what is happening. Our emotions are sometimes private and sometimes public. When it comes to our public emotions, we are told in the Bible to:

"Rejoice with those who rejoice, and mourn with those who mourn."
(Romans 12:15, niv)

That way we can help each other. The truth is we all experience these changing emotions. I can remember when Shelly was pregnant. We would experience the entire range of human emotions in one aisle in the grocery store. She would get so excited because they had the cereal we liked on sale; she was almost giddy. We'd turn the corner, and she would start crying. I'm thinking, "What in the world just happened? An aisle ago you were so happy!" She said, "They're out of spaghetti noodles!" I'm not exaggerating! (Not *that* much.)

But God does not change with our emotions. People actually got mad at Jesus because they couldn't manipulate his emotions. They said:

"We played wedding songs, and you didn't dance, so we played funeral songs, and you didn't mourn." (Matthew 11:17, nlt)

He couldn't be controlled by our emotions; *we* struggle to control our own emotions.

The next two couplets deal with the reality of change that happens in our relationships: *A time to scatter stones and a time to gather stones. A time to embrace and a time to turn away.* The phrase, "a time to scatter and gather stones" seems strange, but it refers to a couple of things, actually—one is referring to a marriage relationship where a couple draws close to each other in sexual intimacy, and then the time of physical intimacy is over. Another is that it refers to aggressiveness and

then peace, like an army gathering soldiers and then the battle is over, and they go their separate ways. Either way, it implies the changing times of passion in relationships.

The next two deal with the endless changes in our lives regarding our possessions: *A time to search and a time to quit searching. A time to keep and a time to throw away.* I remember moving from college to my first job. Everything I owned fit into my little Honda Civic. Then I got married and we moved, and it took a U-Haul. Then we had children and moved, and it took a moving company. I'm hoping we are on the downhill side of the moving business! What the Bible is doing here is acknowledging that as the tides of time changes, so does the amount of stuff that comes and goes with it.

The next two couplets deal again with our changing activities: *A time to tear and a time to mend. A time to be quiet and a time to speak.* The last two pairs deal with the totality of our human experiences again, a kind of summary: *A time to love and a time to hate. A time for war and a time for peace.* Of all days, today we understand this one too well.

The point in *all* of this is that all these changes are a natural part of our human existence from beginning to end. But ultimately, we have to say to God what the writer of the Psalms said:

“My future is in Your hands.” (Psalm 31:15, nlt)

and in Proverbs:

“We can make our plans, but the LORD determines our steps.” (Proverbs 16:9, nlt)

These couplets sound fatalistic—this is overwhelming evidence of the changing tides of time in our lives and how little we control. No matter where we go, we will face all kinds of inevitable changes.

To drive the point even further, the writer in Ecclesiastes then talks about...

2. The weariness of work.

He says:

“What do people really get for all their hard work? I have seen the burden God has placed on us all.” (Ecclesiastes 3:9-10, nlt)

These two verses serve as a reminder of what the author said earlier in chapter two:

“Anything I wanted, I would take. I denied myself no pleasure. I even found great pleasure in hard work, a reward for all my labors. . . But as I looked at everything I had worked so hard to accomplish, it was all so meaningless—like chasing the wind. There was nothing really worthwhile anywhere... I came to hate all my hard work here on earth, for I must leave to others everything I have earned. And who can tell whether my successors will be wise or foolish? Yet they will control everything I have gained by my skill and

hard work under the sun. How meaningless! So I gave up in despair, questioning the value of all my hard work in this world. Some people work wisely with knowledge and skill, then must leave the fruit of their efforts to someone who hasn't worked for it. This, too, is meaningless, a great tragedy. So what do people get in this life for all their hard work and anxiety? Their days of labor are filled with pain and grief; even at night their minds cannot rest. It is all meaningless." (Ecclesiastes 2:10-11, 18-23, nlt)

Again, the author isn't giving us any solutions; he's just saying that the fatalistic attitude would tell you that life is full of changes so there's nothing you can do about it, and all your hard work only makes you tired.

The point of these verses in Ecclesiastes is that life would *seem* meaningless and pointless; that we have all these changes in our lives, and even our work is just a lot of toil for no reward and no purpose. That is fatalistic.

Life *would* be pretty hopeless – if we ended the story there. But then there are the last four verses:

"Yet God has made everything beautiful for its own time. He has planted eternity in the human heart, but even so, people cannot see the whole scope of God's work from beginning to end. So I concluded there is nothing better than to be happy and enjoy ourselves as long as we can. And people should eat and drink and enjoy the fruits of their labor, for these are gifts from God. And I know that whatever God does is final. Nothing can be added to it or taken from it. God's purpose is that people should fear Him (*that means recognize that he is God – respect him*). What is happening now has happened before, and what will happen in the future has happened before, because God makes the same things happen over and over again." (Ecclesiastes 3:11-15, nlt)

Now faith comes surging forward over the fatalistic tides of time and weariness of work. No matter what the complexities of life, it is a gift of God according to verse 13. We discover that a person is not only to simply enjoy himself but to do good in his life according to verse 12. Even though we can never understand all the work of God, according to verse 11, God's plan is always dependable and for our good, according to verse 14. We see in these verses that God is continuing his orderly action in all of the universe.

If you and I were only animals, we would be subject to the tides of time and the weariness of our work—meaningless, day in and day out, always the same, nothing we can do about it. But God has set eternity in *our* hearts! God has given us an awareness and an understanding of himself. He has placed *his* perspective within us. At our creation in the very beginning, God created us in his own image, to be like him (Genesis 1:26). Here's why that's important: we are actually capable of seeing God at work in this ever-changing life!

Now with that in mind, here is something else that is interesting: in the part about God making things happen over and over again, there is a Hebrew word that is used there that implies quickness, or rapidness. The word picture it would create for the Hebrew reader, which is difficult for us to translate, is that the ever-changing events

of life are like a rapidly running river; that God is the river that is rapid and fresh and running and shaping its course through this world and our lives. That means that we can either be dragged along, being pushed, shoved, dunked, and slammed against rocks (fatalistic), or we can jump into the boat and take this exciting ride of life (faith). One perspective is fatalistic. It is painful, frustrating, and out of control. The other is faith – an exciting, ever-changing ride that takes you exactly where God wants you to go! You see, you can either choose a fatalistic attitude, or you can live by faith in...

3. The power of purpose!

Yes, life is ever-changing. There is the time of tide and the seeming weariness of work. But, if you live your life in the Godly perspective of His purposes, you will find instead a life of power and meaning. Here's the key: *we can accept change when we face it with a purpose*. We can embrace change when it is for God's purposes.

That's why the Bible says this:

“And we know that God causes everything to work together for the good of those who love God and are called according to His purpose for them. For God knew His people in advance, and He chose them to become like His Son, so that His Son would be the firstborn among many brothers and sisters. And having chosen them, He called them to come to Him. And having called them, He gave them right standing with Himself. And having given them right standing, He gave them His glory. What shall we say about such wonderful things as these? If God is for us, who can ever be against us? Since He did not spare even His own Son but gave Him up for us all, won't He also give us everything else?” (Romans 8:28-32, nlt)

How do we deal with change? Either resign yourself to a fatalistic attitude and you will be dragged along by life, desperately trying to come up for air and avoid the big rocks. Or surrender yourself to God and live in the power of *his* purpose, so that God can use the changes of life to move your character and your life to the places of greatest worth, impact, and glory. That, my friend, is how you deal with change. Life is ahead; embrace change. Live as a person with purpose!

Prayer

I mentioned that dealing with change means that change is part of our lives and our church, and currently for our church that means we are becoming one church with two languages. Ultimately, we are headed toward having two services on Sunday mornings: one in English and one in Spanish. And we understand that you might

have questions or even concerns about how that will happen and what it will look like for us.

We would love to hear from you! So we have a form that you can use to respond to any or all of the prompts. You can do it by scanning the QR code on the screen and taking the time to answer some or all of our questions, or you can get a hard copy like this from the ushers by the doors on your way out. Either way, we would really, really like to hear from you – even if you don't like it or have concerns about it. Your responses will be anonymous, so you can be honest (unless you want to give us your name). A month from now as we conclude this series, we will do our best to answer your questions. Okay? We are going through change together, and it can be scary, so the more we talk about it, the more we'll be able to manage the change.



*Benediction: Rest assured, no matter what kind of change you are dealing with,
Scripture tells us:*

*For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things
present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else
in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus
our Lord. (Romans 8:38-39)*