

## **“Like An Ever Rolling Stream”**

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Text: Ecclesiastes 3: 1 - 15

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Vacation time often has—should have—a different pace to it: slower. So my recent three weeks were for me. But like us all life speeds up again when you return to work, to the regular routines of life, to the obligations you have, the commitments you’ve made, the unexpected occurrences, the choices you’ve made for your time. Life can be hectic, and it can seem like it is the hectic pace that is in charge of our lives. So we make use of a tool to take charge of our lives: the calendar. But I find an irony to the daybook. We use them to keep track of appointments, deadlines, activities, plans. We use them in order to exert control over the busy-ness of our lives. But in reality the day planner can run us: telling us what to do when, directing us to be at certain places at certain times. It really does raise the question of who is controlling who.

It seems like many people today find time challenging. When I was growing up it seemed like I had nothing but time to run around playing outdoors with my friends. Today many families are organized with military precision in order to accommodate the planned activities of the kids. In the work world the business necessity to watch the bottom line often means 2 people today do the work that three did yesterday. For those waiting for a medical procedure, time feels like the enemy when you have to wait a year to have daily joint pain disappear. For many it doesn’t end with retirement. I am no longer surprised when I hear from a retired person “I’m just as busy now as when I was working!” Or from the early retired person who is supporting their kids and grandkids somehow while also supporting aged parents. It is little different for the elderly, many of whom live in care facilities under the regimen of the monotonous daily schedule that is more numbing than meaningful. Regardless of one’s age, it can seem that time controls us rather than the other way around.

I heard a sociologist once speaking on the effect a society’s tools have on a society’s culture. He was reflecting on how computers have changed our sense of time, prompting the attitude today that things need to happen instantly. The consequence, he said, is that people generally are less patient today. You only need to watch the behaviour of many drivers on Calgary roads to appreciate that. Impatience, it turns out, is the cause of a lot of car accidents. The Swedes wanted to reduce driver impatience, and they found something that helps: they installed countdown clocks beside red lights, to let drivers know how much longer they have to wait before the light turned green. They found this helped drivers become more patient, and the number of traffic accidents went down. A place in China heard about the idea and adopted it, but they went a step further. They thought “if countdown clocks for red lights help, we should also install countdown clocks to tell drivers when the green light will turn red.” I think you can guess what happened. Rather than preparing cautious drivers to slow down in anticipation of a

streetlight turning red, it created more driver impatience. People looked at the countdown clock and thought "I can get through that intersection in three seconds!". Traffic accidents went way up! Perhaps by zooming down the road someone will get to their destination three minutes earlier. But, how much difference, really, will three minutes make? So what is the meaning we find in "time"? For some time is like a fuel that is burned, a commodity that is spent, an opponent (in the "race against time"), an enemy that has to be endured. Not everyone feels this way, but for a lot of people time has a negative connotation.

The Old Testament book of Ecclesiastes was written by a philosopher, who wrote that he applied his mind "to seek and to search out by wisdom all that is done under heaven... I saw all the deeds that are done under the sun; and see, all is vanity and chasing after the wind" (1:13-14). The book is a reflection on what we make the meaning of life, and in it the author asks the reader if we are pursuing the right, or best, meaning for life. One of the things he examined was the meaning we derive from the time of our lives. We read today the very famous passage which speaks of the times of life, acknowledging that there is a "right time", or a "best time" for everything. We know this, and we want nothing more than to have the control to schedule our lives so the important moments of our lives will occur at the best time.

But as we look at these times of life, we have to ask: how easy is it to do? How easy is it to make our life happen on our schedule? There is a right time for birth and for death, but both can happen prematurely. There's a right time to hold your tongue, but sometimes that doesn't occur to us until after we haven't. There's a right time to retire, but the stock market may change that. There's a right time to hold on and let go, but how often do we hold on longer than is helpful for us? This is the author's point, which he drives home with this summary: "true, God has made everything beautiful in its time, but God has left us in the dark." In other words, it is not always possible to make things happen at the best time. We know this from our experience, but in living life we don't always accept this. We can anticipate naively that things will unfold in time as they should. We can work doggedly to make things unfold as we want. But if these are our expectations, then we set ourselves up so often for disappointment. So Ecclesiastes first point about how we look at time is: don't get sucked into the belief that you really can control it. Don't live with the expectation that the meaningful things in life will happen on your schedule. This, he says, is not where you find meaning in life.

Next, the author goes after the activities that fill our calendars. He asks us a surprising question, "But in the end, does it really make a difference what anyone does?" Some people make having a full calendar a badge of honour. Some people believe that a busy life is the sign of a meaningful life. But the author of Ecclesiastes asks us: is that really true? He writes, "I've had a good look at what God has given us to do—busywork, mostly." Life mostly as busywork, he says. It is a jarring assessment he makes. A bit of a condemnation of what we fill our lives with, actually. But his in-your-face declaration that most of life's activities is busywork prompts us to actually look at what fills the time slots in our calendars. To look, to

see, what in the activities of our lives really is busywork? By implication, he's saying that if a lot of what we do is busywork, then a lot of what we do is not really meaningful. And that, I think, is a good thing to think about. There's the old saying that no one on their deathbed ever said about their lives, "I should have spent more time at the office." So I think Ecclesiastes prompts us to ask: if I can control what I put in my calendar, do I want to fill it with busywork or things of meaning? Of course we all have the same answer. The thing is: how often do we ask this question?

The author of Ecclesiastes takes on one final grand assumption – the assumption that maybe God will ensure that the times of our life will happen at the right time and be meaningful for us. Here the author reminds us of the mystery of God, writing "we can never know what God is up to, whether God's coming or going." In other words, don't expect God to make the important time happen at the right time. We can't know God's schedule.

What the author of Ecclesiastes writes can seem more than a little pessimistic, but it isn't really. He's trying to readjust our attitudes. A lot of this book is intended to knock down our human pretensions, which is why the author uses time and again the same summary phrase: "see, all in vanity and chasing after the wind." Chasing after the wind is futile, since it can never be caught, and thinking that you can catch it is vanity indeed. In writing about our attempts to get the important things of life to happen at the right time, he's saying through his three critiques that trying to do this is like chasing after the wind.

So if the author is trying to dismantle our current attitudes around the times of our life, then what attitudes does he want to put in their place? The first is an attitude about God. He reaffirms that God senses the future, and that God's will does unfold through God's interventions in the world. As we read today "I've also concluded that whatever God does, that's the way it's going to be, always. No addition, no subtraction. God's does it and that's it. Whatever will be, is. That's how it always is with God." But how and when God will affect the time of our lives is a mystery. As the author says, "God has left us in the dark." What the author encourages us to do instead is to accept the mystery of God's ways. He writes, "Quit asking questions and simply worship in holy fear." So when it comes to the times of our lives—the times for planting and reaping, building up and tearing down, holding on and letting go—the author calls us to trust God in how God chooses to intervene in life, even if we don't fully understand. And I think there is a second point that is implied by this. The meaning of the important times of life is found in the moment when it happens. It is not found in having that moment happen when we want it to happen. In other words, take life as it comes to you, accept life as it comes to you, find the meaning of life in the moment it unfolds for you, and look to God in that moment.

Which gets at the second change in attitude Ecclesiastes calls us to adopt. Eugene Peterson's translation that we read today has its characteristic punch: "I've decided that there's nothing better to do than go ahead and have a good time and get the most we can out of life. That's it—eat, drink, and make the most of your job. It's God's gift." The attitude the author encourages us to have begins with a belief: that the time of our life is God's gift. Life is a gift. We know this, but we so easily overlook it. Every day we awake and arise is a gift: a new day of possibility, a new day to cherish, a new day to experience, a new day to find meaning. If we look at the day ahead as one of drudgery or difficulty that has to be endured, then I'll bet you dollars to donuts that the day will be experienced as one of drudgery and difficulty. How we look at things so easily determines our experience. So the author of this letter encourages us to adopt a more positive attitude: enjoy life, get the most out of life. True, the tougher times of life will still unfold. As the author writes, there is always the chance we will face times of illness, sadness, anger, broken relationships, war, mourning. But the other times are there as well: of happiness, good relationships, peace, building up, dancing. But even in the midst of the tougher times there can still be opportunities to grasp the positive and happy moment, if our attitude is such that we look for them and embrace them and enjoy them.

So can we throw away our calendars? I'm sure most of us probably can't. But what our passage suggests to us today is that while it may govern our lives it need not govern how we look at life. If we are mindful of what we put into our calendar we can find life more meaningful. And if we begin each day with the acknowledgment that this day is God's gift to me, to be meaningful, and to find enjoyment, then the chances will go up that this is what the day will become. The author of Ecclesiastes tells us: I've looked at the meaning of life from every possible angle, and this is what I've found. So he writes, try it, and you will find the same.