

Ecclesiastes 3: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 00] Ecclesiastes chapter 3. For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven. A time to be born, and a time to die. A time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is planted.

A time to kill, and a time to heal. A time to break down, and a time to build up. A time to weep, and a time to laugh. A time to mourn, and a time to dance. A time to cast away stones, and a time to gather stones together. A time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing.

A time to seek, and a time to lose. A time to keep, and a time to cast away. A time to tear, and a time to sow. A time to keep silence, and a time to speak. A time to love, and a time to hate.

A time for war, and a time for peace. What gain has the worker from his toil? I have seen the business that God has given to the children of man to be busy with. 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. I perceive that there is nothing better for them than to be joyful, and to do good as long as they live. Also that everyone should eat and drink, and take pleasure in all his toil. This is God's gift to man. I perceive 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. That which is, already has been. That which is to be, already has been. And God seeks what has been driven away. 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.

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. 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. 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. All go to one place. All are from the dust, and to dust all return. Who knows whether the spirit of man goes upward, and the spirit of the beast goes down into the earth. 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?

[2 : 45] Temporality and transitoriness, the vaporous character of life, was the subject matter of chapters 1 and 2 of Ecclesiastes. In Ecclesiastes chapter 3, while temporality remains prominent, it is in the form of seasonality that it most appears. The activities listed in verses 1 to 8 are all temporary, but they all have the setting of a fitting time. The pairings of the verses are not contrast between good and bad things, or even pleasant and unpleasant things. Rather, the pairings concern contrasting times, to which fitting activities correspond. Killing, war, and even hating are not always wrong. They have their appropriate occasions. However, discerning these occasions is imperative, and one of the greatest tasks of human wisdom, as human beings so often give themselves to these things on inappropriate occasions. When the psalmist, for instance, speaks of hating those who rise up against the Lord with a complete hatred, in Psalm 139 verses 21 to 22, it is imperative that we consider carefully what kind of hatred is and is not in view, and pay attention also to its proper objects. As James Jordan has argued on several occasions, while the law presents its principles as timeless and enduring, wisdom is much more alert to that which is timely, to the right action for the right occasion. In many respects, we could argue that wisdom is timing. It has a musical character.

It's like the trained ear of the musician. The wise person has an extensive repertoire of actions and responses. They are able to make war, but they are also able to make peace. They know when to hold their tongues, but they also know the truth of Proverbs chapter 15 verse 23. To make an apt answer is a joy to a man, and a word in season, how good it is. They are people who can enter fully into the right feelings at the right times. They can weep in times of mourning. They can laugh in times of joy. They perceive the right times to abandon a cause, and the right times to take one up.

They are attentive and adaptable. There are people who can only operate, for instance, in the mode of courage and conflict, while there are others who are temperamentally circumspect to the point of paralysis. The wise person is neither. They know when courageous confrontation is necessary, and when cautious restraint and conciliation is the most prudent course of action. They are neither prisoners of their reckless courage or of an overcautious trepidation, but they perceive the time and act wisely within it.

Wisdom, then, is not just a matter upon reflecting upon what is timelessly good, but also one of deliberating about what is right, about the specific prudent actions that we ought to take in the light of that which is good in our particular situations and times. I know, for instance, that it is good to be generous and charitable, but should I give that person this gift, or should it go to some other cause? Would it be better if I refrained from giving on this occasion and gave on some other occasion instead? These are the sorts of questions of timing that wisdom needs to be concerned with.

People often confuse what is good and what is right between those values that should guide me and between what I ought to do in this specific situation. The preacher returns to this point later in the book, in chapter 8 verses 5 to 6, Whoever keeps a command will know no evil thing, and the wise heart will know the proper time and the just way. For there is a time and a way for everything, although man's trouble lies heavy on him.

There is a marriage here, as Daniel Fredericks recognizes, between divine sovereignty and human responsibility, between God who establishes the times and human beings who must act appropriately within them, discerning what is fitting and when. Human beings need to move well with the variegated seasons of life, rather than trying to overcome life's seasonality in a sort of timeless ethic.

[6 : 45] The preacher returns to the key question in verses 9 to 11, In creation, God established man to be fruitful, to multiply, to fill the earth, to subdue it, and to exercise dominion over all of its creatures. Man was created to till the ground.

Man was later cursed with toil and difficulty in that task, frustrated in his primary endeavour. God made man for this task, and he also established the seasonality of life, the movements of weeks, months, seasons, years, the various seasons of a person's life, the movements from generation to generation, the life cycle of a great kingdom or empire, the changes in geology and climate over vast spans of time. All of these things were created and established by God, and we dwell within them. We need to move with his providential direction, discerning the times and acting accordingly. Besides making everything beautiful in its time, God also has placed eternity into man's heart. Even in the changing character of life, we are not merely caught in a flux. We have a sense of what is lasting and enduring.

Human beings can have some sense of who God is, a God who is not seasonal, a God who is not transitory and does not change with the times. Nevertheless, despite the fact that we can come to some apprehension of God and his works, we can never comprehend him or them completely. God always exceeds our knowledge. He communicates himself truly to us in a way fitted to our limitations. How ought we to respond to our limitations, the limited duration of our lives and our greatly constrained capacities, by practicing joy and pursuing righteousness within our short lifespans? These are modest creaturely aspirations, but they're good nonetheless. God has given us good gifts to enjoy, and so we should eat, drink and take pleasure, appreciating the rewards of and the rest within the labour that God has committed to us. Some people reading this instruction of the preacher see it as negative or unwise advice. Eat, drink and be merry, because tomorrow we die. In the light of our mortality, hedonism is the only way to go. But this is not what the preacher is saying here. We should note that he talks about doing good. He also talks about eating, drinking and having pleasure in our toil as God's gift to man. Eating, drinking and having pleasure with thanksgiving in one's heart to the Lord was at the very heart of Israel's life. Thanksgiving, contentment and generosity are the means by which the tenth commandment is fulfilled. And with that, it's the way in which our hearts are set right, postured appropriately towards our neighbour in generosity and avoiding all envy, and related appropriately towards God in thanksgiving for his manifold gifts. In many respects, the preacher's claim here is that the good of our toil is discovered in the Sabbaths that God has given us. On the Sabbath, we perceive the beauty of things in their time. We also feed the eternity that God has put within our hearts. It's a time of eating and drinking and rejoicing in the presence of the Lord.

[9 : 49] It's a time of doing good to our neighbours. The meaning and gain for our toil is found in being people of the Sabbath. Yes, the Sabbath as a single day is transitory, but that does not mean that it's not good. Yes, the musical note is short-lasting. It sounds swiftly dying in the air. But the very beauty of the note is discovered in the temporal movement that it serves. So it is with our lives.

God's work contrasts with all of this. God's work can endure forever. Besides the fact that it's enduring, it is absolute. Nothing can be added to it nor taken away from it. Seeing the character of the work of God should lead human beings to fear him, to honour him, recognising the difference between the creature and the creator. Even mankind's greatest activities are afflicted with limitations and flaws. In the task of justice, judges and rulers act in the name of the Lord and seek to uphold his righteousness and his governance within the world. Yet in the very place where justice is supposed to be dispensed, wickedness is to be found. Perceiving this, the preacher reflects upon the penultimacy of human justice. Imperfect human justice anticipates perfect divine justice, which will be enacted upon the righteous and the wicked. There is a day when everything will come into judgment, and all of the failures of human justice will be exposed and rectified. The temporality and seasonality of life is powerfully seen in the beasts. They pass through cycles of birth, procreation and death. They hibernate, they migrate, they grow new plumage, and shed old skins. And the preacher reflects upon the fact that human beings are animals too. While we are distinguished from the animals and being the image of God, in our bodily existence we have an animal nature. And there is a very great deal about us that is analogous to the animals. If you want to understand why human beings act in the way that they do, often there are lessons to be learned from similar animals. Their brains, their hormones, their bodies, and their various systems work in much the same ways as ours do. They also sleep and eat.

They have sex and they give birth. They are born and they die. Like us, they are creatures that live with blood and breath. When we die, we decompose much as they do, and our whitened bones will not much distinguish us from them. When this fate of death will befall us, we don't know. Verse 21 is not necessarily denying the afterlife. It could be translated, who knows when the spirit of man goes up and the spirit of the beast goes down into the earth, as Frederick suggests. Later on the preacher will say in chapter 12 verse 7, and the dust returns to the earth as it was, and the spirit returns to God who gave it. It might also be a reference to the limitations of our knowledge of what comes after death. Which of us has any first-hand experience of the afterlife, of any horizon beyond our immediate lives? Verse 22 concludes the chapter by reaffirming the point that was made earlier. There is nothing better than that a man should rejoice in his work, for that is his lot. As he argued in the previous chapter, there is no telling who is going to come after us, and what they will do with our life and our sacrifices. So while we may hope to leave a lasting legacy, it is important that we enjoy our Sabbaths now.

A question to consider, where else in the wisdom literature are we taught concerning seasonality and the timely character of true wisdom?