

There is a time for everything, and a season for every activity under heaven: Ecc 3:1

When I go on holiday, as a symbolic gesture I take off my watch and try not to think about what time it is.

Like many people I have to have good time management skills. Every Sunday morning is a deadline, I can't turn up and ask for an extension, for you to come back in an hour and then I will be ready.

How does the passing of time affect you?

People ask, where has the time gone?

As you get older time seems to go by more quickly.

But then in some circumstances time can drag – almost seem to stop.

Saturday was the 20th anniversary of my father's death. My strangest experience of time is at a personal bereavement.

When someone close to me has died it is as if I am in a different dimension of time, in strange ways it can speed up, slow down or disappear altogether.

In a normal week you may have times of feeling pressured, on a busy schedule, full diary meetings to attend, places to be and people to catch up on?

An awareness of time is characteristic of humanity – we can measure time, perceive the passing of time.

As a child you would have learned to tell the time. At school learned about seasons and when older learned about history.

You can juggle complex concepts about time, hold in your mind an understanding of the past, present and future.

Goldfish has a memory of 3 seconds (Is this true, how would you know?)

You have memories of past events from childhood some of which are very vivid. You can order these events in your mind, perhaps remembering when you started high school, when you

began your first job, when you first met your husband/wife and the order in which these things happened.

You can anticipate future events

I bet there are some politicians who go to bed tonight thinking only 13 more sleeps until the election.

Perhaps there is a significant date coming up for you in the future, a birthday, wedding anniversary or an overseas trip and you are counting down the days.

You are aware of the present – all things being equal you know where you are right now and what is happening.

Because of your awareness of time you can juggle complicated thoughts like: John normally preaches for around 20 minutes, we are 3 minutes into the sermon, therefore I can look ahead and know he still has 17 minutes to go.

We also sense the passing of time because we are aware of the effects of time:

We age and get wrinkly and our body shape changes.

We might begin to get frail or find our body isn't working as well as it once did.

We can anticipate our own death, some might already have made arrangements for that eventuality.

Why is our understanding of time important?

We have an appreciation of our limited life time and most of us want to make it count for something. The bible reminds us of our limited lifespan saying, *The length of our days is seventy years— or eighty, if we have the strength; Ps 90:10.*

I don't think that length of days has changed too much, but with advances in medical care we might say the length of our days is eighty years or one hundred if we have strength.

Young people may see a possible lifetime ahead of them and they want to make good choices about how they use that time, getting a good education, a steady job, building a home life and investing their energies in a worthwhile cause, making a

difference to the community, to the environment or help defeat poverty or hunger.

In middle age many people have a crisis – wondering if their life is worthwhile, if they are making the difference they had hoped to make. Some people will make significant choices to do something different with their lives. Perhaps they have made enough money, now they want out of the treadmill so they can give time and effort to a worthy cause.

Older people might have their idea of time much more narrowly focused, perhaps thinking their lifetime is coming towards an end. They might have a bucket list of things they want to do before it gets too late.

Someone said, *life is like a penny, you can spend it however you like, but you can only spend it once.*

The passing of time is of great importance to us.

As humanity has become increasingly technological we have moved from measuring the seasons by the rising of the stars to having precision clocks based on the pulsating frequencies of atoms.

To an Olympic athlete even a 100th of a second can be important.

Time gives a framework to all that we do and the clock is ticking for all of us.

The teacher in Ecc has written a famous passage on time saying: There is a time for everything, and a season for every activity under heaven.
Ec 3:1

Reminder of the context – the Teacher is a writer from ancient times, and we need to read this in the context of those times.

Special genre/type of writing – nothing like it in the rest of the bible. Wisdom writing most closely related to the proverbs. It doesn't try to teach about history or OT law.

It is in the form of an experiment in life, an examination of what was known and a searching for understanding to help make sense of life.

The Teacher has a limited understanding/world view. He doesn't share our knowledge of science, of world history, and of philosophy.

The teacher only has a partial revelation from God, he doesn't see or understand the truth that will be revealed in Jesus, the means of salvation that would be achieved on the cross, or what it meant that the tomb of Jesus was found empty.

We need to keep these things in mind as we read Ecc and to be prayerful about our interpretation and understanding of what he is saying.

Pete Seger set the KJV of this passage to music in 1959 adding just six words of his own.

*To everything, turn, turn, turn
there is a season, turn, turn, turn
and a time to every purpose under the heaven*

Despite the passing of thousands of years these words ring true and hit a chord in the human heart.

The imagery remains true of our generation as it did for the generation of the Teacher.

The span of a normal life time will experience many if not all of the things mentioned here.

This describes a view of reality as seen by the Teacher.

This is a *poetic overview* of what life is like around him.

With the passing of time these are things he saw or experienced

The Teacher is acknowledging these things, not commending them.

He is not saying that we should kill or hate, simply noting that they are part of the reality of human life as he experienced it.

The Teacher is not saying these are seasons of equal length:

Not a balance on Yin and Yang, good and bad or light and darkness.

It does not mean that if you have a good day today, you have to pay for it with a bad day tomorrow.

Our natural hope is that we would experience more:
peace than war
love than hate
laughter than weeping

While we would want to minimise the bad things like war, we have to admit they are part of human existence.

In the span of a normal human life each of these things will be experienced to some degree or other.

We also need to keep in mind that this is a picture of life as it is, not as God intended it to be.

Hate, war, weeping, death and killing were not part of God's plan for humanity.

God created us to live in paradise, the garden of Eden, and to be in relationship with him.

It was human sin that brought these bad things into existence.

This is made clear straight away in the lives of Cain and Abel.

Where Cain's heart turned to hatred and led to murder and death.

What God truly intended can be seen in the:

Goodness of the garden of Eden

The fruit of the spirit – love joy peace patience kindness
goodness faithfulness, gentleness and self control.

Heaven – a place of peace and rest where there is no more death or sorrow.

We recognise the poetic truth of the times and seasons in our lives.

We see aspects of this played out all the time in our world.

You could sit down to watch the news tonight with your bible open at this chapter and with a little thought you could fit many of the news items into the pattern of times and seasons outlined by the Teacher.

The murder of Work and Income staff in Ashburton is tragic. As people have said, you should be able to go to work in the morning and return home safely at the end of the day. Yet we

know with the uncertainty in our world, this doesn't always happen. It could be an accident or a health issue, it could happen to any of us at any time – seasons of birth and death are part of human existence.

I was listening to the radio the other day and because we are at the **start of Spring** they were talking about gardening and what to plant at this time of year.

In the wake of the Christchurch earthquake many buildings, even church buildings may need to be torn down.

Even we are having to work through this with our own buildings.

You might have seen the recent video clip of a Grenadier Guard at Buckingham Place who added a few spins into his marching. He is now in trouble with his superiors and would have been wise to realise that when on duty at the Palace, however bored you might be, it is not a time to dance.

It is deeply troubling to have news of war in the Middle East and rising conflict in the Ukraine.

While the actual events may change every generation experiences the types of times and seasons outlined in these verses.

When you are trying to understand human nature and the meaning of life, I think vs 11 identifies a key truth gives us an important insight
He has also set eternity in the hearts of men

There is a time to be born and a time to die – everything we do has to fit into that timescale, yet the span of a human life is not sufficient to gain a true understanding of the meaning of life.

Time gives some understanding, it gives a basic framework by which to measure life, but there is something more, something bigger, something outside of time that is needed to give us a better understanding of the meaning of life.

Great paradox of human experience – we are bound by time, yet we have eternity in our hearts.

Eternity in our hearts:

Opens our minds to existence beyond our short span of human life.

Opens our hearts to another realm of being that exists beyond what we can sense in the physical world.

Raises questions as to what that realm is like and who is out there.

Gives us a vague awareness of God, a being who is not held by the bonds of time as we are.

Brings awareness that we are somehow eternal beings who may have existence beyond this life.

The vast majority of people living today and in previous generations would acknowledge that they have a sense there is more to life than is physically tangible.

This is expressed in many obvious ways in cultures throughout the world and throughout history:

Reincarnation – many people believe that life doesn't end at our death, but that we come back as some other living thing, higher or lower in existence depending on whether you live a good or bad life.

Heaven/paradise – a place that the human spirit goes at the end of life, a place of rest and eternal existence.

Spirit world – a place of spiritual, ghostly existence that lacks any material substance.

Cryogenics – a quasi-scientific approach to eternal life, where you freeze your body at the time of your death and hope that in the future someone will find a cure for what killed you and bring you back to life in a blissful world that has cured illness and ended death.

For the Teacher this sense of eternity is puzzling and frustrating.

He has also set eternity in the hearts of men; yet they cannot fathom what God has done from beginning to end. Ec 3:11

Eternity is in our hearts, but we don't understand what God has done, is doing or will do.

When Paul was writing to the Christians at Rom he asks, *who has known the mind of the Lord?*

And he underlines the depth of God's knowledge, that his judgements are unsearchable and no one can trace his path.

Unless God reveals it to us, we simply can't fathom what his has done or is doing.

With the coming of Jesus we have more insight than the Teacher did, even so there are things beyond our understanding.

The Apostle Paul expressed it in 1 Cor 13 saying, it is like looking at a poor reflection in a foggy mirror or peering through a mist.

We know it is there, we see it partially, yet our view is incomplete.

Humanity in general is in a situation where we sense the reality of eternity, but can't pin it down or get a firm grasp of it.

People search for answers that will help them make sense of this strange yearning and awareness of eternity.

People read books, go on pilgrimages, or maybe try to meditate to get in touch with something beyond life.

As Christians we find the answer in Jesus who among other things said,

I tell you the truth, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be condemned; he has crossed over from death to life. Jn 5:24

We who believe in Jesus have begun to live eternal life. It is not that we wait until heaven for it to begin, we live it now.

There is much that we wait to enjoy in eternity, but that sense of eternity in our hearts finds its rest and fulness in our relationship with Jesus.

In a way we as Christians live in the confines of times and seasons like everyone else, but are different in that we have begun to live the eternity that others are yet to grasp.

What difference does this make to you?

As an individual, *What is the time or season of your life?*

What is happening with your job, your family, your marriage?

Is the season of your life bringing you sorrow and hardship or are you in the midst of laughter and dancing?

Those who are weeping can take comfort that the season will change, a time will come when laughter cheers your heart.

Those who are dancing and singing, enjoy this time for the season will change and a time will come when you are hard pressed.

As Christians we are not fatalistic about this, we simply acknowledge the reality of life.

The thing for us as Christians is not that we avoid hardship, but we walk through the times and seasons with Christ in our hearts, with Christ by our side.

How do you view time?

You might have heard recently Leandra Becerra, a woman in Mexico celebrated her 127th birthday becoming the world's oldest person. We all know her age is exceptional and even with improving health and medical care not too many people make it past 100 years.

If life exists only between birth and death, if those 80 -90 years are the only time we have, then our understanding of the meaning of life will be shaped by that view.

But if we are eternal beings, if there is life beyond this life, then our understanding of the meaning of life needs to take that into account.

Our view of eternity has a profound effect on how we live today, our horizons look beyond physical death, into eternity. We do not simply live for the moment, we live in the light of eternity.

When we are with God in eternity our perspective of time will change.

From God's side we will look back on the seasons of our life, even the seasons of our church and we will see them differently.

We – as a church also need to think about times and seasons

What seasons has our congregation been through and what season would we say we are in at present?

How might we describe the spiritual times and seasons for us?

On one hand with Ron moving to another parish and with the changes needed in our buildings we face significant challenges and opportunities.

We are in a time of change some old things are coming to an end, some new possibilities lie before us.

It will be sad to say goodbye to some good friends who have walked the journey of faith with us for a number of years

On the other hand we can see this as a time of growth in mission as we have turned our attention outward and served Christ in the community helping the food bank with the can day in memory of Charlie, the shoebox ministry we begin this month, the cake bake day, the funds our children at kidzone have raised to help other children, mainly music and playgroup. Added to this we have the opportunity to think about our buildings and our mission as we enter a new season in the life of the church.

As someone has said about Auckland weather – if you don't like it wait 5 minutes and it will change.

Seasons in our church change, not in 5 minutes, but they will certainly change.

No season in church life lasts forever.

People, buildings, programmes, technology – all change.

So let us look for the next season of growth in our congregation,
growth in Christian maturity,
growth in attendance
and growth in mission.

More than anything on my heart, and I am sure on your heart, is the desire to see a season of growth in the Kingdom of God:
for people to come to faith
for people to find meaning in life and find answers to for sense of eternity that is in their hearts,
and for God to be glorified through the life of this congregation.

Let us ask God to bless

The season of our family life
The season of our work and leisure
The season of our church life and ministry

All this to the glory of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.