

Ecclesiastes

Chapter 3

Ch1: We started with the Hebrew word “hebel” as it relates to vanity of vanities. We discussed “breath” as something fleeting.

Ch 2: We looked at self-indulgence, wisdom and toil; Ecclesiastes reminds us to enjoy what God has given us, they are not an end in themselves.

Chapter 3 emphasizes “seasons” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vi0Lbjs5ECI>

A reflection on the upcoming passage; These are polar opposites in a multiple of seven (which suggests the idea of completeness), and the teacher began his list with birth and death. So, a merism suggesting totality.

Side note: "It may very well be that the Bible, as organized, functions as a merism, beginning in Genesis with Eden lost and ending in Revelation with the 'New Jerusalem' gained, these two referring to the entirety of human history and representing the 'Alpha and Omega' (Rev. 21.6) of God's sovereignty. Revelation 11:17 extends merism to the triadic 'one who is, was, and is coming.' Finally, while it may be to stretch a point, it might be said that the 'Old Testament' and the 'New Testament' form a merism that represent all of God's word and the 'Bible' as totality." (Jeanie C. Crain, Reading the Bible as Literature: An Introduction. Polity Press, 2010)

Seasons

Read Ecc 3:1-8. (p554)

[Slide 2-3]

¹For 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 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.

[Slide 4] Trivia/Memory Lane: The Byrds – Turn! Turn! Turn! (1966)

[Slide 5] Blank

Discuss: What is the point of this poem?

*God determines the broad order of human events and experiences. A “Tapestry of Times”. Does not infer we will necessarily be involved in all of these.

Consider also the construction of a tapestry. From the underside, the tapestry appears chaotic, disorganized. When viewed from the front, it is beautiful. The maker of the tapestry has a wise purpose for the placement of each thread.

There is a cycle to our lives; even things we perceive to be bad have a proper place in the cycle.

A person is born and grows up, we expect that person to die at some point. When someone dies while still young, it feels out of place.

It doesn't work to plant all the time. You have to plant at the right time of the year, replenish nutrients. When the harvest is ready, we reap.

We try to avoid sadness, nervous about attending funerals. Appropriate to mourn and weep. Weeping may be a part of life, but life is not *all* weeping.

There are times when we really need to keep our mouths shut, and there are other times when we need to speak out.

Think of Job's friends – they would have comforted him more if they had just kept their mouths shut. OTOH, if we see someone being bullied or made fun of, we speak up and stand for the oppressed.

Righteous anger is legitimate under the appropriate circumstances.

Most commentators see an allusion to the practice of marring an enemy's fields by casting stones upon them, as the Israelites did when they invaded Moab (2 Kings 3:19, 25).

A time for war. We probably can all agree war is not a fun time. The US entered WWII to curtail Adolph Hitler and the rise of Nazi Germany.

Read Ecc 3:9-11 (p554)

[Slide 6]

⁹ What gain has the worker from his toil? ¹⁰ 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.

3:11 is a keystone verse with two major points. First: He has made everything beautiful in its time.

Discuss: Does what we considered in 3:1-8 seem beautiful?

Discuss: Why do you think God allows “bad” things like death and war to occur?

Discuss: What does it mean for everything to be beautiful in its time?

Remember: Our perceptions are limited; Since the Garden of Eden, humans have been seeking to define good and bad on our own terms. God tells us what is good.

The term “beautiful” is as is suitable for the occasion. Everything is fitting or appropriate for its time. Each season is to be considered as part of the whole.

Humans seem to have a tendency to “look ahead” and wish we were in a different season of life.

In his book, "Why Are We Here", Luke Dockery shared this anonymous poem:

[Slide 7]

I Was Dying

**"First I was dying to finish high school and start college.
And then I was dying to finish college and start working.
And then I was dying to marry and have children.
And then I was dying for my children to grow old enough for
school so I could return to work.
And then I was dying to retire.
And now, I am dying... and suddenly I realize I forgot to live."
(Anonymous)**

"He has put eternity into man's heart" ... we possess an innate knowledge that there is something more to life than what we can see and experience in the here and now.

Since we were made for eternity, the things of time cannot fully and permanently satisfy.

God has given the Teacher a desire to understand all of life, but God has also limited his ability to do so.

God has "set eternity in the human heart." In every human soul is a God-given awareness that there is "something more" than this transient world. And with that awareness of eternity comes a hope that we can one day find a fulfillment not afforded by the "vanity" in this world.

When we think "eternity" we usually think eternity with God. God is eternal, and directs eternity, and only through his revelation can we have some understanding of it.

Left to ourselves, life is "hebel" – impenetrable and mysterious.

Carpe Diem...seize the day. Make the most of the time we have.

Make your lives extraordinary.

Read: Ecc 3:12-13. (p554)

[Slide 8]

¹² 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.

Verse 13 is an echo of Ecclesiastes 2:24, where the same guidance is given.

Rather than becoming resentful about what God has not granted human beings, one should enjoy the gifts that God has given.

Read: Ecc 3:14-15. (p554)

[Slide 9]

¹⁴ 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.

Use what we have, live in the here and now. To struggle for anything other than harmony with this reality is to act insanely and with the utmost futility.

Instead, the only rational response to reality is to “revere him [God]” (v. 14), issuing in a life centered on God. We will be hearing this again...

(This precise advice — to revere or fear God, acknowledging that he is Creator and that we are only creatures (5:2) — will be repeated forcefully in 5:7 and in the conclusion to the whole book in 12:13: “Now all has been heard; here is the conclusion of the matter: Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man.”)

Verse 15 is an echo of Ecc. 1:9, What has been is what will be, and what has been done is what will be done, and there is nothing new under the sun.

Verses 1-8 have an important connection with the theme of the book and relate closely to what precedes and to what follows.

The significance of this section is that man is responsible to discern the right times for the right actions; and when he does the right action according to God's time, the result is 'beautiful' (v. 11)."

[Slide 10] Ecclesiastes 3:1–8 serves as a bridge between the first two chapters and the section that follows. Each day is a gift from the hand of God (2:24–26). Why? Ecclesiastes 3:1–8 explains it is because God has a reason and a time for all things.

People do not know God's timing (3:9–11), but they are called to enjoy life in the present (3:12–13) and trust in God's sovereignty (3:14–15).

Man is to take his life day by day from the hand of God (2:24-26; 3:12-13), realizing that God has a fitting time for each thing to be done (v. 1).

[Slide 11] YOLO: You only live once

YOLO IS NOT – “You only live once, so let's do some crazy and reckless things”

YOLO is rather: “You only live once, so let's take advantage of the time God has given us and make the most of it. Make the most of the season you happen to be in; eat, drink and take pleasure in our work – these are gifts from God!”

Carpe Diem.

Read Ecc 3:16-22. (p554)

[Slides 12-14]

¹⁶ Moreover, I saw under the sun that in the place of justice, even there was wickedness, and in the place of righteousness, even there was wickedness. ¹⁷ 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. ¹⁸ I said in my heart with regard to the children of man that God **is testing** them that they may see that they themselves are but beasts. ¹⁹ For what happens to the children of man and what happens to the beasts is the same; as one dies, so dies the other. They all have the same

breath, and man has no advantage over the beasts, for all is vanity. ²⁰ All go to one place. All are from the dust, and to dust all return. ²¹ Who knows whether the spirit of man goes upward and the spirit of the beast goes down into the earth? ²² So I saw that there is nothing better than that a man should rejoice in his work, for that is his lot. Who can bring him to see what will be after him?

This section talks about judgment and death. He sees wickedness and injustice, but he trusts that God is just and will bring judgment in its time.

In verse 17 we see the teacher saying that **God WILL** judge the righteous and the wicked. A future, divine event – for all.

[Slide 15]

We have the confirmation of that in Revelation 20:12 (p1041) - And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Then another book was opened, which is the book of life. And the dead were judged by what was written in the books, according to what they had done.

The fall of mankind affects all human relationships. One may suffer wickedness at the hand of other human beings. But this can be endured if one understands that God will judge the righteous and the wicked. The teacher will have more to say regarding oppression as we move into Chapter 4.

In verse 18, we see God (in the present tense) is testing the children of man “that they may see that they themselves are but beasts.” Man has no advantage over beasts in avoiding physical death.

[Slide 16](Asaph) Ps. 73: 21-24 (p486) ²¹When my soul was embittered, when I was pricked in heart, ²² I was brutish and ignorant; I was like a beast toward you. ²³ Nevertheless, I am continually with you; you hold my right hand. ²⁴ You guide me with your counsel, and afterward you will receive me to glory.

Regarding death, once breath leaves our bodies, we’re dead. There is a season for it.

[Slide 17] Ecc 3:20-21: ²⁰ All go to one place. All are from the dust, and to dust all return. ²¹ Who knows whether the spirit of man goes upward and the spirit of the beast goes down into the earth?

Here, the teacher refers to physical death – In v17, he has already stated that the righteous and the wicked will be judged, so for humans physical death is not the absolute end.

The concept of faith hasn't been explicitly stated in Ecclesiastes, but the teacher seems to be calling on us to operate on faith.

God has placed man “under the sun”, but with eternity in his heart, humankind should recognize a “beyond the sun” aspect. So from that, we infer that man is prescribed to operate “under the sun” with a “beyond the sun” perspective.

Verse 21 does not imply ignorance, it seems to be a cynical look at the matter. How to handle this verse is interpreted many ways by many scholars.

We can look at two other verses in Ecclesiastes with the similar phrase, Ecc 2:19 & 6:12

[Slide 18]

3:21 **Who knows** whether the spirit of man goes upward and the spirit of the beast goes down into the earth?

2:19 and **who knows** whether he will be wise or a fool? Yet he will be master of all for which I toiled and used my wisdom under the sun. This also is vanity.

6:12 For **who knows** what is good for man while he lives the few days of his vain[a] life, which he passes like a shadow? For who can tell man what will be after him under the sun?

We read in Proverbs 15:24 (p539), **The path of life leads upward for the prudent, that he may turn away from Sheol beneath.**

[Slide 19]

Remember Fiddler on the Roof?

Hodel: Papa, God alone knows when we shall see each other again.

Tevye: Then we will leave it in His hands.

There are many things which God alone knows. We can leave those in His hands.

Life is fleeting and hard to comprehend. Fits with our definition of "*hebel*".

This chapter closes with some guidance from the teacher:

[Slide 20]

²² So I saw that there is nothing better than that a man should rejoice in his work, for that is his lot. Who can bring him to see what will be after him?

As an end in itself, work is meaningless.

[Slide 21]

¹² 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.

Only receiving it as a gift from God gives it enduring worth.

Ecclesiastes gives us the perspective of enjoying and making the most of the season we are in.