

**“There is an appointed time for everything. And there is a time for every event under heaven.”  
“He has made everything appropriate in its time. He has also set eternity in their heart.”  
“God has so worked that men should fear Him.” —Ecclesiastes 3:1, 11, 14 (NASB)**

**What is time?** At first glance, the question may seem easy to answer. We are always speaking of time. We order our lives around it. We carry expensive devices to remind us of it. But when we think of it more closely, the concept of time becomes difficult to define. Philosophers have proposed various theories throughout history, but no one has articulated a definition in which all agree. By all accounts, *time is a great mystery*. Its very existence reminds us of our status as finite and frail creatures. Consider the response given by Augustine of Hippo (AD 354–430) when this same question was posed to him:

What is time? Who can explain this easily and briefly? Who can comprehend this even in thought so as to articulate the answer in words? Yet what do we speak of, in our familiar everyday conversation, more than of time? We surely know what we mean when we speak of it. We also know what is meant when we hear someone else talking about it. What then is time? Provided that no one asks me, I know. If I want to explain it to an inquirer, I do not know.” (*Confessions*, 11.14.17)

However, there is one thing we can generally agree on: *time isn’t our friend*, at least as we view life from a strictly human perspective. The more experienced we get with time the more we view it *as a thief*. Children wish that time would speed up; young adults want it to slow down; the elderly want it to turn backward.

This battle against the clock has been raging since the beginning of time itself. In ancient paganism, mankind developed all kinds of religious rituals to try to erase the past and manipulate the future. Those efforts have evolved into all kinds of costly and extreme practices today. Some people consult fortune tellers, seeking to prolong life by learning about and avoiding impending danger. Some spend enormous amounts of money to acquire the latest cosmetics promising to reverse the effects of aging. Some put their bodies through extreme diets and ingest the strangest supplements, hoping to find “the fountain of youth.” Some even pay hundreds of thousands of dollars to have their bodies frozen after death with the hope that advances in medical technology will allow their bodies to be regenerated in the future—a practice called *cryonics*.

Most of these efforts reflect man’s refusal to come to terms with the reality of time and submit himself to the One who both created time and controls it. As Michael Kelly observed, **“The precise quality of man’s rebellion lies in his supreme aspiration to make nature and history serve and glorify man. To accomplish that goal he must have the absolute lordship of time and its content”** (*The Burden of God*, 84).

Solomon acknowledged the enigma that *time* represents. Having recognized that *human life is a vapor* (1:2), Solomon had to come to terms with the meaning of time—or at least with the implications time has for life that is finite and frail. Since life is so short, how do we deal with life’s changing circumstances? Most importantly, what is the nature of God’s control over time? Ecclesiastes 3:1–22 contains Solomon’s key conclusions.

### **I. God’s Control over Time is Comprehensive (3:1–8)**

The first section of Ecclesiastes 3 contains one of the most familiar passages in all the book, if not in the entire Old Testament. Ecclesiastes 3:1–8 is the go-to text for funerals—even secular ones. Sadly, however, few are acquainted with Solomon’s intent in these verses and the role they play in articulating the book’s argument.

Solomon begins with an absolute assertion in 3:1, **“There is an appointed time for everything. And there is a time for every event under heaven.”** The statement is construed in the form of a rhetorical device called a

*chiasm*—a special literary structure that places emphasis on the *center* of a series of parallel statements, which in the word order of the original Hebrew of v. 1 turns out to be *time*.

A for everything  
     ➔ B an appointed time  
     B<sup>1</sup> a time  
 A<sup>1</sup> for every event

Although the second Hebrew term for “time” is common, appearing in dozens of texts in the OT, the first term is rare, used only a few times and always in the sense of “**appointed time**” (see Ezra 10:14; Nehemiah 2:6; 10:34; 13:31; Esther 9:27, 31). The appearance of the term raises the question: *appointed by whom?* Although “God” is not mentioned in the chapter until v. 10 (after which it is then mentioned frequently), it is clear that *time* as Solomon is describing it is that which has been appointed **by God**. It is not blind fate that has appointed “everything,” nor is it creation itself. Neither is time haphazard, chaotic, or random. Rather, time is determined by a personal and intelligent God; He has ordained it and all of its “events.” That Solomon is thinking of God’s control over time is made apparent also by his phrase “**under heaven**”—a phrase that is different than “under the sun.” Whereas the latter phrase emphasizes the sphere of creaturely existence, the former emphasizes the domain in which God exercises His sovereignty (see also 1:13; 2:3).

Having stated his thesis (“God’s control over time is absolute”), Solomon then provides the specifics in vv. 2–8.

**“a time to give birth and a time to die;  
 a time to plant and a time to uproot what is planted.  
 A time to kill and a time to heal;  
 a time to tear down and a time to build up.  
 A time to weep and a time to laugh;  
 a time to mourn and a time to dance.  
 A time to throw stones and a time to gather stones;  
 a time to embrace and a time to shun embracing.  
 A time to search and a time to give up as lost;  
 a time to keep and a time to throw away.  
 A time to tear apart and a time to sew together;  
 a time to be silent and a time to speak.  
 A time to love and a time to hate;  
 a time for war and a time for peace” (Eccl 3:2–8)**

To emphasize the exhaustive nature of God’s control over time, Solomon records **a poem** dominated by a rhythmic pattern that communicates the notion of changing seasons. The poem mentions “time” twenty-eight times in fourteen pairs of opposite circumstances. The listing of these opposites indicates that Solomon is including every circumstance *in between* these polar opposites as well. In other words, as Solomon defines time and God’s control over it, he emphasizes the fact that all of the circumstances of human existence have been foreordained—“appointed”—by God.

There is good reason to believe that Solomon is conducting this reflection at the end of his own life, having returned to the Lord after years of disobedience (see 1 Kings 11:11–43). In other words, Solomon has already received the prophecy that the Lord will discipline him for his previous wandering. That discipline will manifest itself in the uprising of adversaries against Solomon’s leadership—making the end of his reign difficult. Solomon himself must soon die, and after he does his great accomplishments will be reversed through the foolish actions of his son Rehoboam. The unified kingdom will be divided, and Solomon’s glory will fade. Yet in all of this, Solomon acknowledges that God’s control over these circumstances is *comprehensive*. There is nothing that happens apart from God’s meticulous providence. Everything is a part of His plan. And as Solomon will go on to state below, coming to terms with this reality must lead to the proper response.

## II. God’s Control over Time Is Appropriate (3:9–13)

The cyclical nature of life under God’s meticulous control leads Solomon again to the provocative question he asked at the beginning of the book (see 1:3). Here Solomon states the question as follows: **“What profit is there to the worker from that in which he toils? I have seen the task which God has given the sons of men with which to occupy themselves” (3:9–10)**. If God’s control over time is exhaustive, what can man possibly do about his circumstances? Doesn’t this mean then that indifference, cynicism, or contempt for God are legitimate responses? No!

Solomon provides the antidote to the wrong reactions to the doctrine of God's comprehensive determination of life's circumstances: **"He has made everything appropriate in its time" (3:11a)**. Solomon affirms that God's control of time is "appropriate"—literally, "beautiful." As such, it is always *fitting*. Because He is all-wise, God's plan will always be impeccable in terms of its appropriateness to the situation. The circumstance that man finds himself in could never be better because anything different would be "less fitting." Consequently, anger, resentment, and discouragement in response to life's circumstances are always inappropriate.

Solomon does acknowledge that man will yearn to understand *the big picture* of his circumstances: **God "has also set eternity in their heart" (3:11b)**. Indeed, it is natural to man that he will ask the "why" and "how" questions. Since man is created in the image of God, it is expected that he will wonder about "eternity"—to transcend his circumstances to look upon life as a whole, from beginning to end and beyond, to make sense of it. But to arrive at this *big picture* is impossible: **"yet so that man will not find out the work which God has done from the beginning even to the end" (3:11c)**. Man cannot see it because he is intellectually incapable, but also because God is perfectly justified in keeping it a mystery. He does not owe man an answer.

What should be man's response to his own limited understanding? Solomon provides another *carpe diem* ("seize the day!") text: **"I know that there is nothing better for them than to rejoice and to do good in one's lifetime; moreover, that every man who eats and drinks sees good in all his labor—it is the gift of God" (3:12–13)**. In other words, man's duty is *to submit* to the reality that God is eternal and sovereign, and he is not. This submission to God's comprehensive and appropriate control manifests itself in three practical responses: (1) man will appreciate or "rejoice" over God's rule; (2) man will obey God's commands—he must "do good in one's lifetime"; and (3) man will be grateful for the "gifts" God gives in the mundane aspects of life. Such responses are the exact opposite of *frustration* or *fatalism*.

### III. God's Control over Time Is Everlasting (3:14–15)

Solomon describes another aspect of God's control over time and connects it with another appropriate response on man's part: **"I know that everything God does will remain forever; there is nothing to add to it and there is nothing to take from it, for God has so worked that men should fear Him" (3:14)**. In terminology reminiscent of Moses' psalm on God's eternality and man's transitoriness (Psalm 90), Solomon acknowledges that God's foreordination of life's circumstances is *irresistible*. It cannot be thwarted. From everlasting to everlasting *He is God*, and His plan will stand. This reality should lead man *to fear*—literally, "to be in awe before Him." This concept of "fear" is the Old Testament equivalent of the New Testament term "faith." It can be defined "that affectionate reverence, by which the child of God bends himself humbly and carefully to his Father's law" (Charles Bridges, *An Exposition of Proverbs*, 3–4; see also Eccl 5:7; 7:18; 8:12–13 [3x]; 12:13).

Furthermore, Solomon states that **"That which is has been already and that which will be has already been, for God seeks what has passed by" (3:15)**. As the Everlasting One, God does not experience time as we do. He never loses track of time, wastes opportunities, forgets what has passed, or encounters anything new. Although man may consider details of the past as "water under the bridge," a "distant memory," or "bygones," "the past" for God is not a mere memory; He actively knows **"what has passed by."** He never forgets or faintly remembers. This affirmation prepares us then for the final section of vv. 16–22.

### IV. God's Control over Time Is Righteous (3:16–22)

In the final verses of chapter 3, Solomon focuses on two particular challenges to God's control over the circumstances of life—emphasizing in both cases that God's control is *impeccably just*.

First, Solomon points to the experience of *injustice* in life's circumstances. If God is in control, why is there injustice?: **"Furthermore, I have seen under the sun that in the place of justice there is wickedness and in the place of righteousness there is wickedness" (3:16)**. But Solomon quickly acknowledges that man's perspective on time is so limited that he is not able to factor in God's perfect timing in the administration of such necessary justice: **"I said to myself, 'God will judge both the righteous man and the wicked man,' for a time for**

**every matter and for every deed is there” (3:17).** Indeed, there will be a final reckoning for every unrighteous act ever committed. Even that exercise of ultimate justice will be entirely appropriate in its time.

Second, and in a more complex challenge, Solomon points to the dilemma that arises when considering the fate man shares with animals: **“I said to myself concerning the sons of men, ‘God has surely tested them in order for them to see that they are but beasts.’ For the fate of the sons of men and the fate of beasts is the same. As one dies so dies the other; indeed, they all have the same breath and there is no advantage for man over beast, for all is vanity. All go to the same place. All came from the dust and all return to the dust” (3:18).** If man—created in God’s image—shares the same kind of physical death as the beast of the field, where is God’s fairness (see Gen 3:19)? Why does man have any more responsibility than the beast of the field, if they die the same way? Solomon then provides the response to this challenge: **“Who knows that the breath of man ascends upward and the breath of the beast descends downward to the earth?” (Eccl 3:21).** This verse is difficult to interpret, but the difficulty is alleviated when the verse is understood in the broader context of Ecclesiastes. Solomon here is not questioning whether there is an afterlife for man. He has just referred to final judgment (3:17) and will emphasize it again in the book’s conclusion (12:14). Even more importantly, Solomon will later expressly acknowledge that the soul returns to God (12:6–7). Though found as a question, the verse is best understood as a statement of a fact that not everyone recognizes.

The resolutions to these two challenges lead Solomon to another *carpe diem* (“seize the day!”) statement: **“I have seen that nothing is better than that man should be happy in his activities, for that is his lot. For who will bring him to see what will occur after him?” (3:22).** Since God will judge “every deed” in the end, man is responsible to *steward his life*—however brief it may be—appropriately in the present. This stewardship requires an enthusiastic embrace of one’s God-given responsibilities in this present life.

### Hear the Preacher!

1. Cease grumbling in response to life’s circumstances.
2. Respond with awe to God’s sovereignty over your time.
3. Learn to rejoice in God’s rule.
4. Remember future judgment—it is both a comfort and a warning.
5. Steward your time appropriately.

### For Discussion

1. List several ways by which man sinfully seeks to control time and its circumstances in life. How does this reflect rebellion against God?
2. Based on Solomon’s instructions, how should believers relate to time? What key spiritual responses should this section of Ecclesiastes nurture in our lives?
3. How do we instinctively show that we have “eternity” set within our hearts (3:11)? How will the believer manifest this innate yearning differently than an unbeliever?
4. How does the reality of future judgment (3:17) encourage us and warn us?

### For Further Study

1. Since the time we have been given in this life has been sovereignly limited by God, we are to take responsibility for the way we steward the gifts He gives us. In light of the *carpe diem* statements in 3:12–13 and 3:22, determine several practical changes you need to make in your own life.
2. Spend time in prayer, asking God to help you understand how His control over your life has been, is, and will be a thing of beauty.
3. Consider how Romans 8:28 harmonizes with the truths emphasized in Ecclesiastes 3.

**Audio, Video, and handouts for this session:** [gracechurch.org/motw](http://gracechurch.org/motw)

**Next meeting:** November 29, 6:30pm – Annual Fall Fellowship (Family Center)