

All in God's Time
Ecclesiastes 3:1-15

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Scr. Reading: Eccl 3:1-15
Chasing the Wind

Time management is big business—seminars, life hacks, bestselling books... But have you ever realized how misleading the term is? “Time management: techniques for managing the unstoppable progression of moments from the future to the present to the past.” Time is an unstoppable force. It doesn’t get managed; it moves along. Constantly. Utterly unaffected by all our smug attempts to manage it. You might as well sign up for a “gravity management” seminar. Session titles like “Tips for Taller Stacks” and “Get a Grip: The Key to Fewer Falls.”

The allure of time management is the dream that one day everything in your life will finally be under control. The problem, of course, is that time will never submit to us, no matter how disciplined or urgent our attempts to control it. And to assume otherwise is nothing but pure human arrogance. Reminds me of the joke about the DEA agent who stopped at a ranch and told the old farmer: “I’m here to inspect your property for illegal grows.” Farmer: “OK. Just don’t go in that field over there.” Agent: “I am from the Drug Enforcement Administration of the federal government. See this badge? This badge entitles me to go anywhere I darn well please, and there’s nothing you can do to stop me.” A few minutes later the rancher hears some hollering from the field, and sure enough, the DEA agent is running for his life, chased by a huge bull. The old guy drops his tools, runs to the fence, and yells, “Your badge! Show him your badge!!”

Human existence as we know it is inextricably embedded in time. We can’t stop it, slow it, change it, or manage it. Despite all our attempts at efficiency, productivity, and self-management, time marches on. It’s the aspect of our lives to which The Preacher turns his attention in Ecclesiastes 3.

As he often does, The Preacher will surprise us at the end with some wonderfully encouraging things to say about time [song]. But that positive outlook is only possible when you bring God into the picture. That’s not where the Preacher starts. As usual, he starts from the perspective of life “under the sun.”

The Vanity of Time Under the Sun (vv1-9)

vv1 For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven:

Note that phrase “under heaven.” It’s a key phrase in this book, along with the other “under the sun.” It’s the operating assumption that this life down here, on earth, below the sky is all there is. So whatever answers we find must be found right here, “under the sun,” with no regard to anything supernatural or transcendent. It is life without regard for God or the revelation He has provided. Life “under the sun” is the worldview of a **secularist**—the person who operates in a world limited to what we can observe with our senses.

Reminder: The Preacher has a core identity and an assumed identity. In his core identity, he is a God-fearing, orthodox Jewish teacher. He’s the king of Israel, responsible to lead the people in remembering and obeying God’s law. That’s his true self, the core identity he can’t change, which every so often shines through the gloom. For the purposes of this book, he is playing a part. He has assumed the identity of a complete secularist, a person who believes that this life and this world is all there is. Nothing supernatural whatsoever. No word from God to explain life. No accountability to God to guide it. This book is the record of his attempt to see how far he can get in life without acknowledging God.

Here in chapter 3, he takes up the question of time. Human history. The ebbs and flows of the ever-changing seasons of life. He captures his thoughts in a poem in vv2-8. The popular view of his poem is that he’s celebrating the beauty of life’s symmetry—how well everything fits together in the big picture. But if you look at the context—if you look at the rest of the paragraph and the book as a whole, you’ll see that’s not what he’s saying at all.

I want to pause here a moment and stress the importance of context when we read the Bible—interpreting the individual parts in light of the whole. Why do we preach sequentially through whole books of the Bible, rather than just on the inspirational or instructive verses scattered here and there? Because you need can’t properly understand those individual parts unless you understand the whole.

ILLUS: asking someone if they like the LotR and they say, “Oh yeah, man. That ring? Frodo was so lucky. I’d love to be able to disappear like that.” If

someone talks like that about the ring that nearly destroyed Middle Earth and haunted Frodo the rest of his life, you'd suspect they hadn't even read the book; and if they had, they certainly hadn't understood it.

I want you to understand Ecclesiastes *as Ecclesiastes*, not just a bunch of unrelated and inspiring thoughts from this book. We want to hear the message God has for us in this book, not the message we find inspiring from verses taken out of context.

This poem is in Ecclesiastes, not Psalms, so does your reading make sense of that? The Preacher introduces it by saying this is how time works "under heaven"—i.e., time without reference to God. And look how he concludes:

v9 *What gain has the worker from his toil?*

Sure, there's a certain appeal to the rhythm and variations of life which the poem captures. If it were always "a time to plant," how dreary! But the Preacher is on a quest for life's ultimate meaning—"what gain has the worker from all his toil?" (cf. 1:3). Where's the benefit? When all is said and done, what remains? In light of that search, this poem isn't celebrating beauty; it's driving home the apparent pointlessness of it all. 2 aspects: time's relentless march is oppressive and unproductive.

Oppressive. Time relentless march is a burden. That's the point of the heavy repetition—14 pairs, 28 occurrences of the phrase "a time to":

vv2-8 *a time to be born, and a time to die; a time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is planted; ³ a time to kill, and a time to heal; a time to break down, and a time to build up; ⁴ a time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance; ⁵ a time to cast away stones, and a time to gather stones together; a time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing; ⁶ a time to seek, and a time to lose; a time to keep, and a time to cast away; ⁷ a time to tear, and a time to sew; a time to keep silence, and a time to speak; ⁸ a time to love, and a time to hate; a time for war, and a time for peace.*

It's beautiful at first, but if you think about what's being said, it's a drag. **Everything is frustratingly out of your control!!** There's "a time to be born and a time to die," but you don't get to choose either one of them. There's "a time to plant and a time to pluck up what is planted," but we here in Colorado know those times aren't always easy to discern. Some years you plant in May and a late snow still smothers your budding little garden. We're caught in the rhythm of this cosmic tune, but we didn't put the quarter in the juke box. We dance, but we didn't pick the song.

We tell ourselves "I am the master of my fate / I am the captain of my soul"; but all the while, it's these inexorable seasons of life that pressure us into most of these situations. When do you make a choice to kill or weep or hate? Life forces these upon us. You didn't intend to misplace your wallet, but suddenly it's a time to seek. The collector's fortunes change, and suddenly it's no longer a time to keep; instead, it's "a time to cast away" his carefully curated hoard. Former friends turn bitter enemies, and in pain they find the "a time to love" has become "a time to hate." The peace-loving nation prepares for war. This isn't celebration; it's oppression.

Unproductive. Every positive experience in life is paired with a negative. Time moves us forward in one direction, and then shifts gears and rolls it all back in reverse. If every good moment in life is matched by its evil twin, what gain is there in that? The only "Precious Moments" that last are those trademarked ceramic figurines you get for someone special on her birthday. We're all Sisyphus, forever rolling the boulder up the mountain only for time to roll it back down and erase all our progress.

Life is a series of endless cycles, nothing new. He's not saying the world is a wonderfully ordered and wide-ranging place of joy. He's questioning why, in light of the repetitious cycles of life, we should do anything in this fallen world.

ILLUS: "Mayberry Goes Bankrupt" – The town council forces Andy to evict Frank Myers, who hasn't paid his taxes or his other debts. As he cleans out his place, Frank finds a 100+ year-old bond from the city of Mayberry in the amount of \$100, promising 8.5% interest, compounded annually = over \$300,000. Mayberry can't pay and suddenly finds itself in the debt of the man whom the town council evicted just the day before. Instead, the mayor and others help Frank repair his house and the bank gives him a nice mortgage on the place to pay his old debts. In the final scene, someone notices the old bond was issued in the days of the Confederacy, bought and payable with Confederate currency. It's worthless! Frank's bond is a quaint historical artifact, the town owes him nothing, and they're all right back where they started.

So is that it? Time is oppressive and life gets us nowhere? No. Everything changes once the Preacher brings God into the picture.

The Beauty of Time Above the Sun (vv10-15)

The worldview of a secularist only gets you so far—right to the point of despair. But look what happens when he brings God into the picture. Three truths about God that completely change our perspective of time:

1. God makes everything beautiful in time.

vv10-11 *I have seen the business that God has given to the children of man to be busy with. ¹¹ He has made everything beautiful in its time. Also, he has put eternity into man's heart, yet so that he cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end.*

Yes, life is hard. The monotony can be grinding. Painful experiences are all the more agonizing because there appears to be no reason why! That's the Preacher's point in v10. The word "business" sounds neutral, but it's much more negative than that—more like "burden" (NIV) or "task" (NIV, NAS). But...

v11a "He has made everything beautiful in its time." God has intentions and designs which bring it all together. Not just "purposeful" as though it all makes sense to us eventually. "Beautiful" because it all looks good, satisfying, pleasing. God is the Master Artist who is using every dark line to create a masterpiece.

Notice the tense of the verb: "has made." From God's perspective, it's all settled and done. Even while time moves us along, God sits above. The masterpiece is finished. He "has made" it beautiful already. All that remains for us is to get there and see it.

v11b "He has put eternity into man's heart." "Eternity" is an important word here – rather than just "transcendence" or "spirituality." We know instinctively there is more to this life than cycles of repetition. Eternity is the perspective from which all these back-and-forth motions in time make sense. Animals by their nature are immersed in time, but humans have an element in their nature which longs to see events in their full context—from the perspective of eternity. Situated in time as we are during our mortal lives, we are like a nearsighted person at the edge of the Grand Canyon, frustrated and confused by the blurry shapes and recurrent colors that stretch out before us. What we need—and what

God will someday give us—is a set of glasses called "eternity" which will bring everything into perfect focus. "He has made everything beautiful in its time."

v11c "yet so that he cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end." Human beings are not capable of seeing the whole panorama of God's purposes, at least not now. So why do you demand an answer now? You can't even see the whole picture!

ILLUS: the corn maze experience. "This can't form a shape because I can't see any shapes from here..."

That's exactly what we do when we think, "I can't see any point to this suffering; therefore, there CAN'T be any point to this suffering." Just wait!! God's ways are higher, He sees the whole picture, and He has made in all beautiful in its time. In eternity. Trust Him. You'll see.

2. God gives good gifts in time.

vv12-13 *I perceived that there is nothing better for them than to be joyful and to do good as long as they live; ¹³ also that everyone should eat and drink and take pleasure in all his toil - this is God's gift to man.*

The Preacher isn't being cynical; he's being sincere. The blessings of everyday life are gifts from God, so enjoy them. Make the most of your life! When you're all caught up in the whys of your problems, you miss all God's good blessings.

ILLUS: pic at the National Museum of the USAF, holding a happy kid, squatting near an awesome aircraft, staring off into space with a forlorn look

For the lost man, "making the most of life" is a mere distraction from the vanity of it all. It's a delusion, an act of existential courage in the face of the meaninglessness of life. He's just filling time in the void. But for the Christian, this unpretentious approach to life isn't a stopgap measure; it's a calling and a gift from God (v13). God will make sense of all the parts; for now, for you, just enjoy the moment.

3. God will judge all history in His time.

vv14-15 *I perceived that whatever God does endures forever; nothing can be added to it, nor anything taken from it. God has done it, so that people fear before him. ¹⁵ That which is, already has been; that which is to be, already has been; and God seeks what has been driven away.*

The relentless, changeless march of time has a divine purpose—namely, to cause people to fear God. The man whose whole perspective is limited to things “under the sun” is a prisoner in a cycle of time he cannot escape. The Christian sees in it God’s faithfulness and intentional, albeit mysterious, design. How? His starting place is the fear of the Lord—a posture that assumes He is greater, wiser, better than we are; and He therefore must have reasons for all His mysterious ways.

“God seeks what has been driven away.” Translation options: “God will call the past to account” NIV / “God requireth that which is past” (KJV) / “God requires an account of what is past” (NKJ). The point is, God will right all the wrongs of history. He will bring justice for every evil we’ve suffered in time. Part of how He makes it all beautiful is righting wrongs, correcting injustice, fixing the problems. God isn’t just standing above time; He will intervene in it and make it all right. Wait for His justice!

How can we know this for certain—that our time-bound existence isn’t utter vanity? The incarnation and atonement of Jesus. Only Christianity offers real answers...

In the incarnation, the eternal God became a time-bound Man, and in that one step He validated our own human existence here under the sun. Every other religion has a god who remains aloof, outside of time, above the sun. The Christian God steps down into time, takes our flesh upon Himself, and lives life right here with us under the sun. How can you know it’s OK to enjoy the material blessings of this life like the Preacher recommends? Jesus did it Himself.

But what about injustice and pain? Look at the cross. It’s the ultimate injustice, history’s best example of a situation that, in the moment itself, doesn’t look like it could possibly serve any good purpose. The most wonderful Man who ever lived, kind, wise, sinless... dying on a cross? There’s no way this can turn out well... until in the Resurrection Jesus conquered death, achieved our forgiveness, and defeated everything that could possibly come against us.

What about God judging evil? The cross demonstrates that He takes evil so seriously, He took it into His own body. He’s not just going to give

sinners a pass and call it good. All sin will be punished—just in Christ instead of in you.

The Lord’s Supper is a reminder of all this, pointing forward and pointing backward. Back to when God brought justice and punished evil in the body of His own Son. And forward to when Jesus will sit at a great banquet and feast with His people, after He’s woven all of history together and “made everything beautiful in its time.”

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