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# You Do Not Have Much Time

*David Gibson\**

Of the many video clips I watched of Billy Graham in the week of his death, one in particular has stuck with me. Preaching in Southern Seminary Chapel in 1982, Graham said that at sixty-four years old his greatest surprise in life was the brevity of life: “If someone had told me when I was twenty years old that life was very short and would pass — just like that — I wouldn’t have believed it. And if I tell you that, you don’t believe it either. I cannot get young people to understand how brief life is, how quickly it passes.”

Time. Flying past us. Not enough of it. Slipping away from us. Always pressed for it. Wishing we were better at managing it. Feeling guilty we don’t have more for someone special, or something noble. We are always running out of time. And Billy Graham is right — oh, how quickly it passes.

Time is a profoundly theological entity. An eternal God teaches creatures some of his greatest lessons in the vehicle of time. It has both a linear and a circular form — you can’t repeat time, even as it gifts you many things on a repeating loop. All of it educates us about what God loves and about what it means to be human, giving us at least three great lessons.

## **1. THE PATH OF WISDOM RESPECTS TIME’S RHYTHMS.**

“For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven” (Ecclesiastes 3:1). It’s worth pausing right there, at the entrance to this most famous of reflections on time.

Scripture says there is a time for all things, but our world counters that, instead, all things can be done all the time. Most technology, for instance, has harnessed us to the lie that we can throw off the creaturely restraints of time and

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have access to everything always, without waiting, without stopping, and without needing to rest.

Electricity blurs the boundaries between working while it is day and sleeping while it is night. Our online life has become our timeless master, as several screens ping commands without end which we obey without question. Gyms, fuel stations, libraries, offices, and supermarkets are open 24-7 and we come to believe we can do everything all the time. There is no particular season for anything. We do what we want, when we want.

Wise people respect time's rhythms. Dawn, morning, afternoon, evening, night. God made six days to work, one day to rest. This structures a week, which repeats over a month, and the months in years.

Many people try to live rhythm-free lives by simply doing whatever they feel like doing in any given moment, without proper attention to whether it is the right time to do that thing; this actually tears at the fabric of what it means to be human. We are now discovering that our constant, season-less attention to digital media is diminishing our personhood.

In years of pastoral ministry, I have not seen many families unravel who unswervingly observe the Lord's Day together with deliberate joy and routine hospitality. I have witnessed others whose interruptible devotion to the corporate body is merely a symptom of the irregular rhythms in other areas of life.

## **2. THE PATH OF FOLLY SEEKS TO CONTROL TIME'S SEASONS.**

Rhythms are not all there is in an ordinary life under the sun — there is “a time to be born, and a time to die” (Ecclesiastes 3:2), there is “a time to weep, and a time to laugh” (Ecclesiastes 3:4), there is “a time to love, and a time to hate” (Ecclesiastes 3:8). These are seasons, not rhythms, for there is no predictability to their appearance in our timelines and often their presence takes us by surprise.

It takes the eye of faith to see that God “has made everything beautiful in its time” (Ecclesiastes 3:11), because we often live with life's ugliness and pain as much as its beauty and delight. Further, these are relational seasons: they involve people we love and lose, those we wrong and forgive, those we befriend and

those who do us harm. We are profoundly relational beings and most of our lives are taken up with navigating the different seasons of our relationships and the effects they have on us.

Such seasons expose how little control we actually have over our lives. Zack Eswine says, “Many of our frustrations rise from our blindness to the change of season or to the pain or joy of them, and we struggle to adjust our expectations” (*Recovering Eden*, 130). What do we do with those seasons which bring wrecking-ball damage to our tidy little realms? Where do we turn?

Ecclesiastes helps us to see that one of the seasons we do not control is the time for justice. “I said in my heart, God will judge the righteous and the wicked, for there is a time for every matter and for every work” (Ecclesiastes 3:17). There will be a time, one day, for divine time travel: “God seeks what has been driven away” (Ecclesiastes 3:15). All the events of human history that have slipped through the hourglass of time into the past might be lost to us — *but they are never lost to God*. One day, he will dial back time and fetch the past into his present to bring it to account. Every time will have its day in court.

Foolish people seek all the answers to life in each and every season of life. But some seasons yield only questions, not answers. Some seasons bring a wound that will not heal; it might take a lifetime to learn that we “cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end” (Ecclesiastes 3:11). The story of my life has broken characters, jarring interruptions, unexpected joys and relationships caught up in unresolved tensions and difficulties. In God’s kindness I have, as yet, unfinished chapters. But my story is not *the* story. “*The* story reveals that there will be a time for judgment, and believers trust that judgment will finally prevail” (Craig Bartholomew, 180–181).

### 3. THE PATH OF LIFE EMBRACES TIME’S REVERSALS.

This perspective is the gospel’s now-and-not-yet voice speaking in the unfamiliar accent of Ecclesiastes. Today is the time of suffering and anguish, of work and pleasure, of toil and terror; tomorrow is the time of glory and judgment, of the resurrection of the body and life everlasting in world without end.

Now, this; tomorrow, that. The Lord Jesus fills our time with the unspeakable comfort of promised great reversals. Lose your life today for the sake of Jesus and his gospel; save it tomorrow. Gain the world now; forfeit your soul then. Be ashamed of Jesus in the time of this sinful generation; witness him being ashamed of you in the time of his coming in the glory of the Father and the holy angels (Mark 8:35–38).

Believers on the road to life know that the experiences of time can be reversed. The gospel turns the world on its head. Marred beyond human resemblance, the Servant of the Lord comes, in time, to shut the mouths of kings; buried with the wicked, he comes, in time, to divide the spoils of the strong (Isaiah 52–53). Blessed are those who are poor in spirit, who mourn, who are meek, who are hungry, those who lose everything in the here and now, for the day of reversal is coming and the reward will be great in the kingdom of heaven (Matthew 5).