

“Simply outstanding. Matt deals with one of the most critical challenges in contemporary western Christianity: clarifying biblical, realistic priorities for our use of time. He gives a comprehensive, compelling template for sustainable Christian living. Pure class.”

RICHARD COEKIN, Senior Pastor, Dundonald Church, London; Director of Co:Mission; author of *Ephesians For You*

“Make time to read this book! It is an easy read and full of amusing and relevant illustrations and useful ideas to consider. Full of biblical truth, it gives some firm challenges on how we spend our time. I’ve already made some changes.”

LIEUTENANT-COLONEL JODY DAVIES MBE, The Royal Gurkha Rifles

“A great little book. Penetrating, engaging and realistic—make the time to read it, and it might just change the way you think about time.”

CARRIE SANDOM, Associate Minister for Women and Pastoral Care, St John’s, Tunbridge Wells, Kent, UK

“This is brilliant. If you’re feeling time-poor, read it. It gives guidance not guilt, principles rather than rules, and freedom instead of burdens.”

AL STEWART, Director of the Geneva Push; formerly Bishop of Wollongong, Sydney

“Time is a commodity I am always searching to secure. Between work deadlines, exercise, quality time with family, church activities—it seems there is never enough of it. Even fitting in the opportunity to read feels like a stretch! But I never once regretted taking the time to pick up this book—and neither will you, however busy you are. Thank you, Matt, for the wisdom and encouragement you have carefully crafted.”

BARBARA LANE, Executive Vice President of LTI Inc., Atlanta

“In all of life’s demands and duties, this book reminds you that there is only one essential activity—to listen to Jesus. A real gem!”

MARC DÖRING, Partner, Simmons & Simmons LLP
international law firm

“If you are a busy Christian, I strongly recommend reading this book. It is wonderfully practical, and packed with careful biblical reflection and solid biblical wisdom.”

WILLIAM TAYLOR, Rector of St Helen’s Bishopsgate, London

“I am so glad I made time to read this book! How to make the most of limited time is an issue that faces us all. Matt’s wise, clear and concise book (ideal for busy people!) shows us how the application of biblical principles can save us from wasting our time or burning ourselves out.”

ALASDAIR PAINE, Senior Minister, St Andrew the Great,
Cambridge, UK; author of *The First Chapters of Everything*

“This is a wonderful book that will help us to rethink and refocus. Matt reminds us that the time we have is God’s gift to us to use wisely, without feeling burdened or guilty. The book is full of practical tips and real life examples that enable us to live godly lives under the pressures of work, church and family life.”

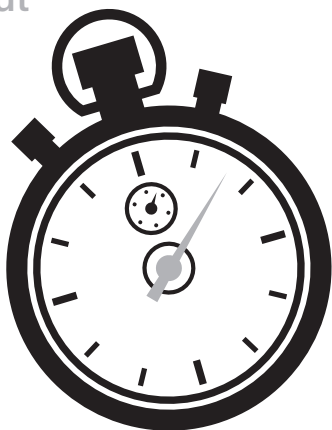
ANDREW PERRY, Consultant Orthopaedic Surgeon

“Many Christians experience time as a pressure and a burden. Matt has drawn on his experience as senior pastor of a city-centre church to give us a thoughtful, warm, and tremendously practical book. It is realistic and grace-filled. Busy Christians will find this a challenging and encouraging stimulus to godliness.”

CHRISTOPHER ASH, Director of the Cornhill Teaching Course,
London; author of *Pure Joy*

MATT FULLER TIME FOR EVERY THING?

How to be busy without
feeling burdened



*To the many at Christ Church Mayfair who
constantly strive to serve the Lord with their time,
especially the elders and their wives.
I wrote this book for you in the first instance.
I hope it helps.*

Time for every thing? *How to be busy without feeling burdened*

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1. The elusive gift of time

A few weeks ago my wife asked me what I wanted for my birthday. No doubt she expected the normal dull answers: a new pair of shorts, a tie, or something wild like some new glasses.

To her surprise, my instant, instinctive answer was:

Time.

Time. I would love to have more of it. I would love to feel less rushed and tired. I would love to sit in a chair and read a novel for a whole morning. I would love to sit and stare at the sea for an afternoon. I would like some time.

There are occasions when I look at my retired parents and in-laws with envy, because they seem to have time. Making a cup of coffee used to be something my dad did while juggling other tasks, but now that he's eighty it has become an event. He talks about doing it ten minutes in advance. Then he enjoys the creation and consumption of his cup of coffee before finally he reflects upon the fact that he enjoyed that cup of coffee. Sometimes I look upon that pace of life and it looks great! And yet, even retirees often feel that they don't have enough time. Everyone reaches the stage when they know that time is running out.

The famine of time

Many of us feel a famine of time. We never have enough to accomplish all our goals and we are constantly dashing from one thing to the next. There's not enough time to ring a friend. There's not enough time to see the kids before they go to bed. Not enough time to read that book that I want to. Not enough time to have lunch away from the desk.

Maybe it was better when I was younger. But not according to those who are younger. Take the case of Martha Payne, the Scottish ten-year-old who became an internet sensation when her school tried to ban her from taking photographs of her school lunches and rating them on her blog. One of her complaints was: "There's not enough time to eat lunch ... I would like to sit in one seat for the whole of my lunch, but I keep getting moved on so tables can be cleaned." So young, yet so rushed!

Maybe it was better in the past then. Surely they can't have felt rushed 150 years ago. Yet it's not hard to track down precisely the same sentiment in those who lived and died in previous centuries. An historian called William Smith commented on changes to the Yorkshire town of Morley in 1886:

With the advent of cheap newspapers and superior means of locomotion ... the dreamy old days are over ... for men now live and think and work at express speed. They have their Mercury or Post laid on their breakfast table in the early morning and if they are too hurried to snatch from it the news during that meal, they carry it off to be sulkily read as they travel, leaving them no time to talk with the friend who may share the compartment with them. The hurry and bustle of modern life lacks the quiet and repose of the period when our forefathers, the day's work done, took their ease.

There were hardly high-speed railways with WIFI everywhere, and yet the same attitude was there. I wonder what William Smith would have made of newspapers being half-read at best before being discarded, or the volume of information provided by the internet, or the level of communication by email emoticons. But what his comments do reveal is that it has always been possible to feel rushed or harried. It is not a modern phenomenon; it is a struggle for humanity living in the world, rather than only for 21st-century people living in the modern world. Time has always been the gift everyone wanted, and very few people enjoyed.

Perhaps the problem is not with how much time we have, but with how we view it. Is the problem perhaps with us? Time famine is not a 21st-century phenomenon. Phrases such as: “Doesn’t time fly” ... “Time marches on” ... “He’s cash rich, time poor” have been around for a long time.

Still, we do have to recognise that the technological revolution has accelerated, and continues to accelerate, the pace of life. Most of us are never too far from a mobile phone or our emails. Many of us find it very difficult not to check our messages or log into Facebook on a regular basis. Some of us can’t enjoy an event without spending it checking what others are doing at other events, or what’s going on in the office.

How did life become so rushed? I always feel better if there’s a convenient individual to blame. It’s always satisfying to find a scapegoat. I’ve looked hard, and I’ve found one. His name is Peter Henlein. He is responsible for our battle with time. Why? Because in 1504, he invented the first pocket watch. Ever since then, we’ve been able to carry around with us a ticking measure of the day’s disappearance. He caused the experience of glancing at our watches with despair, either

because there is so much still to do in the remaining time, or because we know we have wasted a whole lot of time.

Since Peter Henlein isn't around to confront, I had to resort to asking my wife for the impossible: time. I live with the nagging knowledge that there simply isn't enough time. For me, time has become an enemy that I need to defeat and conquer. It has assumed the likeness of a crocodile that I try to wrestle to submission while it thrashes its tail and gives me the runaround.

On the other hand, for some of us it's not that 24 hours are too little; the problem is that they're too much. You may know the feeling of simply trying to fill your time. We're not in overdrive because we're not in gear at all. In the film *About a Boy*, the lead character played by Hugh Grant divides his day up into half-hour units because it's less intimidating trying to fill up a day that way. Taking a bath is one unit, or block; watching a TV quiz show is one unit; going to the hairdresser is four units. It's a caricature, but some of us can while away units on mindless TV or doing "research" on Facebook. Time is still an obstacle to be overcome. There is little pleasure or enjoyment in filling our time. Perhaps we're wasting a lot of it in the simple effort to fill it.

At the risk of stating the obvious: it's not meant to be that way. Time is not meant to be a tyrant because there's too much of it or too little. If time is a monster to me, then something has gone badly awry in my thinking! Hard work is good, and making the best use of time is good; but obsessing about time, being burdened by a lack of time, feeling guilty all the time, is bad. We know that, but how can we escape it? That's what this book is about.

We have actually been given a lot of time. Time is a gift—a gift we're designed to enjoy. The Bible would encourage us

to see time not as a wretched commodity that we never have enough of, but as a gift.

Let me say that again—it's really important! Time is a gift to enjoy. There is, and will always be, 24 hours in a day. That won't change. What needs to change is how my heart views those hours.

The march of time

Here's one view of time from the writer of the Old Testament book of Ecclesiastes. He's known as the "Teacher".

¹ There is a time for everything, and a season for every activity under the heavens:

² a time to be born and a time to die,
a time to plant and a time to uproot,

³ a time to kill and a time to heal,
a time to tear down and a time to build,

⁴ a time to weep and a time to laugh,
a time to mourn and a time to dance,

⁵ a time to scatter stones and a time to gather them,
a time to embrace and a time to refrain from embracing,

⁶ a time to search and a time to give up,
a time to keep and a time to throw away,

⁷ a time to tear and a time to mend,
a time to be silent and a time to speak,

⁸ a time to love and a time to hate,
a time for war and a time for peace.

(Ecclesiastes 3 v 1-8)

Did you read that poem in both a negative way and a positive way? It's possible to do this negatively—you cannot resist the march of time; it is relentless and unstoppable. Yet the

poem can also be read positively—God has designed a time for everything, so that we can enjoy the variety of experiences that this life has to offer. I think that the Teacher wants us to see both of these as true, but that the liberating response is to view time as the gift of God.

The most obvious point this poem makes is that we're not in charge of time. We do not decide when we are born or when we die. If we want to grow decent crops, we have to plant in autumn and uproot in the summer. If you are a shepherd, there is a time to heal an injured lamb and a time to cook and eat it. So the Teacher gives us 14 pairs of truths: each time, a negative and a positive, covering the natural life cycle (v 2-3); emotions (v 4); and activities (v 5-8). He wants us to recognise that we dance to a tune that is not of our own making and that we cannot alter. We cannot resist the seasons nor shift their order. Round the years go: another birthday; another Christmas; pull out the summer shorts; pull on the autumn layers; pull out the winter coats; another Christmas, and... repeat.

Yet it's not simply the seasons of the year that control us but the seasons of life. Some seasons are joyous: a wonderful holiday with friends; your wedding; and a newborn child. Others are tragic: the death of a stillborn baby; watching your parents' divorce; the death of a close friend. Life goes around and around and then there is a "time to die". Depressing, isn't it, to dwell upon life like that?! As the poem continues:

⁹ What do workers gain from their toil? ¹⁰ I have seen the burden God has laid on the human race. ¹¹ He has made everything beautiful in its time. He has also set eternity in the human heart; yet no one can fathom what God has done from beginning to end. (3 v 9-11)

“Gain” (v 9) is a business word meaning “profit”. If you’re a shopkeeper, you make money by selling goods, you pay your suppliers and other costs, and whatever is left is your profit or gain. The Teacher is asking: *What profit will you have in life? What is the reward for your toil at work and at home? When you lie on your deathbed, what will you have to show for your brief time on this earth?*

Even here and now, doesn’t it often feel that we are toiling just to keep our heads above water, or toiling to try and achieve something useful with our time? That’s what the Teacher is describing here. My own experience has often been of feeling that I am disappointing people—I am failing to give enough time to people at work, to my immediate family, to my wider family, to my church and to my friends. There simply is not enough time to satisfy everything I want to do and everyone I want to please. There may be a time for everything that God expects, but there is not time for *every* thing that could be done. And that leads to the burden of “toil” without profit.

We know and experience wonderful, joyful moments in life that speak of something truly beautiful (v 11), yet they are tainted by frustration. Triumphs fade, holidays end, contentment passes and we are left with an endless “to-do” list and the feeling that we are letting people down again. Even some of those who have achieved greatness are uncertain of what they’ve really achieved. Back in the summer of 2012, Bradley Wiggins won the Tour de France and then Olympic gold. When interviewed after receiving his medal, he commented: “There was a light melancholy on the podium; nothing will ever top this.” That’s the burden of time; even the great moments pass.

The gift of time

So far, so glum. But then the Teacher says something that can transform our thinking:

[God] has made everything beautiful in its time. He has also set eternity in the human heart; yet no one can fathom what God has done from beginning to end. (v 11)

The Christian knows that we can trust in the plan of God: that he has made everything beautiful in its time. The word translated “beautiful” here is a visual term used for physical beauty. The Teacher is saying that God’s rule over time is staggeringly beautiful. It takes your breath away and makes you look twice, even though we may often only see a glimpse of it.

Yet at the same time, God has set both frustration and beauty into this world so that we look beyond this world and to him in order to enjoy the glory without the irritation. God “has also set eternity in the human heart”. When we feel as though life does not offer enough time, it’s because we were made for something more. We were designed to enjoy an eternity of time. If we accomplish everything we dreamed of in this life, it’s likely our dreams were too little.

But, though we sense we need more time, “no one can fathom what God has done”. We struggle to remember that we are not in charge of time. We need rescuing from the illusion that we can decide upon the times for laughter and dancing; we need to abandon any pretence that we can control life in this world, and to give up the thought that we are able to find the time to do everything that we desire. If we believe that we are in control, it will only produce frustration and bitterness.

We cannot master the seasons of life but we can trust the Lord who does! Knowing this is the key to viewing time as God’s gift.

What kind of life does this lead to?

¹² I know that there is nothing better for people than to be happy and to do good while they live. ¹³ That each of them may eat and drink, and find satisfaction in all their toil—this is the gift of God. ¹⁴ I know that everything God does will endure for ever; nothing can be added to it and nothing taken from it. God does it so that people will fear him. (3 v 12-14)

Wouldn't it be great to find that sort of satisfaction in our toil? Wouldn't it be lovely to wake each day with the thought: *God has given me time to enjoy and serve him with today and I'm looking forward to that?*

How wonderful to begin each day knowing that your day has purpose, yet is manageable—that you will be busy, but not feel burdened by it. How lovely it would be to end each day tired but not exhausted; satisfied, rather than anxious; and fulfilled, rather than guilty—to know there is a time for everything that God expects, but not time for *every* thing that could be done; and to feel OK about that.

That's the gift of God—and that's what we're exploring in these chapters. So in the first half of the book we'll be laying some foundations in terms of how we view time, busyness, and burdens; and then in the second half we'll look at how to use our time well (and avoid using it badly) in the areas of work, family, church and leisure.

And I'll be trying to keep each chapter short, because... we're short of time!