



Ecclesiastes - Chapter Three

Summary of Chapter Three

Solomon believed that there is a time and place for everything, whether it be good or bad. He believes that everyone must seek guidance from God to truly know what their path in life is.

II Ecclesiastes 3:1-8 - Everything Has Its Time

There is an appropriate occasion for every human event or activity; life is endlessly complex. Several of the items mentioned in this poem have already been examined by the Teacher, e.g. compare v.2 'a time to die' with 2:14-17; v.2 'a time to plant' and v.3 'a time to build up' with 2:4-5.

¹ For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven:

² 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 throw 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 throw 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.

Ecclesiastes 3:1-8

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

The poetry of this list - describing the different seasons and facets of life - is beautiful. Yet it also casts a dark shadow, because it is a reminder of the inevitability of trouble and evil, and of the relentless monotony of life. Derek Kidner commented, "The repetition of 'a time, and a time' begins to be oppressive. Whatever may be our skill and initiative, our real masters seem to be these inexorable seasons: not only those of the calendar, but that tide of events which moves us now to one kind of action which seems fitting, now to another which puts all into reverse."

A time to be born, and a time to die; a time to break down, and a time to build up. A bad facet answers each good facet. The Teacher understood that although there are good things in life, the bad things cannot be escaped.

A time to kill. Solomon does not justify murder but there are times when God has ordained that it is right to kill, such as for self-preservation. Also, God gave man the right to kill animals for food: **<<Every moving thing that lives shall be food for you; and just as I gave you the green plants, I give you everything>>** (Genesis 9:3), although it was clearly never intended as a means of sport or entertainment such as fox hunting, or for material gain as seen through ivory poachers for example.

A time to heal. This most likely refers to the healing of broken relationships, whether between individuals or nations, which ties in with the killing during war.

A time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance. It is natural to be sad over loss, particularly the loss of a loved one or one's homeland as typified by the exiles from Judah: **<<By the rivers of Babylon – there we sat down and there we wept when we remembered Zion>>** (Psalm 137:1). Yet people also need to see that God is there in such times and that they should rejoice over the good things that he gives, even and perhaps especially during the hard times: **<<give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you>>** (1 Thessalonians 5:18).

A time to throw away stones, and a time to gather stones together. In the agricultural context of the time it was common for farmers to clear their land of

stones and rock to improve crop yields and quality. At the same time, stones were used for all types of building projects from small walls to elaborate buildings.

A time to lose. Some see this as a time to give up looking for a lost item. Others see it that there comes a time when someone just has to let go of something that was precious to them. It is true of life that things have to die in order for new things to live. This was exemplified in the sacrifice of Jesus' own life: *<<Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit>>* (John 12:24), and: *<<No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends>>* (John 15:13).

A time to hate. While love for one's neighbour is the norm for biblical ethics: *<<You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people, but you shall love your neighbour as yourself: I am the LORD>>* (Leviticus 19:18), *<<The second is this, "You shall love your neighbour as yourself." There is no other commandment greater than these>>* (Mark 12:31), *<<For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, 'You shall love your neighbour as yourself'>>* (Galatians 5:14), and: *<<You do well if you really fulfil the royal law according to the scripture, 'You shall love your neighbour as yourself'>>* (James 2:8), there is also a righteous anger that is legitimate under the appropriate circumstances: *<<O LORD, who may abide in your tent? Who may dwell on your holy hill? Those who walk blamelessly, and do what is right, and speak the truth from their heart; who do not slander with their tongue, and do no evil to their friends, nor take up a reproach against their neighbours; in whose eyes the wicked are despised, but who honour those who fear the LORD; who stand by their oath even to their hurt>>* (Psalm 15:1-4), *<<I hate the company of evildoers, and will not sit with the wicked>>* (Psalm 26:5), *<<You hate those who pay regard to worthless idols, but I trust in the LORD>>* (Psalm 31:6), *<<Do I not hate those who hate you, O LORD? And do I not loathe those who rise up against you? I hate them with perfect hatred; I count them my enemies>>* (Psalm 139:21-22), and: *<<In the temple he found people selling cattle, sheep, and doves, and the money-changers seated at their tables. Making a whip of cords, he drove all of them out of the temple, both the sheep and the cattle. He also poured out the coins of the money-changers and overturned their tables. He told those who were selling the doves, 'Take these things out of here! Stop making my Father's house a market-place!' His disciples remembered that it was written, 'Zeal for your house will consume me'>>* (John 2:14-17). The word for hate in the bible often means to 'love less'.

A time for war, and a time for peace. The justification for war is always portrayed according to which side is trying to justify their actions. Although it is often the victor's justification that prevails, history teaches that true justification can only be on the side of those who are defending what is lawfully theirs in the

sight of God. In many examples neither side has justification for the killing and destruction they cause through war or violence.

III Ecclesiastes 3:9-15 - The God-Given Task

The vanity of life causes the Teacher to reflect on what is permanent and lasting, namely, God and his sovereign ordering of human affairs.

⁹ What gain have the workers from their toil? ¹⁰ I have seen the business that God has given to everyone to be busy with. ¹¹ He has made everything suitable for its time; moreover, he has put a sense of past and future into their minds, yet they cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end.

Ecclesiastes 3:9-11

What gain have the workers from their toil? I have seen the business that God has given to everyone to be busy with. The Teacher asked the kind of question he had asked before; but this time he found an answer in the God-given tasks that God gives to each person.

Despite the repetitiveness of the natural world as also seen in Ecclesiastes 1:4-11, the Teacher can see that God has made everything suitable for its time. This sense of balance considers the poetic list in the previous section. The problem is that God has also placed eternity (that is, he has put a sense of past and future into their minds or a sense that life continues beyond this present existence), yet they cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end.

He has put a sense of past and future into their minds. The Teacher understood that man has an awareness and a longing for the eternal, and that God has put this in their hearts. It can be said that eternity is in the human heart because they are made in the image of an eternal God. The well-known missionary and author Don Richardson used the phrase future into their minds or ‘eternity in their hearts’ to describe the phenomenon of redemptive analogies in almost all aboriginal cultures. Almost every culture has traditions, customs, or ways of thinking that reflect basic Biblical truth, and these can be and are used by missionaries to explain the Gospel. This can be useful for Christians when they have discussions with people with other religious or philosophical beliefs. Start from something they believe and understand and explain the Gospel of Jesus from that standpoint.

Yet they cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end. Although God has given man a longing for and awareness of eternity, God has not revealed very much about his eternal work. This keeps the yearning for eternity alive in the heart of people as a yet-to-be-fulfilled longing.

Find out, Hebrew *matsa*, has the sense of ‘figure out’ or ‘comprehend by study’ in this verse and other places in the book; refer also to Ecclesiastes 7:14, 7:24, 7:26-29 and 8:17. The Teacher thus realises that both his desire to understand all of life, as well as the limitations on his ability to do so, have been ordained by God.

¹² I know that there is nothing better for them than to be happy and enjoy themselves as long as they live; ¹³ moreover, it is God’s gift that all should eat and drink and take pleasure in all their toil.

Ecclesiastes 3:12-13

I know that there is nothing better for them than to be happy and enjoy themselves as long as they live. Rather than becoming embittered by what God has not granted human beings (namely, the ability to comprehend all of reality), one should enjoy the gifts that God has given. In light of God’s making everything beautiful and in his gift of eternity in their hearts - then it is wise to receive the good things of this life, and to receive them as the gift of God.

¹⁴ I know that whatever God does endures for ever; nothing can be added to it, nor anything taken from it; God has done this, so that all should stand in awe before him. ¹⁵ That which is, already has been; that which is to be, already is; and God seeks out what has gone by.

Ecclesiastes 3:14-15

I know that whatever God does endures for ever. Here the Teacher escapes - ever so briefly - his ‘under the sun’ thinking. It is not the mere mention of God that brings the escape; it is also the knowledge that God is eternal and that this matters to him and everyone else throughout the ages.

The short-lived vanities of this world reveal all the more clearly the enduring work of God, to which nothing can be added. The absolute sovereignty of God and his purposes is meant to bring human beings to a sense of humble reverence of him: God has done this, so that all should stand in awe before him: <<With many dreams come vanities and a multitude of words; but fear God>> (Ecclesiastes 5:7), and: <<*The end of the matter; all has been heard. Fear God, and keep his commandments; for that is the whole duty of everyone*>> (Ecclesiastes 12:13). Refer also to the comment made on Acts 9:31.

God seeks out what has gone by. Again, this reflects a brief escape from ‘under the sun’ thinking. If God judges the heart and deeds of humankind, then everything has meaning. Kidner observed, “God has no abortive enterprises or forgotten men. Once again *Qoheleth* has shown, in passing, that the despair he describes is not his own, and need not be ours.”

IV Ecclesiastes 3:16-4:16 - Second Catalogue of Vanities

The Teacher returns to examining more of life's vanities.

IV.a Ecclesiastes 3:16-4:8 - Judgement and the Future Belong to God

Solomon appears to find all the injustice of the world quite depressing and wonders if humankind is any better off than other animals. Yet he alludes to humans being tested by God to show them that without him they are no different. The fact that people die is a further aspect of vanity. Yet Solomon also knows that God will judge both the righteous and the wicked in accordance with his will.

¹⁶ Moreover, I saw under the sun that in the place of justice, wickedness was there, and in the place of righteousness, wickedness was there as well. ¹⁷ I said in my heart, God will judge the righteous and the wicked, for he has appointed a time for every matter, and for every work.

Ecclesiastes 3:16-17

I saw under the sun that in the place of justice, wickedness was there. The effects of the fall extend to human relationships (refer to Genesis Chapter 4), and thus in a fallen world one suffers outright injustice and wickedness at the hand of other human beings. What makes this sad reality tolerable is the certainty that God will judge the righteous and the wicked: <<Many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt>> (Daniel 12:2), and: <<For all of us must appear before the judgement seat of Christ, so that each may receive recompense for what has been done in the body, whether good or evil>> (2 Corinthians 5:10), i.e. ultimately justice will be done.

Solomon looked at the world - the here and now world, apart from considering eternity - and saw that there was great evil and injustice. Instead of fair judgement he found wickedness; instead of righteousness he found iniquity. This is a significant problem 'under the sun'. If man does not have to reckon with eternity; if this life is all there is, then many of the wicked and evil people win and many good and righteous people lose. The idea of karma does not consistently work - at least not in this life.

¹⁸ I said in my heart with regard to human beings that God is testing them to show that they are but animals. ¹⁹ For the fate of humans and the fate of animals is the same; as one dies, so dies the other. They all have the same breath, and humans have no advantage over the animals; for all is vanity.

Ecclesiastes 3:18-19

Human beings are but animals in the sense that both human beings and animals die. Solomon looked at life among both humans and animals, and also compared their deaths - doing so in 'under the sun', 'absent eternity' terms. On this basis, he could say that there is little difference in the life and destiny between humans and animals. The Teacher thought of an animal dying and its body decomposing. Then he thought that by all outward appearance, the same happens to a human body. In terms of mortality, then, humans have no advantage over the animals.

This is no argument for the doctrine of annihilationism, the idea that the unrighteous dead simply cease to exist, either immediately or after some time of punishment. It is no argument for two reasons. First, Solomon spoke here as a man unconvinced of eternity and the meaning it brings to life. Second, Christians believe in what Paul wrote: <<*but it has now been revealed through the appearing of our Saviour Christ Jesus, who abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel*>> (2 Timothy 1:10). The understanding of the afterlife is cloudy and uncertain in the OT, but much clearer in the NT.

²⁰ All go to one place; all are from the dust, and all turn to dust again.

²¹ Who knows whether the human spirit goes upwards and the spirit of animals goes downwards to the earth?

Ecclesiastes 3:20-21

Who knows whether the human spirit goes upward. For the Teacher, the human spirit is a mysterious entity: while he affirms that the spirit returns to God when a person dies in Ecclesiastes 12:7, he does not know how it comes to reside in the human body in the first place: <<*Just as you do not know how the breath comes to the bones in the mother's womb, so you do not know the work of God, who makes everything*>> (Ecclesiastes 11:5). In this verse the verb 'know' has either the sense of 'to comprehend' or 'to understand completely' (as in Ecclesiastes 1:17, 7:25 and 8:16 for example), or else 'to perceive' or 'to observe' (as in Ecclesiastes 2:14 3:12 and 3:14). The reader senses that the Teacher hoped there was a different destiny for people and animals. Yet in his 'under the sun' thinking, there was no real reason to believe it - so, "Who knows?"

²² So I saw that there is nothing better than that all should enjoy their work, for that is their lot; who can bring them to see what will be after them?

Ecclesiastes 3:22

So I saw. It is true that Solomon perceived this, but he did so on the faulty assumptions of ‘under the sun’ thinking: <<***For what is our lot from God above, our heritage from the Almighty on high?***>> (Job 31:2 NIV).

There is nothing better than that all should enjoy their work, for that is their lot; who can bring them to see what will be after them? After briefly flirting with a confidence in eternity (vv.9-15), the Teacher has returned to his ‘under the sun’ thinking. Under that premise, nothing is better than for a man to accomplish what he can in this world and try - the best he can - not to trouble himself about what will happen after his death. In his ‘under the sun’ thinking, Solomon has an answer for the question, “What will happen after them?” The answer is, nothing - because death ends it all, and therefore ultimately his life has no more significance or meaning than the life of an animal.