

August 11, 2019  
Sunday Evening Service  
Series: Ecclesiastes  
Community Baptist Church  
643 S. Suber Road  
Greer, SC 29650  
© 2019 David J. Whitcomb

## To Ponder . . .

Questions to ponder as you prepare to hear from Ecclesiastes 3:1-22.

1. What do the contrasts born/die, kill/heal, laugh/weep convey about life?
2. What is the lesson connected with this text: *I have seen the business that God has given to the children of man to be busy with (v.10)?*
3. *He has made everything beautiful in its time (v.11a).* What are the two possible interpretations of this statement?
4. If God has put knowledge about Himself in us, why don't we naturally seek Him?
5. When we perceive that God is in control of all things, how should we respond?
6. *So I saw that there is nothing better than that a man should rejoice in his work, for that is his lot.* Obviously, this is not a license to sin, so what does it mean?

### GOD'S TIMING IS ALWAYS RIGHT Ecclesiastes 3:1-22

The other day I sent a text to Robin, our IT guy, telling him that the clock for the security cameras was wrong. He replied in an email that he had reset the time and wrote, "Apparently isn't updating

automatically. Keep me posted when it loses a minute (and we do know you know when something is more than a minute off :))." My question is this: "Is that a good reputation or a bad reputation to have?" I am one of those odd people who believes that if I am not five minutes early, I'm late. Not everyone agrees with me. And not everyone is chained to a clock like I am. Surely, Solomon gives us a better way to live according to this text.

The text is about discovering God's timing. This chapter does not express all the frustration and discouragement of vanity that the preacher discovered in his experiments with life. Rather, the lesson here is the importance of learning that God is in control, He has a time for everything, His timing is always perfect, and we are wise to learn it and submit to it. Learning that God is in control and submitting to His timing is the solution to the vanity of life.

We know from experience that being in the wrong place at the wrong time is a formula for disaster. Being in the wrong place at the right time is to miss an opportunity. Being in the right place at the wrong time will also miss the opportunity. Being in the right place at the right time is where we find blessing and opportunity to learn about God's will and character. Finding the right place at the right time is the lesson of our text. When God's people fit into God's will and timing, we find meaning, purpose, and fulfillment in a life that is otherwise characterized by vanity, chasing after the wind.

If you have purchased groceries in a grocery store or ridden in an elevator (both of which are pretty likely), chances are pretty good you have heard verses one through eight of our text put to music. Pete Seeger wrote the song originally in the 1950's. But in 1965 the Byrds released the song under the title "Turn, Turn, Turn." Older folks remember it.

I have a friend who is a bit older than I am. He attended a very conservative Christian College in the late 60's. Before attending college, he had recorded jingles for a local radio station in Tennessee. He was a fairly accomplished musician, in certain genres of music, and was unsaved at the time. He pulled off the nearly impossible, his freshman year in college. As he tells the story, he asked permission to do a song for a student body event. He told the person in charge of approving the music that he wanted to sing Ecclesiastes 3:1-8. What

could be wrong with singing Scripture? However, what he sang and played on his guitar was the Byrd's rendition of the text which had been a top 10 rock song just a couple of years earlier.

The song as it appears in our text is beautiful enough as it is. We won't need a tune from birds or bees or turtles or exploding mushrooms to understand what it teaches us.

### **God Has a Time For Everything (vv.1-8).**

The scope of these first eight verses is life-encompassing. In his great experiment of life, the preacher concluded that *For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven (v.1)*. This poem presents a comprehensive view of life. It is a brief acknowledgment of what people do, not a list of what people should do. As we live, we should come to understand that God has a plan for everything under the sun. The theme in this chapter is about sorting out that plan in order to know and do God's will. It is the same truth Paul gave us in his letter to the Ephesian Christians. *For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them (Ephesians 2:10)*.

Obviously, it is impossible to assess the entire scope of life in eight verses. Therefore, we must acknowledge certain limitations in this presentation. Some people might experience all of these things. But not everyone will do all of these things. Everyone must do some of these things (i.e. be born/die, weep/laugh, etc.).

It is also helpful if we stop to consider the poetic structure of these verses before we dive into them. This is an example of *merism*. In rhetoric, this figure of speech teaches a lesson through direct contrasts. That idea should be obvious as we read through the poem:

- 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 (vv.2-8).*

At the same time, in the context of law, a *merism* can be one phrase that implies everything within the scope or context of that phrase. Or in the case of these contrasts, the wise man speaks of everything between life and death, all the feelings between love and hate, all the experiences between seeking and losing, and so on.

We might also find in this merism an illustration of the completion of God's work or the completeness of His control. Notice that the poem consists of fourteen contrasts of twos. That is two sets of seven. We generally observe that the number seven demonstrates or illustrates completeness in the Bible. As in the fact that God created all things in six days and rested on the seventh. To that end, this poem is possibly an illustration of the fullness of life, the completion of God's plan for all that we do in life.

### **This We Know About God's Plan (vv.9-15).**

We know about God's plan for life because He has given us His plan. We should take confidence that God has a plan especially in light of the reality that work can be disappointing. Again the preacher asked the question, *What gain has the worker from his toil? (v.9)*. Okay, so we experience all the various details of life. Then, we finally conclude that God has determined a right time for everything in life. But what is to be gained? This question drives us to try to figure out what God's plan is for this vast experience called life.

So, by personal illustration, I was born in a particular place at a particular time, to particular parents. Those parents raised me in various locations all within the same general geographical area. They reared me in a particular setting, with a fairly strong emphasis on religion. They sent me through the typical, normal educational system. I met a girl in that same general geographical location who also experienced a similar emphasis on religion and was educated by the same kind of school system. We married, moved 650 miles away to a religious, educational environment that is quite a bit different

than where and how we were reared. My wife I birthed and we reared three sons who repeated the above process in a very similar way. And now we are reaching the end and pause to wonder, “Why did we do what we did?” “Where was God in all of this?” Contrary to the conclusions of many of our peers, Pat and I are fully convinced that God has revealed His plan and His purpose over and over and over through our circumstances of life. We continue to discover that life is God’s business.

And work is God’s ordained business. *I have seen the business that God has given to the children of man to be busy with (v.10)*. The mention of God might alert us in this verse. It reminds us that Solomon has made scant references to God up to this point in the book. We met God in 1:13, *And I applied my heart to seek and to search out by wisdom all that is done under heaven. It is an unhappy business that God has given to the children of man to be busy with (1:13)*. Then, *There is nothing better for a person than that he should eat and drink and find enjoyment in his toil. This also, I saw, is from the hand of God (2:24)*. And, *For to the one who pleases him God has given wisdom and knowledge and joy, but to the sinner he has given the business of gathering and collecting, only to give to one who pleases God. This also is vanity and a striving after wind (2:26)*.

All three previous references appeal to the same principle as verse ten. God determines, ordains what we do in life. In 1:13 and 3:10 we also discover that work in and of itself is an unhappy experience, because we leave all our gain behind (2:18). Also, work is frustrating because there is a good chance we leave all the fruit of our labor to a fool (2:19). Or we work all our lives and give what was gained to someone who didn’t work for it (2:21). Therefore, God desires for us to turn our focus to Him and realize that what pleasure we do enjoy from our labors is a gift from God (2:24). And we need to realize that it is God’s prerogative to bless who He chooses to bless (2:26).

The great experiment revealed that in all the passing aspects of life you cannot dismiss God from the equation and arrive at a meaningful, satisfying conclusion. Finally, the preacher concludes in all his experiments that God is central to all the activity of life. That sinners refuse to acknowledge God’s centrality does not change the fact.

Therefore, our responsibility in passing life is to figure out God’s plan (v.11). The evidence will drive us to conclude that God does “Good.” He has made everything beautiful in its time (v.11a). The Hebrew word for *beautiful (yaw-fāh)* is used about forty-one times in the Old Testament, only two times in Ecclesiastes. The word speaks of things attractive, fair, beautiful, appealing. God used the word to describe the king of Tyre who pictures Lucifer with all the beauty and splendor God gave him (Ezekiel 28:7). Amazingly, the same word is used to describe Messiah in all His righteous glory (Psalm 45:2; Isaiah 33:17).

However, it is also possible to interpret the word to mean fitting or appropriate as the New American Standard Bible does in this verse. If we interpret the word that way, we conclude that God originally made everything beautiful and attractive. And God continues to manage His creation so that He makes everything appropriate and fitting according to His plan and timing. We know this!

Therefore, we need to also conclude that our consciences really do acknowledge God. *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 (v.11b)*. Everyone has a sense of eternity in his soul. Every normal human who has not seared his or her conscience has a sense of something beyond this life. Even Solomon had to conclude on the basis of experiments in passing things alone: *I perceived that whatever God does endures forever (3:14)*.

Because God has revealed His character in creation and has written the principles of His law on the human conscience, everyone is aware of God. It is as Augustine, Bishop of Hippo, concluded about God: “You have made us for Yourself, and our hearts are restless until they can find peace with You.” (Augustine)

But wait! What about the verses we studied a week ago from Paul’s letter to the Christians in Rome? There we learned, *No one understands; no one seeks for God. All have turned aside; together they have become worthless; no one does good, not even one (Romans 3:11-12)*. Other verses in the Bible teach that *since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, God gave them up to a debased mind to do what ought not to be done (Romans 1:28)*. Or in Job we read the indictment: *They say to God, “Depart from us! We do not desire*

*the knowledge of your ways” (Job 21:14).* That doesn't sound like people who have a sense of God in their hearts, a desire to search for Him.

God places a desire for Him in the human soul, but then people spend their lives searching for their own version of God, chasing gods of their imagination, trying to satisfy that longing of eternity in their souls. *They exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things (Romans 1:23).*

God has placed a sense about Him in our souls. That should make us search out His plan. What do we perceive about God's plan (vv.12-15)? The first thing we learn, according to our text, is that God's plan makes us joyful. When we begin to figure out God's plan, we should be happy and do good. *I perceived that there is nothing better for them than to be joyful and to do good as long as they live (v.12).*

This is what the preacher perceived. The word translated *perceive* is the very common Hebrew word *yada*. It has a wide array of meanings all having to do with “to know.” Often the idea is rooted in observation or experience. That fits well with the story of the preacher's experiments with life. He put to the test and observed all the supposed sources of joy and satisfaction, only to observe that the passing things of life cannot provide lasting joy.

Who determines what true joy is? Having concluded that God determines the timing and events of life, the preacher was heading in the right direction to find joy. Because our Creator created us in His image, He determines what brings us joy. And joy is found in doing good. But who determines what constitutes doing good? Solomon began his investigation seeking satisfaction in that which is called “good” [*pleasure = good*] (2:1). God is the essence of “good.” His character defines “good.” That is why we find true pleasure, good only in Him.

This conclusion impacts even mundane life that is often experienced as boring or unpleasant. When we learn that God is in control of all aspects of life, we can then enjoy God's gift of toil. The preacher concluded, *Also that everyone should eat and drink and take pleasure in all his toil – this is God's gift to man (v.13).* We have

already learned in this study that toil, work apart from a relationship with God is futile, discouraging, and disappointing. Conversely, working because it is God's plan, desire, and purpose for us gives meaning. On one hand, working for God's glory, making my work a sacrifice of praise to God, makes it enjoyable. Then, partaking of the fruits of our labor (though they are temporary) is a source of great joy. On the other hand, trying to find satisfaction in the passing things work affords always ends in dissatisfaction. Enjoying the rewards of work as “gifts from God's hand” (2:24) always brings enjoyment and pleasure.

Furthermore, when we get it into our heads that God's work is to maintain and control all things, that work generates respect in us. The preacher confessed, *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 (v.14).* Still watching, observing, perceiving and drawing conclusions, the preacher concluded that God's work is eternal. This is a reference to God's sovereign control of all things. In eternity God has “done it.” He has determined the time and outworking of all things and no one can change it, add to it, take from it.

How does that make you feel? Many people try to ignore God's control. Many professing Christians think they are taking God's control away from Him by trying to control the circumstances of life themselves. They delude themselves. They are not in control at all. Rather they are causing the same problems over and over, running into the same walls over and over, causing themselves the same pain over and over. Because God is in control and is trying to teach them through the walls, the bumps, the bruises and the pain. But controlling people are stubborn, self-centered, and quite determined.

We do far better to fear God because He is in control. God's intent for us is to admit that He is more powerful and able than we can possibly imagine. God's intent is that we would become so astonished at His control that we would be afraid to resist His power. God's intent is that we would learn what utmost respect for Him is like and practice it all the time. Respect does not treat lightly. Respect does not argue. Respect assumes God is right. Respect submits.

Another truth we learn when we admit that God is in control is that God repeats His work. *That which is, already has been; that*

*which is to be, already has been; and God seeks what has been driven away (v.15).* This means that God proves He is in control by His consistent maintenance of all things in life. But what about the phrase, *and God seeks what has been driven away (v.15b)?* God's control extends to all of our thoughts, plans, purposes and activities which, in eternity, God will reach back and pull before us as He requires us to give an accounting.

### **Conclusions About God's Control of His Plan (vv.16-22).**

Solomon, even though he was king, learned that human governance fails. Who knows that better than we do? *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 (v.16).* We expect justice and righteousness. We should because God ordains leaders to render justice. But too often the rulers and judges are corrupt and we don't get justice. Where we expect to find justice we experience wickedness instead. Righteousness should be found in God-ordained authorities. Too often it is not.

Does that bother us? Do we fret and stew? We have no need to worry about these things because God still has everything under control (vv.17-22). He is the final judge and He has already determined a particular time for all judgments. Solomon concluded, *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 (v.17).* He has a time for testing. *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 (v.18).*

More than, but connected to, coming judgment is the fact that God, in His control, determines eternal destinies. To mere, finite humans it often appears that there is little difference between humans and animals. *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 (v.19).* That is a sad conclusion. Often when a person thinks like that, he or she is willing to make huge sacrifices to save little fish, but at the same time engage in wholesale slaughter of little human babies.

It is true that humans and animals go to the same place, which is the grave. All living things die because of sin. The grave is in the ground for all. *All go to one place. All are from the dust, and to dust all return (v.20).* But what about the eternal aspect of people—that characteristic that animals don't have? God knows where the spirit goes. *Who knows whether the spirit of man goes upward and the spirit of the beast goes down into the earth?(v.21).* God knows.

Therefore, we are wise to rest in God's control. *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? (v.22)* This is the wonderful conclusion at which we should arrive when we try to figure out what life is all about. We are to work, we are to toil and labor, we are to try to achieve and leave something valuable behind. But all work and achievement is valuable only when we admit that God is in control.

Resting in God's control allows us to enjoy the blessings He gives. Resting in God's control gives us great confidence when we see His hand moving, shaping, changing in divine activity. The only way for us to find joy in this life is to rest daily in the assurance that life is not about me, my plans, and my desires, but about God doing what He desires to do with me and through me.