



BELIEVERS CHAPEL

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Lessons from Mike Black

Ecclesiastes 3:1-15

Lesson 4 of 16

2007-08

"A 'Time To...' Joy in HIS Sovereign Providence"

TRANSCRIPT

This is our fourth lecture in the book of Ecclesiastes. Ecclesiastes 3:1-15 is our study tonight. And if you would, to amplify our study, I would like for you to mark another passage from the Old Testament that we will be looking at with a little more scrutiny than the others. And that would be 2 Samuel 16:5, an incident from the life of David that I think will add to our study. We will be looking at a number of texts tonight but you don't need to turn to them if you will just make reference to them. If you don't have a pen, see me and I will give you a list of the verses that we cover tonight as we look at one particular word and its use. Well let's look together at our text.

There is a time for everything,
and there is a season for every activity under the heavens:

a time to be born and a time to die,
a time to plant and a time to uproot,
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 scatter stones and a time to gather them,
a time to embrace and a time to refrain,
a time to search and a time to give up,
a time to keep and a time to throw away,
a time to tear and a time to mend,
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. Ecclesiastes 3: 1-8

This is a very familiar passage of scripture that I'm sure many of you have read, pondered, thought about, and are familiar with. The first time I ever heard this poem I was a young lad listening to a memorial service for President Kennedy when this particular text was read. Now, that's the poem. And it is my understanding that the remaining text for today is the interpretation of the poem.

What does a worker gain from his toil? I have seen the burden God has laid on men. 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. I know that there is nothing better for men than to be happy and to do good while they live. That everyone may eat and drink and find satisfaction in all his toil—this is the gift of God. I know that everything God does will endure forever; nothing can be added to it and nothing can be taken away from it. God does it so that all men will revere him.

Whatever has already been,
and what will be has been before;
and God will call the past to account.

Ecclesiastes 3: 10-15

Let's bow before the Lord of the Word for a moment of His blessing.

Father, we are grateful to be together under the Word of God. And I would pray that this text of Holy Scripture would do its mighty work in our hearts and therefore in our lives: That we might always be different because we were here before Your Word.

May we be ever changing, ever growing, ever being made like Christ. That we would take this text from the Old Testament to truly understand our relationship with You better, understand life better, and understand what the Teacher means by enjoying our lives. Grant us Your Grace to do just that. In Jesus name, Amen.

I would like to begin by just making some general comments about our text. I think it's important first to note the structure of the passage. The poetry which begins in verse 1 abruptly ends in verse 8, ending the first part of the lesson (And that would be

Roman numeral I). Then the second major section begins in verse 9 through 15 (Roman numeral II). I take that to be the interpretation of the poem.

Now I would like to make some general remarks to help us ponder this poem written by 'the man with a powerful mind'. First, these are 'snap shots' of life's experiences. We are to observe them as specific points rather than a pattern, or a continuity, or a puzzle. They are not prescriptive activities but rather descriptive activities of living life. This is my life and your life, as we live it 'under the sun'.

Second, we want to keep in mind that from the starting point in verse 2, we are to see life as a gift: ***This is a powerful presupposition to our study***. We are not the products of our own making. We have been brought into this experience called 'life' and we have no control of when we're born or when we die.

Third, observe that there is nothing really pursued here that is permanent: There is no goal to obtain here. This is the purpose of the infinitive construct of the poem and the repetition of the word 'time'. Notice everything is moving forward and continuously turning over and over and over again.

Fourth, this is the human experience in our work. Verse 2, notice planning and plucking (if you have the NIV it's 'uproot'). Verse 5, scattering stones and gathering stones. Verse 7, tearing and mending. This is the human experience. In other activities, Verse 4, weeping and laughing, mourning and dancing. Verse 7, being silent and then speaking. Verse 8, loving and fighting.

Fifth, observe that there are 14 pairs of contrasting opposites. In Hebrew poetry this is a common figure of speech called a merism. The first two pairs are human traits: 'to be born and to die'. The second two though deal with the creation; 'to plant and to uproot'.

So we've looked at the text and we've considered the structure. We've observed some particulars to wet our appetite, and to help us, and to acquaint us with this material. Now we want to specifically look at these verses in detail.

Roman numeral I:

Verses 1-8. Our Teacher here tells us this poem intends to cover everything. Notice verse 1, 'everything without exception'. And the second phrase is more specific; 'every activity'. Now that is very important in understanding this poem. It will help us to interpret this poem and I think it will lead us to one clear interpretation.

It also tells us, I think, that our Teacher, 'the man with the powerful mind', had one specific idea to pass on to us. It is intricate. It is well thought through. It's complex. But, he has one grand idea.

Verse 2. Notice the forward motion. Who would want a perpetual spring that we would only plant and never harvest? So in the providence of God, we have the four seasons of the year. Verse 3. Notice the reversal from the 'positive' word in verse 2 mentioned first, to here in verse 3, the 'negative' word 'killing' is coming first. The desirable 'healing' comes second. 'Tearing down' written before 'building up'. The 'killing' here refers to the legitimate ending of life such as capital punishment (which the bible clearly teaches), or when a sovereign nation launches a war. The 'tearing down and building up' could refer to construction, but it also could have warfare in mind. An attacking army must destroy before it can cease hostilities and build up again.

In verse 4, we move to the realm of human emotions. Notice the pairs of contrasting emotions here. First the negative, 'weeping and mourning', followed by 'laughter and dancing'. The contrasts are striking and they're meant to be so. I think it's legitimate to say we move from the personal to the public expression here. Weeping is personal, mourning is more public; and the same with laughter and dancing.

In verse 5, the four pair of contrasting opposites stand out in more than one way. First, they're longer than the other expressions that we've had. And second, whereas the other expressions were simple and clear, these are more obscure. I like the straight forward idea among the majority of the commentators who say it's probably a reference to clearing away stones for an agricultural environment; an activity which would be typical of this day and time. Regarding the unusual feature of the second pair that

express opposites we have the verb, 'to embrace'; the gesture or action that express affection one for another. Most likely the idea is expressed in greetings. For example the verb here is used in Genesis 29:13b of Laban greeting Jacob when he first arrived. The text says, "...He" (and here's our word), "*embraced* him and kissed him and brought him into his home..."

In verse 6, the fifth pair of contrasting elements has to do with possessions. Occasions when we need to look for something or we need to keep something, our Teacher says, 'there are times when we just need to cease looking and to go on and to move on'.

Up to this point the contrasting opposites have been closely related as they continue to do so here in verse 7. 'Tearing and mending', associated with sewing. 'Silence and speaking', associated with the voice. And in verse 8 the contrasting pairs again have a definite connection. 'Love and hate'; strong personal emotions of attraction and repulsion. 'Peace and war'; corporate or public expressions manifesting themselves.

Now again we want to emphasize that the poem does not advocate these emotions but simply to describe them. This is a part of living and that's what he wants you to know. He has written a poem to describe life in snap shots. But it's life with an interpretation.

Roman Numeral II:

Verses 9-15. Now, let's get on with the interpretation of the poem. The key word of course is the word time. If we interpret time correctly we interpret the poem correctly. The word time throughout the revelation of the Word of God means a 'sovereign, ordained event'. And this is what I want to show you by looking at a number of passages; but believe me, I am just skimming the surface. So now let us ponder this concept of time as God spells it out to us.

Esther 4:14 Morticai's words to Esther, (famous Biblical words we might say):
"...if you remain silent at this time, relief and deliverance for the Jews will arise from

some other place, but you and your father's family will perish. And who knows but that you have come to the royal position for such a time as this?" A statement we recognize as fraught with the providence of God.

Here's another. Habakkuk 2:3, a very noteworthy Old Testament promise, "For the revelation awaits an appointed time; it speaks of the end and will not prove false. Though it linger, wait for it; it will certainly come and will not delay."

David in Psalm 31:14 wrote, "I trust in you, LORD; I say "You are my God."" And then in Psalm 31:15 he says this, "My times are in your hands."

In the New Testament, the Gospel of John: Let me just say that Rudolph Schnackenberg, a German Theologian and a great student of the Gospel of John and Johannine literature, spends a great deal of time with this word time. He points out that time is all about the sovereignty and providence of God littered throughout the Gospel. Let me give you one example. In John 7, the brothers of Jesus chided Him to go public. 'No one who desires to be a public figure acts in secret', they said. 'Since you are doing miracles show yourself to everyone.' But Jesus answered John 7:6, 'The right time for me has not yet come.' Of course he was referring to the cross.

Acts 1:6, "So when they met together, they asked him, "Lord are You at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?" And (vs7), "He said to them: "It is not for you to know the times or the dates the Father has set by His own authority."

Again, in the same book, Acts 17, when Paul is speaking to the Greek Philosophers he says in verse 26 of that chapter that 'God has determined the exact times that you would live and He has determined the exact places that you would live'. So time, as used here in Ecclesiastes, is a *sovereign, ordained event*.

Question for you; Why were you at age 18 or 22 not having your face caked with mud lying on Omaha Beach 1944 with a German bullet through your heart? Why are you living in Dallas Texas in 2007 or not some other part of the country or not some other country in the world? It is because of the providence of God and His sovereign plan. That's why you are here and that's why it is so. Some live to 2, and die. Some live to 22, and die. Some to 62, and die. And some live to over a 100. And why? And what's

the answer? Well, there is no answer from our perspective. But, we are not the products of chance, or luck, or happenstance. The Bible does not teach that. The Bible teaches that our lives are sovereignly ordained by God. Paul the Apostle said it this way (Acts 17:28a), "For in Him we live and move and have our being." And that's our answer.

One of the last messages I ever heard from S. Lewis Johnson preaching in Oklahoma City a message he entitled, "The Immensities". And his text was 2 Timothy 1:8-9, "So do not be ashamed to testify about our Lord or ashamed of me his prisoner. But, join with me in suffering for the gospel, by the power of God. He has saved us and called us to a holy life—not because of anything that we have done but because of His own purpose and grace." Now flesh that out for us Paul. What do you mean by purpose and grace? And Paul says (end of vs9), "...This grace that was given to us in Christ Jesus before the beginning of *(a sovereign ordained event called) "time."* So it is time: The sovereign plan of God. And again, the Apostle speaking of Christ Jesus in Galatians 4:4 said, "In the fullness of time God sent His son born, of a woman born..."

So how do I take this sovereign concept of His all-knowing and all-wise providence and bridge that over into my every day experience; and live my life in that fashion? Well again let's follow the Apostle's instruction. 1 Thessalonians 5:18 he writes, "...give thanks in all circumstances; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus." Simply put, God's time for you, His plan for you, *is what is going on right now with you.*

And that's tough because that's filled with all kinds of tensions isn't it? Bad things happen to God's people. It happened to Joseph. Joseph was abused by his brothers, lied about by Potiphar's wife, forgotten by the cup bearer in Pharaoh's prison. But years later he told his brothers who were the catalyst of all this ordeal, "...you meant it for evil but God meant it for good" (Gen 50:20). As Thomas Watson the puritan divine wrote, "I must trust Him where I cannot trace Him." And that, my friends, takes courage and it takes great biblical faith, because the world is filled with madness. That's what our 'man with a powerful mind' has told us.

But we don't need to read him to understand that. We pick up the papers. We see the news broadcast. We watch our politicians pontificate and pander for our votes.

No, the world is filled with madness, evil, hostility at any and every level, many times over: And it falls upon Christians as well. But our comfort from our text is this: This is all part of His plan. Look again at these elements in life; weeping, laughing, mourning, dancing, all sovereignly timed. How often in our lives could we have said, "Who could have ever believed that this would happen?"

Early one morning my family, when I was eight-years-old, received a call from a State Trooper. My oldest brother, 21, weeks before he was to graduate from college, was killed in an auto accident. And there that morning I sat next to my father as he was on the phone calling one of his longtime friends who owned a funeral home. I will never forget his words at that moment; "Paul old buddy I never thought I would ever be making a call like this." Life deals out its powerful, painful interruptions and we ask why?

Life also deals out its pleasant and wonderful surprises and blessings; and there again we ask why? But we're not the product of a random set of chance or events that happen to us. No, we'll let the pantheist believe that. That's their world:

'Evil is not really evil it's just a part of nature. We're just confused with what we call evil. There's really no such thing as 'good'. There's just life, and there's no real end and purpose to history.'

That doesn't really square with reality, does it?

You go ask that police chief who went into that Virginia Tech classroom last spring if evil is real. He described it this way. He said, "It was the worst thing I had ever seen in my entire life." Now the atheists believe that there is no such thing as God so there can't be any sovereign control, or purpose, or sovereignty, or plan, or providence. Evil, hurt, pain; they're just a part of the evolutionary process and they live just fine with that. And their world seems round until they get jolted. Then we watch them, and how often have we watched them reach out and seek out for answers groping in the dark? You see we as believers have a far better way to live this life 'under the sun'. We have a better way to think about our circumstances, our times, that God had made for us.

And it is with that idea that I want to illustrate an experience in the life of David: For 2 Samuel 16:5-11 is very interesting in light of our text and our subject.

As King David approached Bahurim, a man from the same clan as Saul's family came out from there. His name was Shimei son of Gera. And he cursed as he came out. He pelted David and all the king's officials with stones, even though all the troops and the special guard were on David's right and left. And as he cursed, Shimei said: "Get out, get out you man of blood you scoundrel! The LORD has repaid you for all the blood you have shed on the household of Saul, in whose place you have reigned. The LORD has handed the kingdom over to your son Absalom. You have come to ruin because you're a man of blood.

Then Abishai son of Zeruiah said to the king, "Why should this dead dog curse my king? Let me go over and cut off his head."

But the king said, "What do you and I have in common you sons of Zeruiah?" (*now watch this text closely*) "If he is cursing because the LORD said to him 'Curse David', who can ask 'why do you do this'?"

2 Samuel 16:5-10

And now look at the latter part of verse 11; "...Leave him alone; let him curse, for the LORD has told him to."

Now my friends I'm going to show you how David applied his 'Calvinism' to his everyday life. Was anything that this man, this son of Gera, is there anything that this man said that was truthful or right? No. Nothing. Is he quickly made a fool of when David defeats his son Absalom? Yes, of course. Is this rebellious fool eventually executed by Solomon because he was a rebellious fool and couldn't live under authority? 'Yes' is the answer from the Word of God.

But in light of all of that, I want you to look at David's personal sensitivity to God's plan and God's will for David's life. David says, "Leave him alone. Let him curse." 'I will accept this as part of God's discipline in my life'. David is so sensitive to God and his sin with Bathsheba that he considered this, (if you will, 'time'; God's sovereign ordained event in David's life), as God's will for him. That's how David lived his life and that's why he was a great man.

The liberal theologians would not approve of such an interpretation for they would not even consider such a strong view of the sovereignty of God. For him, the liberal, God is real but He's just not that powerful. He just simply cannot do anything about calamity. That has been the recent position that they have expounded from Rabbi Kushner, and his book *Why Do Bad Things Happen to Good People* (published 1978). The Rabbi's daughter had been given a disease: Yet despite his continual pleas to God to save her, she wasn't saved, physically. His resolution and his way to gain equilibrium with his congregation was to conclude that God is just not powerful enough. God is weak. And because He's weak and because He's not powerful, we the believing community needs to forgive Him.

We need to forgive Him for being "weak". Don't be bitter. Realize He just can't!

Such a message as that is the most massive contradiction to the Word of God I have ever heard. Imagine the idea that the creature needs to forgive the Creator! It's blasphemy!

My Christian friends look at this poem. Our God is sovereign over life. Nothing is excluded! That is what he tells us in verse 1. It's all comprehensive. This is the life experience. Yes there's laughter, yes there's weeping, yes there's mourning, yes there's disaster. Remember Job's words to his wife, "Shall we accept good from God and not trouble?"(Job2:10). Evil is real. In God's plan it rules. It rules for a time and it rules for a season. It takes the greatest of men, John the Baptizer, and it puts him in prison and cuts off his head. And we think, well, evil won didn't it? And then we find, no, it was just all part of the plan. And then later on, they take The Christ and they put Him up on an emblem of death and torture. And they said 'Well, we're over that. We're through with Him'. And then we read on and we learn, no, that was just part of the plan. No my friends, evil is real and it has its reign and rule and its season.

Kevin Granata was a professor at Virginia Tech. He was on the third floor of that engineering building and heard gunshots. He hurried downstairs and there he was murdered, that awful day in our American history. Then later we find out who Kevin Granata was; one of the top biomedical engineers in the country. He was on the cutting

edge of biomechanics. He was the man that all scientists have called simply irreplaceable for he had spent his time working on biomechanics for people with cerebral palsy. They said he had outdistanced everyone in his field. So amazing was this man and the breakthroughs to science that he was bringing; and then we hear about this and consider his tragic death; and we say, "Why? How?"

So now we want to look at the interpretation of the poem because it's going to give us some answers in this second part of our text. In verse 9 we see that we only have a small fracture of data to understand life's gain. Verse 10, there are billions of kaleidoscopic movements in each day and the burden for man is he has no perspective to see them all, and how they all intricately fall into place. Not even our 'man with a powerful mind' could look into all these things. All he can do is describe them. But what we know from our study of scripture, and what we can 'take to the bank' as believers, is this, verse 11: In His time God makes all things right. In His time, a sovereign, ordained event, "He made everything beautiful...". '*Beautiful*'. That's His word. The master puts the picture together in His time.

If you're familiar with John Le Carre', he is a writer with the most interesting style. You start each story with a number of subplots and at one particular juncture in the story they begin to amalgamate into one plot, into one particular focus. Now, how does a man write like that? Well, for one thing, he sees the end of the story as clearly as he sees the beginning. It was all in his mind. But for us, the readers who turn the pages, we collect our knowledge by the journey. And we're often confused and lost until the end. And then we see his one great purpose, his one single focus, and the beauty of the story. Often in life, what God does, we'll never see. It's verse 11, 'We cannot fathom what God has done from beginning to end.'

So how do you and I live in a life like that under a sovereign providential God? Well as frivolous as it may appear, he tells you in verses 12 and 13 to enjoy your life knowing God has a sovereign purpose and is guiding it along. You're allotted 'portion' has been given to you as part of His everlasting work. And as a result, look at verse 14; The believer's life 'endures'.

What a contrast in our poem. A life, and a world, and experiences that are always changing, always moving; but our lives, the lives of the believer, our work endures. You remember Psalm 90; you remember Moses's prayer in vs19; 'bless the work of our hands'. Bless the work of our hands! Why, since we don't have anything to show for the work of our hands, and since life just passes through our fingers? But for the believer, for the man and woman of God who serve Him and live for Him: Your hands are building a lasting memorial to the Glory of God! That's unbelievable!

And this is assured, (verse 15), because your God has foreknown it all, sovereignly put it all in place, and guides it with an all wise providence. Have you ever considered that the greatest single act of evil in time and history was the single greatest blessing in all time and history? God checkmated evil with the cross and with the resurrection of Christ. You and I need to be mindful of that. We need to remember that because you and I go through so many troubles. We walk through many dark valleys. We worry and we fret. But we need to keep mindful of God's all wise providence.

I have a card on my desk with the words of S. Lewis Johnson from Genesis 37. And here's what it says, "The darkest moments are short corridors leading to sunlit rooms." Only S. Lewis Johnson could say that. "The darkest moments are short corridors leading to sunlit rooms". My Christian friends, that is your life, and that's my life. How did the apostle put it: Those momentary 'light afflictions' (2 Cor 4:7). Mine never seem to be 'momentary' and they never seem to be 'light'. They seem to be such a burden. And they seem to go on forever. But our 'man with a powerful mind' says, 'you just sit quietly and learn to submit. Don't murmur, don't argue with His plan'. You see, when you and I shed tears, He puts them in a bottle. He preserves our tears in a bottle. That's how much He loves you! That's how much His concern is over you! Our God is that personal to each and every one of us! His valleys are never to destroy: But to make us, to build us up, to be people like Him. 'The man with the powerful mind' says, 'Do you see my poem? Well remember this; His plan is working; And it's all working just for you'.

Now my friends, this is life 'under the sun'; this book of Ecclesiastes. It is not the life of Christ in the New Testament. So let me just say: If you don't know the person of

Christ through the work of Christ there is nothing in life working for you. It's all working against you. We saw that last time in our last lecture, in our last text; all of your work, the work of your hands is all going to be given over to the righteous. Your life is ultimately futile. You're not only lost but your purposeless.

I invite you to come to Christ tonight, to place your trust in Him, the God who controls everything in your life. You cannot run away from Him. He sees you wherever you are, and He speaks to you now through His word and says, 'Come to Me; drop your burdens down and come to Me and enter into the greatest single relationship you'll ever have in this thing called life 'under the sun'.'

May God give you the grace to do just that. Come to Christ. May God the Spirit that opened Lydia's heart, open your heart right now, and come to Christ. The word of God has been spoken and it will not return void.

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