

Ecclesiastes 3:1-8

A Time for Everything, and Everything in Its Time

Main idea: You take the good, you take the bad, you take them both, 'cause there you have the facts of life.

Two of the greatest movies ever made, in my opinion, are also two of the most difficult movies to watch. Both of them take place during World War II and specifically focus on aspects dealing with how hard life was in the concentration camps, and how various people coped during those times.

[Picture of movie posters]



One is called Schindler's List, and the other is called Life is Beautiful. And while both of these films contain some of the most horrifying reminders of what happened during the World War II, they also contain the reminder that even with all its pain, life contains beauty, compassion, and love.

And I think that reminder is so striking not just because of the real history that those movies deal with, but because to various degrees, we experience the same reality in our lives today. The sober truth is that this life contains both beauty as well as pain. Goodness, as well as evil.

You may have met a few people over the years who think that life only contains one or the other. It seems that some people are so negative about life that they think that life only contains pain. They may say, “Life is pain,” or they’ll even reason that God cannot possibly be good, and that therefore Christianity cannot possibly be true because there’s so much evil in the world. We often call them pessimists, but the truth is that they likely accurately see many aspects of life that optimists just dismiss. Much of life is painful, and pessimists rightly acknowledge the pain. But they also neglect to see how so much of life is beautiful.

So on the other hand, it seems that many other people are so positive about life that they refuse to even acknowledge how difficult life can be. It’s tempting to try to just ignore pain and focus on the positive, and to encourage others to do the same. But the Bible never tells us to ignore pain. Instead, it encourages us to trust God through the pain, and to find beauty in Jesus.

So as Christians, we should neither be pessimists, who only see pain, nor optimists, who refuse to acknowledge pain, but rather people who live according to the truth that this life contains both good and evil for a time, until the time when God makes all things new.

Ecclesiastes 3:1-8

There is an occasion for everything, and a time for every activity under heaven:

a time to give birth 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;
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 avoid embracing;
a time to search and a time to count as lost; a time to keep and a time to throw away;
a time to tear and a time to sew; 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)

Father, we acknowledge that You are Lord of all, even over all history and all time. Help us to trust You for everything we experience in this life, whether good times or bad, because we know that You know what You're doing. So even when we have no idea what we're doing, help us to trust in Jesus. In Jesus's name, Amen.

I'm sure many of you have heard the expression, "A place for everything, and everything in its place." It's talking about how when you're organizing or cleaning your home, there's a logical place for each and every thing, and each thing should go where it should logically be. Dirty clothes, for example, don't go on the floor. They go in the dirty clothes basket, so that they can easily be carried to the laundry room in order to be made clean. "A place for everything,

and everything in its place” is a great idea, even though sometimes it’s hard to live by.

Ecclesiastes teaches that there’s also a time for everything, and everything in its time. Verse 1.

There is an occasion for everything, and a time for every activity under heaven: (Ecclesiastes 3:1)

In other words, God has given us this world, and time in this world in order to do everything that must be done. We’ve probably all said before that we ran out of time for one thing or another, and that can be true when it comes to various activities that we plan to do, but when it comes to all the things that must be done, there’s a time for everything, and everything in its time. In God’s wisdom and sovereignty, He’s made a time for all the things that happen under the sun.

There’s a time for good things, and there’s also a time for what we consider to be bad things. There’s time for pain, and there’s time for pleasure. In fact, that’s exactly the dichotomy that the Teacher in Ecclesiastes points out in this passage. Verse 2.

a time to give birth 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; (Ecclesiastes 3:2-3)

There’s a debate among Bible scholars about how hopeful versus hopeless this passage is. On one hand, some say this passage is

all about acceptance and focusing on good things, even when life obviously still contains a lot of bad things. Like the serenity prayer says:

God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference. - Serenity Prayer

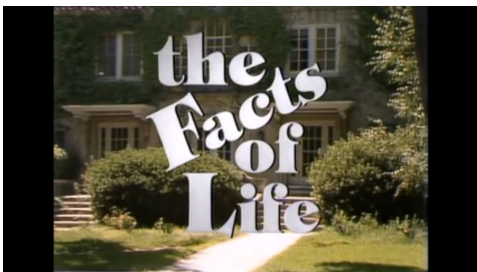
And that's certainly a good attitude to have about life. But that's not all that this passage is teaching.

Others say that this passage is about coming to terms with the idea that no matter how much good there is, there's always going to be bad, and there's nothing we can do about it. As the author Dave Eggers wrote:

Everyone disappears, no matter who loves them. - Dave Eggers

And that certainly seems to line up more with how cynical the Teacher in Ecclesiastes often is. But that's also not all that this passage is teaching. Instead, what we have is more like the theme song to the show, "The Facts of Life."

[Video Clip from "The Facts of Life" theme song]



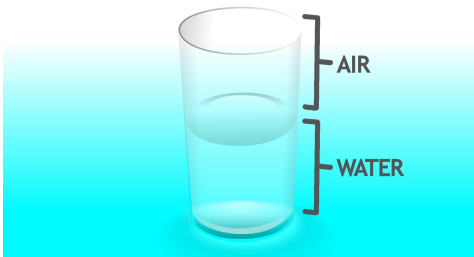
Life contains both good and bad, and we need to be honest with ourselves and others about that in order to navigate life in truth.

[Photo of a glass half full of water]



It's kind of this same argument between optimism and pessimism. Is the glass half empty, or is the glass half full? But the truth is, whether we see the glass as half full or half empty, the glass is actually completely full.

[Photo of a glass full of water and air]



It's full of water and air. That's the reality, right? Optimists and pessimists can debate whether it's half full or half empty all they want, but it doesn't change the reality that it's actually completely full with two different substances.

In the same way, in each of these verses and the verses that follow, there are two examples of contrasting times that make up all of time. Some of these things we consider good, and some of them

we consider bad, but they all make up all of time as we know it under the sun.

And it's interesting how the Teacher in Ecclesiastes plays with our emotions in this passage. Some of the examples he uses instantly strike a chord with us because they're such weighty topics. Giving birth and dying, killing and healing are all things we have strong feelings about because they're literally matters of life and death. And yet, in these same verses, we read other contrasting actions that aren't nearly as emotionally charged.

Some of these things even appear to be morally neutral. When it comes to planting and uprooting, tearing down and building, we'd say that these are just things that need to happen. Now, I'm not a farmer, but in the normal course of farming, from what I hear, you sometimes need to plant, and you sometimes need to uproot, right? And in the normal course of building a city, you sometimes need to tear down existing structures in order to build them back better. Morally neutral.

And yet, these morally neutral actions are placed right alongside things that we have extreme emotions about: giving birth and dying; killing and healing. It's like the Teacher wants us to be on a roller coaster of emotions, not knowing if the next thing will be serious or not so serious, so that we would be totally on edge about what could come next.

And he's not predictable, either! He switches back and forth between stating the positive first, followed by the contrasting negative, then stating the negative first, followed by the contrasting

positive. He switches from something we might be fairly neutral about, to something we're going to have strong emotions about, and not according to any sort of pattern. Throughout this passage, he keeps us completely off-balanced on this emotional roller coaster.

And that's a lot of life, isn't it? We don't know what could happen next. It could be good, it could be bad, or it could be morally neutral. And sometimes there can be a long season of good, only to be suddenly cast into the middle of a fierce trial, and sometimes there can be a long season of bad, which finally resolves into something good for a time. That's just life.

And we're going to see this even more in the verses that follow. Verse 4.

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 avoid embracing; (Ecclesiastes 3:4-5)

Most of these things are things that we all experience in the natural course of life. As a general rule, people weep, laugh, mourn, dance, and embrace. But unless you're a kid at the playground, we might not be quite as familiar with the idea of gathering and throwing stones.

You might immediately think it's talking about gathering stones in order to throw them at someone who was condemned to die according to the Old Testament Law, but that's actually not what it's

referring to. It's much more mundane than that. The word "throw" in this passage is better understood to mean "scatter." There's a time to gather stones, and there's a time to scatter them. So more likely, it's simply an illustration about the rockiness of a terrain. Now, once again, I'm not a farmer, but when you're farming, you'll want to gather all of the stones out of an area, so that you can have good soil to plant in, right? But if you're building a road in those days, you'll want to scatter the stones so that weeds will be less likely to sprout up in the path.

So even though it sounds counterintuitive, there's a time to gather stones, and a time to scatter them. Both are necessary parts of life, just like weeping, laughing, morning, dancing, embracing, and even avoiding an embrace.

We often only want the good things, but that's not life. We need to be able to take the good, and take the bad, because to ignore one or the other is to deny the facts of life. It's to deny reality.

Imagine a life that's all laughing, but no weeping. Laughing might get a little boring, right? It would lose its joy, and may even appear to others as madness, like the Joker in Batman. Or imagine a life that's all embracing. You wouldn't appreciate the embrace as much. The lack of an embrace causes you to long even more for the embrace, so that the embrace has more meaning.

We read in Romans not long ago:

And what if God, wanting to display his wrath and to make his power known, endured with much patience objects of wrath

prepared for destruction? And what if he did this to make known the riches of his glory on objects of mercy that he prepared beforehand for glory— on us, the ones he also called, not only from the Jews but also from the Gentiles? (Romans 9:22-24)

And then it also went on to say this:

For God has imprisoned all in disobedience so that he may have mercy on all. (Romans 11:32)

You see, God's plan includes a period of lostness so that we can experience the joy of being found. It includes a period of death so that we can experience true life.

Maybe life under the sun is often so hard not because it's so bad, but so that in the end, we'll finally see that it's so good. Maybe Christianity can be so difficult to understand and live by now not because it's wrong, but because it's so right. And if we experience so much of the pain, and difficult things now in this time, it's only because there's going to be a greater, more complete time to come.

Verse 6.

a time to search and a time to count as lost; a time to keep and a time to throw away;
a time to tear and a time to sew; 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 3:6-8)

As we read all of these contrasting times, we might feel a little powerless. We would love to never lose anything, but there's a time to search and a time to count as lost. We would love for there never to be any hate in the world, but there's a time for love, and a time for hate. And there's even a time for war.

Now, that's not to say that these things are glorifying to God. And yet, because we live in a broken world, broken by our sin and the sins of those around us, there is a time for these things. And yet, just The Byrds sang at the end of their song:

A time for love, a time for hate

A time for peace, I swear it's not too late - The Byrds

When we read this passage in Ecclesiastes, we could feel powerless. It's just the way it is. When you think that life is just about accepting that there's good and bad, and there's nothing you can do about it, it can lead you to feel depressed. But only if you think that this is all that life is.

You see, Jesus stepped into our hopelessness and changed the course of history. When Jesus, the Son of God, was born into our broken world, He came to be the Light in the midst of the darkness. And when He died on the cross, He came to destroy the power sin and this world had over us. He came to give hope to the hopeless, and salvation to sinners, which is all of us. He came to give us peace with God.

And He invites us to be peacemakers. He invites us to plant, and heal, and laugh, and dance. And yes, there's a time in this life for all these other things—dying, killing, war, and so on—but only a time. But when the end comes, there will only be eternal life and laughing and dancing forever, because in Jesus, God turns all of our sorrow into joy.