
Times

Ecclesiastes 3:1-15

Russ Kennedy

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

We are not in control of our lives...

Everyone tries to gain or assert or lose control of their lives. But most of you realize that if you are realistic, you actually have little control over the moment by moment of your life.

Everyone struggles to have control over some small portion of their lives. Even a child who is given no choices will control their toys when they can.

Many people are frightened or frustrated over this reality. They lose the sense of the significance and value of life and living. Sometimes that leads down a deep dark cycle of depression. Other times it leads to lashing out in anger and manipulation.

The seasons and rhythms of life give order and direction to our lives...

In the midst of so much that tends toward disorder and chaos, God has instituted times and seasons. There is a time, a moment or moments, for everything. There is a season, a week, month, year for everything. This is not fate. This is not chance. This is design. This is directed. This is... Divine.

The connections of our relations give meaning to our lives...

So much of the reality of our lives is embedded in relationships. We have family relationships. We have a constantly changing circle of friends. We have relationships both within and outside of our church. We have a relationship with unbelievers. Most of the time we think of those good, strong, loving relationships.

You also have other relationships. Ones that can be described as difficult, rancorous or even possibly, hateful. The relationship that is filled with arguments, strife and anger. But it is still a relationship.

Let's listen to the beautiful poetry that is haunting and helpful in its song.

The Endless Cycle of Life (v.1-8)

God designed, even in the fall and curse, a cycle of life. In this world, things begin, exist, and end. This is not just a beautiful poem. It is meant to inform how we understand and respond to life. It is a kind of beautiful, spiritual realism.

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 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.

What is appealing in it...

What does the unbeliever find beautiful in this poem? This is often read at the funeral of unbelievers. I wonder how many hearing it even know where it is from much less understand what Solomon meant for us to hear. But the balance and symmetry of life of which *a time to be born and a time to die* appeals to people.

What does the believer find beautiful in this poem? It is understandable that a Christian hears this text and is struck by the choreography of God's sovereign providence.

What we learn from it...

What can we observe from these couplets?

The beautiful symmetries flowing in life.

Life has an aspect of art to it. It has the ugly aspects that come because of sin and its consequences. But it also has its beauty because of God's design and doing. The fall colors are beautiful. But those colors are related to the frosts that will kill the leaves. When we admire and are amazed at fall foliage, we are seeing the effects of dying. Do you think this is an accident? No, not at all. There is a greater death which will bring life that is pictured in that season.

The relentless progress of events in life.

You cannot stop or alter the reality of these seasons. If you were born, you will die. There will be times like this in all our lives. These seasons and times will simply relentlessly march through the years of our lives. Birth and death, planting and harvesting, killing and healing, destruction and building, weeping and laughing, mourning and dancing, throwing away and saving, hugging and not, seeking and losing, tearing and mending, silence and speaking, loving and hating, war and peace... these will never cease in this present reality.

The unmistakable *both/and* of life.

I have already referred to the deeply satisfying symmetries of it all. We also should observe the both/and of life. These couplets go together. Sometimes they feel like one is the destruction of the other. Often, they feel like one is the restoration of the other. Sometimes it is hard to know how to respond when experiencing both together. But life is lived in the regular rhythm and symmetry of the “both/and”.

The tragic effects of the Fall on life.

Many of these opposites were designed by God from the beginning to become realities after the sin and fall of Adam and Eve. In the Garden there would have been birth, planting, building up, advances, love and so on. But the world was designed also for what life would be after the Garden. God had appointed the seasons and times to function within the world as it is now. The Garden of Eden was designed to be temporary. This world in all its troubles and triumphs may seem permanent but is also temporary. It was God who imposed this judgment under which and in which we live.

The important recognition of the seasons of life.

To be wise, useful and compelling Christian realists in this life, we must recognize the seasons of life we are in. If we are tearing down in building up seasons, there will be conflict. If we are uprooting what was planted during the growing season, we will have no harvest. If we are caught unaware by the troubling reality and nearness of death, we will grieve without hope. If it is a time to speak and we don't, we may not serve well. If it is time to be silent and we speak, we may cause harm. The wise Christian realist living in the world as it is now, will be attune to the times and seasons and will not be depressed or in despair because of them.

The inevitable death at the end of life.

Solomon is turning up the light on how we live in such tragic seasons with hope. We do so because we will die. The most significant thing about your life is that... it will end. Understanding that, living in that reality, coming to peace with that brings a sense of significance to the moments that fly by.

The Helpful Challenge in Living (v. 9-15)

In the light of the seasons of life and living that God has established, we must think carefully and deeply about the way things are. Solomon is pressing us to be realistic but in a way that does not lose meaning and hope.

The Surprising Meaning of our Lives (v.9-11) A'

From poetry to prose, Solomon transitions with what feels like a startling and abrupt question.

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.

God has given us the daily, seasonal, life work we are to do.

There is a season of education and work. There are times of preparation and then producing. There are times where we wait and times where we go. God has ordained, even in the present fallenness a predictable, useful, profitable cycle of life. We have

seasons of rest and sleep. We have times where we establish tasks to be done. Sometimes we have freedom to choose when they are done. Sometimes we are told when they are to be done. That we live and do is from God and by God. It was His design from the beginning even the warping distortions of this time under the sun.

God has given beauty to the seasons of life.

When we recognize and respond rightly to things in their times, there is a glory, a loveliness then. Wisdom dictates that we sync our lives to the seasons God has established. But many do not. They resist and strain to be and do differently. Some may dance to a different drummer. But we should move to the rhythm of the God's times and seasons.

God has placed a sense of the eternal in our hearts.

Though we live in the passing seasons of life, we know that is not all there is. It takes an enormous effort to suppress that eternity in our hearts. Many try with all kinds of misuses and abuses. From religion, to pleasure, to science, to philosophy – many and varied are the efforts to fill inward eternity with outwardly satisfying things. The inward sense of eternity in our hearts is meant to resonate with the outward design of God so that there is an inescapable sense of the Divine Being to whom we will answer.

God has limited that sense of the eternal. We cannot discern the purposes and plans of God from the internal disclosure of Himself. It requires an external, objective revelation, namely, His Son and the Scripture.

The Temporal Nature of our Work (v.12-13) B

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. ¹³ also that everyone should eat and drink and take pleasure in all his toil—this is God's gift to man.

If we understand that the seasons, the times, the work, the life we live is a gift from God then it transforms two things.

We should be a joyful people.

This does not mean that we do not suffer and our suffering is not real. But suffering should sweeten, not sour us. True Christian joy is strong enough a river to flow from the times of the blessing of rain through the drought and desert of suffering. True Christian joy is not afraid of the real pleasures of life that God has given. Nor does it wither under the real pains that God allows.

We should take pleasure even in the temporary work and life we have.

This is one the clearest yet often missed messages of Ecclesiastes. All work, all toil, all doing that aligns with God's design and direction is good. It may be temporary. It may not last. But we are allowed, no, we are encouraged, to take joy in the work of our heads, hearts and hands.

We do so accepting them as gifts from God.

When we enjoy the gifts, we are enjoying and honoring the Giver. The true believer, even in the Old Testament, had a theology of work, of toil, of labor that joined the pleasure of daily life with pleasures of God.

If we accept joy and pleasure in life without acknowledging them as gifts from God, then we steal what is borrowed, deny what is real and self-focus our joys.

The Eternal Works of our God (v.14-15) A'

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.

Our temporal, passing life and all its joys and pleasures exist in the environment of God (v.14a). What He does is unlike our doing. His works are enduring. The significance of our lives and works does not rest in us or in the doing ourselves. It rests in the context of God. What we are doing is significant because it is enfolded into and becomes a part of the greater, eternal doing of God.

God has designed what He does to draw out fear, reverence and respect (v.14b). The fear of the Lord is the fountain from which all pleasing God flows.

Earthly pleasure without the fear of God subverts the purpose of joy in God. Reverence for God elevates our human joys to heavenly pleasures. But to enjoy all that God gives without honoring and respecting Him is to corrupt and contaminate those very joys.

Moral good without the fear of God subverts the purpose of pleasing God. Reverence for God ensures that pleasing God is not matter of law but of life. Moral obedience to God without loving fear of God is simply conforming to legislation. Respect and submission to God go together – pleasing God soars on the two wings of respect and submission.

God has set history in motion and is driving it towards His ends (v.15). Thus, the seasons of life ebb and flow in the stream of God's divine providence.

Reflect and Respond

Let us not forget, let us gladly affirm, that this is God's world. Fallen, broken, curses... full of dangers and delights, it is still His design. Christian realism affirms God's purposes in the pains and pleasures of living in this world, under the sun.

Even the unbeliever lives in God's world. Most deny it. Denying it does not change the fact. Just because the person is blind does not mean the sun is not shining.

The poetry and prose of this text, like the poetry and prose of life, gives us common ground to point unbelievers to God. There is both the common rhythm of life and the commanded respect for God. Both lead us to the larger story, the greater Real.

While it is hard to understand, the temporal work and doing of our lives and intertwined with scarlet and purple threads of God's redemptive and ruling purposes. Our passing life and somehow a part of God's eternal, unchanging doing.

Do you respond to the life God's way? Do you think of its endless round of pain and pleasure as empty and useless? Or do move through it all with deep inner joy knowing that you are dancing to the God's music?

Do you respond to God with respect and submission? Not the servile, cowering fear and compliance of the false, pagan religions. Rather, the glad and humble bowing to such a wonderful, amazing God who designed and implemented the world we live in, filled our hearts with eternity and revealed Himself in His Son and through His Scripture?

To everything there is a time and a season. In that rhythm of life, today is the day of salvation. Believe and bow to the Lord.