

A Proper Time for Everything

 Ecclesiastes 3:1-13

 Pastor Jeremy Thomas

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 fbgbible.org

 Fredericksburg Bible Church

107 East Austin Street

Fredericksburg, Texas 78624

(830) 997-8834

Turn to Ecclesiastes, often known as Qohelet, which means “the Teacher.” It is Solomon who is our teacher and he is teaching us by negative example in his later years, after his wives turned him aside from the Lord and turned him toward idols. And during that time he lived by the flesh and tried humanism to the nth degree and he has come back to us with this report, inspired by the Spirit of God to teach us how not to live life, how not to think, because many people think that they can find meaning and significance and ultimate satisfaction in this life without God. But here is a man who had every resource on the planet, trillions of dollars, every luxury life could offer, lovely garden parks, twenty or thirty mansions, 700 wives, 300 concubines, his own personal theatre group, whatever he wanted whenever he wanted it, and he ended up completely disillusioned and empty. So the lesson is a negative one, don’t do this because it won’t fulfill you. You can only be fulfilled when you put God at the center of all your activities.

Now last time we analyzed Solomon’s final analysis concerning pleasure and whether pleasure will ultimately satisfy, fulfill and give meaning to life in 2:12-17. Here he analyzed what would happen to all his wealth after he died. The issue is that he had worked hard for all his wealth and he didn’t get to enjoy it all himself, as the fruits of his labor, and so now it would go to his heir and who knows whether he will be wise or a fool. Even the prospect that it would come under the control of a fool caused him to fall into total despair. All this wealth would now go to someone who didn’t work for it and would quite possibly be an idiot. Thinking about this only resulted in Solomon having painful days and sleepless nights. And so he concluded that the whole question of inheritance led to just vanity.

But we came back and analyzed this from the NT and found that the issue of inheritance can be dealt with in the way that God deals with our inheritance. He’s a perfect Father, so it follows that Father knows best. What He has done is divide our inheritance into two aspects. One aspect is given to all His children. That’s 1 Pet 1:3-5, “an inheritance imperishable, undefiled and will not fade away, reserved in heaven.” The second aspect is given to all His loyal children. That’s Col 3:23-25, “do your work heartily, as for the Lord...knowing that from the Lord you will receive the reward of the inheritance” whereas those who do not “will receive the consequences” for not, which is loss of that aspect of inheritance. So we could construct wills for our children that have these two

aspects of inheritance, and we can train them in these things so they know what we expect of them even after they have left our home, because the Scriptures implore children to honor and respect their parents until they die, not until they leave the home. So the child still has obligations to the parent beyond childhood and so there is are also still parental expectations into adulthood. The other corrective we discussed was the importance of knowing your children. Solomon didn't know his children. He didn't even know if the heir to his throne would turn out to be wise or a fool. He neglected his fatherly duty. When you do that because you are so busy building your business and acquiring a fortune for yourself, you end up dying and giving all this money to your children, who are most likely very foolish, and now what are they going to do with it? They're going to waste it. So this section gives us some things to think about as far as our personal relationship with our children and inheritance.

In 2:24-26 Solomon is reflecting on the first experiment after he had repented at the end of his life. So this is when he had put God back at the center of his life and we know this because we see him finally mention God for the first time. His conclusion in 2:24 is that the best you can hope for in this life is just to be able to eat and drink and find something each day in your labor that is good. He says, this is from God. If you have greater expectations than that in life your expectations are just going to be dashed, because really, that is all there is this side of eternity. In 2:25 he makes clear that no one can eat and drink and have enjoyment without God. Oh, people can put on a face, they can dress in the best clothes, drive the fanciest cars and travel the world, but really, deep down underneath the surface, there's no joy, no lasting satisfaction, no meaning to all that. And the reason is because you can't get that apart from God. In 2:26 Solomon contrasts the believer who receives wisdom, knowledge and joy from God, with the unbeliever who goes on acquiring and collecting in order to do what with it all? Quite possibly just hand it over to a moron. He says this is vanity. It's a waste of time. So the simple conclusion to Eccl 1-2 is to just have the right perspective on life. Put God at the center and look at the world as it truly is, as a fallen, temporary dwelling place, where our greatest expectation should be to simply have a good meal and find a good thing or two here or there in our labor. It's the simple pleasures in life that are all we can expect and hope for, and if we are content with that we will find the most amount of joy possible in this life. Thus says "The Teacher."

Today we come to the third section of the book, Ecclesiastes 3:1-5:20. Here Solomon is not using experiment as his mode of investigation, but he is using observation. He's observing the human life and these are general observations he made about life. Unger said, "Up to this point Solomon had resorted to experimentation to prove his thesis of the vanity of all things in the old creation under sin. Next he turned to observation."¹ The verses we will look at tonight are probably the most well-known verses in Ecclesiastes and I've thought of them often. There's a time to give birth and a time to die...a time to weep and a time to laugh and so forth and so on. How many times have you thought of this section? And yet what are some of these expressions talking about? What is this section about? This section is apparently difficult because the commentaries take a number of different approaches. Some of this is due to the confusion about whether Solomon is viewing life from the human view point or the divine view point and some of it is due to the proper translation of some of the Hebrew

words and some of it is due to just not knowing what expressions like “a time to cast stones” meant in Solomon’s day. But for reasons I’ll point out, I’m going to take the approach that 3:1-10 are Solomon’s view of life from the human view point and in 3:11-15 he gives some analysis from the divine view point. And what he seems to be saying is that our lives are so ordered that it seems that everything that happens happens at the right time, even though you are often doing the exact opposite of what you did previously, so that there is no ultimate benefit, and yet the timing is so apparently right that you think you can find out the meaning of your life, but it ultimately evades you. And I’ll try to explain this better, but it’s hard to follow Solomon’s argument.

In 3:1 we have Solomon’s thesis stated, in 3:2-8 we have his thesis illustrated, in 3:9-10 he gives his conclusion from the human view point and in 3:11-15 his conclusion from the divine view point. In 3:1 his thesis is stated: **There is an appointed time for everything. And there is a time for every event under heaven—** Now it’s important to understand this verse correctly because it’s the thesis and therefore everything in 3:2-8 is understood in light of the thesis. The NASB translation has a number of shortcomings. The first thing we want to see is that Solomon is setting up a chiasm. A chiasm is a literary structure or pattern. Solomon had a very firm grasp on language, figures of speech and patterns. He wrote thousands of proverbs and songs, many poetic, and verses 2-8 are a poem. So there are a number of figures of speech he employs in this section and the first thing he does with language in verse 1 is set up a chiasm. A chiasm is a pattern frequently used in Scripture. Roy Zuck, in *Basic Bible Interpretation*, said, “In a chiasm, elements one and four in one or more verses are parallel in thought, and points two and three are parallel in thought.”² In our verse, the Hebrew states element one as “everything” which is parallel to element four, “every,” while element two is “appointed time” which is parallel to element three, “time.”

The next thing that’s important to see is what these words mean and how they should be translated. The two words for time differ in signification. The first word, translated **appointed time**, is used in Nehemiah 2:6 when the king asked Nehemiah, “How long will your journey be, and when will you return? So it pleased the king to send me, and I gave him a definite time.” The words “definite time” refer to the duration of the journey and the time of his return, and so from the beginning of the journey to the end of the journey. The illustrations in 3:2-8 reflect this concept of time. Verse 2, “A time to be born and a time to die, a time to plant and a time to uproot what is planted...,” both of these are beginning and end statements with some duration of time in between. The second word in 3:1, translated simply as **time** has many meanings, but the best in context is “proper time” or “appropriate time.” The point with this word is to say that, generally speaking, these things seem to happen at the proper time. Verse 3, There’s a proper time “to kill” and a proper “time to heal,” a proper “time to tear down” and a proper “time to build up.” So that not only is there a beginning and an end, but the timing of the beginning and end seems proper, it just seems right, which is strange when you reflect on your life. Why is that?

The next word we want to look at is translated **event** in the NASB. This word really has the idea of “activity.” Solomon’s observations are about every human activity. And he’s not looking at every human activity from the

divine view point, but from the human view point, because he says “every activity” **under heaven**, that is, from the merely human point of view. And yet, from the human point of view he noticed something strange, and this is his thesis, every activity we engage in, generally speaking, seems to begin at the proper time and end at the proper time, it all seems just right. And why that is is never answered from the human view point, there’s something missing in that equation, and he will tell us why by the end of it, but for now, just looking from the human view point, isn’t it strange that things that happen in life just seem to happen at the right time? I would state Solomon’s thesis in 3:1 this way, “For every human activity there is a beginning and end; and there is a proper time for all these activities from man’s point of view.” And in that there is a truth. Man has seen the truth. But it has not led him to ultimate truth.

Now in verses 2-8 he begins to illustrate his thesis and prove it. This is the formal beginning of Solomon’s poem as you can tell from the different typeset in this section of your Bible. Since it is poetry he is using many figures of speech common to Hebrew poetry. The major figure of speech is called merism. A merism is “a figure using polar opposites to encompass everything in between, that is, totality.”³ For example, in v 2, the figure would mean that not only are the moment of birth and death in view, but the whole life between birth and death. Solomon used fourteen merisms in vv 2-8, two in each verse, and the two in each verse seem to be related. I’ll try to show that. Some are easy to decipher and others are unclear, simply because we don’t have enough information about Solomon’s culture. But we can make general application of each of these, there’s no hard and fast things he’s referring to. He means for us to apply these principles to all sorts of situations in our lives. Glenn said, “Though the exact meaning of some of these “activities” is uncertain, Solomon intended to affirm that *all* a person’s activities, both constructive and destructive, and *all* his responses to people, objects, and events happen in their [proper] times.”⁴

In 3:2 the first and second merisms relate to the beginning and ending of life. The first is **A time to give birth and a time to die** obviously refers to the beginning and end of a human life, but it could also refer to animal life. The second merism in 3:2 **A time to plant and a time to uproot what is planted** refers to the beginning and end of plant life. There is a proper time to sow in order to get germination and a proper time to uproot the plants after the harvest so that there is no more fruit. Both relate to the beginning and ending of a life and when they happen appears to be just right.

In 3:3 the third and fourth merisms relate to destruction and construction. The third is **a time to kill, and a time to heal**. Solomon is not talking about murdering humans, there’s no proper time for that. The word **kill** is different from the word used in the Ten Words, “You shall not murder.” So he’s probably talking about **a time to put down an animal versus a time to heal an animal**. Man makes a determination based on the condition of the animal. But there could be other valid applications. The fourth merism in 3:3 is **A time to tear down and a time to build up**. This probably refers to the tearing down of a home or building of some kind. Buildings get old and there comes a proper time to tear them down. Also there is a **time to build up** a new home or building. In the

end, both merisms in verse 3 relate to destruction and construction. The time for each seems right in a man's mind. But why is that? Especially when they contradict.

In 3:4 the fifth and sixth merisms relate to sadness and joy. The fifth is **A time to weep and a time to laugh**. The point is that specific occasions call for a specific response. We might weep at a funeral and we might laugh at a wedding. There is a proper time to **weep and a proper time to laugh**. That is just the way life is. The sixth merism in 3:4 is **A time to mourn and a time to dance**. Again, there is a proper occasion for such responses. We might **mourn** at a time of war; we might **dance** at a time of peace. There are many applications. But the point is there is an appropriate time for sadness and joy.

In 3:5 the seventh and eighth merisms relate to sexual activity. In 3:5 is **A time to throw stones and a time to gather stones**. Suggestions as to this practice are many. The Jewish Targums refer to clearing the ground of loose stones before gathering stones for building on the site. Other suggestions are that they threw **stones** in order to clear a field for planting, while at other times they gathered **stones** in order to build walls or buildings. But it's possible when coupled with the next merism that in the sexual act there is a time to cast one's seed on the ground, so there is not a baby, but there is also a time to not cast one's seed on the ground. The eighth merism in 3:5 is **A time to embrace and a time to shun embracing**. It is clearly related to sexual affection. Sometimes it is the right time to show affection to your spouse and other times it is not the right time. In any case, both merisms in verse 5 probably relate to sexual activity.

In 3:6 the ninth and tenth merisms relate to material things. In 3:6 there is **A time to search and a time to give up as lost**. Sometimes we should keep on searching for something lost and other **times** we should just **give up as lost**. The tenth merism is **A time to keep and a time to throw away**. Sometimes it's time to keep something, such as to remember, and other times it's time to throw the thing away. Both merisms relate to material things. The decision is individual and there are reasons for both and a right time for both. Why the time to keep something at one time seems right and time to throw away at another just seems strange. But somehow you just know.

In 3:7 the eleventh and twelfth merisms relate to sadness and joy again. In 3:7 **A time to tear apart and a time to sew together**. This probably refers to the Jews practice of rending their garments during times of intense grief or repentance. There is a time for this, just as there is a **time to sew together** new garments. The twelfth merism in 3:7 is **A time to be silent and a time to speak**. Sometimes it is best to just be quiet and say nothing whereas other times it is best to say something. Both relate to a time for sadness and joy. And each time seems proper.

In 3:8 the thirteenth and fourteenth merisms relate to personal and national emotions. In 3:8 **A time to love and a time to hate**. There are times when it is right to **love** and other times when it is right **to hate**. Some might think that it's always wrong for a believer to hate, but we are to **hate** injustice, lies, deceit, etc... The fourteenth

merism in 3:8 is **A time for war and a time for peace**. This looks at a nation's situation. Sometimes it is the proper **time for war**, when injustice and evil are prevailing, and other times it is **time for peace**. But both relate to personal and national emotions and each seems proper in its time.

Now in verse 9 he draws some conclusions to his thesis from the human view point. The thesis from his observation is that all things in human activity seem to take place at the proper time, and while that is true, what remains an enigma is that these all are totally opposite to one another. How can it at one time be right to build and at another time destroy what was built? How can it be right to look for something at one time and to stop looking at another? And yet it is, and so he concluded in 3:9, **What profit is there to the worker from that in which he toils?** In other words, nothing ultimately lasts that man toils for. He builds something, he destroys that something. He is born, he dies. He laughs, he weeps. It's just one canceling out the other. So what net gain is there to all of man's work which he toils day in and day out to accomplish something?

So he concludes in verse 10, **I have seen the task which God has given the sons of Adam with which to occupy themselves**. The sense of this statement is as it was in 1:13 and 2:23 and 26, that this **task** God has given us is toilsome, difficult and fatiguing. And yet we are occupied with it. We can't detach ourselves from it. We want to understand. We want to figure out our lives, what they are about and where they are going. This is a task God has given the sons of Adam. He hasn't given this to animals. Animals don't care about figuring out the meaning of their lives. They are just looking for the next blade of grass. Constable said, "... one thing that elevates us above the animal world, in addition to the God-given sense of eternity [v. 11], is the desire to understand the whole. This accounts for all science, philosophy, and human knowledge, as well as theology." Animals don't engage in those areas. They eat, drink, poop and run around according to their behavior. But here we are, man, and we are occupied with figuring it all out. And Solomon says, it's a grievous task because it seems to all make sense at the time but then we do the opposite and it makes nonsense.

Now that is looking at human activity from the human view point. And ultimately the end of that is mystery and frustration. So now in 3:11 Solomon turns to address this enigma from the divine view point, at least as far as he could see, but we'll look farther by turning to the NT.

In 3:11 he turns to the divine view point saying, **He has made everything appropriate in its time. He has also set eternity in their heart, yet so that man will not find out the work which God has done from the beginning even to the end**. The word **appropriate** is sometimes translated "beautiful," and the sense here probably is "beautifully fit," in the sense of fitting together. Everything in life just seems to fit together. It really is beautiful if you think about it. What some people see as chance occurrence they usually really detect is marvelously ordered. The reason is because God is over all human affairs. He is shaping and organizing history all the time such that it all fits together.

Then Solomon adds, **He has also set eternity in their heart, yet so that man will not find out the work which God has done from the beginning even to the end.** The controversial word here is the one translated **eternity**. There are three views of this Hebrew word. The first is the most common view that the Hebrew word *ilam* is a corruption of the word *olam*, for **eternity**, and so **eternity** is original. If this is correct, Kaiser said, "This quest is a deep-seated desire, a compulsive drive, because man is made in the image of God to appreciate the beauty of creation (on an aesthetic level); to know the character, composition, and meaning of the world (on an academic and philosophical level); and to discern its purpose and destiny (on a theological level)...Man has an inborn inquisitiveness and capacity to learn how everything in his experience can be integrated to make a whole." I'm not inclined to think this is the correct understanding of this word, though the concept is true. This was my desire in college, as a believer, and this is the verse that was first used by my father-in-law as the theme of the first Bible study we were doing at his home after I met Robin. What I wanted to know was how does every area of life integrate into a whole and make sense of it. What's the unifying principle of the cosmos? And the answer I found was the revelation of God in Scripture, that the Scriptures begin with creation because intrinsic to creation is a goal or aim to which history is moving, which is the establishment of His kingdom and rule on the earth through man made in His image for His glory. And if that is the proper understanding, then the point of this verse would be that, from the humanist point of view, you can never figure that out, you can't see what the purpose of it all is, you can't see where it's going. You want to, and you are occupied with it, most of science, philosophy and theology are all on this quest to figure it out, but without divine revelation in Scripture you can never figure out **what He has done from the beginning even to the end.** That's the first view.

Another view is that **eternity** is from the Hebrew word meaning "darkness," which would refer to ignorance. In other words, "God set ignorance in man's heart so that man would not find out the work which He had done from beginning to the end." In this view, Wallace said, "Thus the verse would mean that God has "obscured" man's knowledge so that he cannot discover certain features of God's program." This is ultimately similar to the first view except in this view Wallace points out that at the end of verse 11, what man wants to know is not the whole purpose of the cosmos, but the purpose of his own life **from the beginning even to the end.** And the reason he makes that conclusion is because the context is about man's life, a time to be born and a time to die, a time to tear down and a time to build up. Man is just trying to figure out the meaning of his life in this context. And I do find that contextually, this is better than the previous view of man searching for the entire meaning of the cosmos. So perhaps "darkness" or "ignorance" is the best translation of verse 11, but certainly what man wants to find out in this verse is the meaning of his life and why it is ordered the way it is.

The third view is that **eternity** is from the Arabic root for "knowledge" so that "The point would be that God has endowed man with "knowledge," but not enough for man to discover God's eternal plan. This approach is only rarely adopted: "knowledge" (YLT)." In this case man would again be unable to figure out his life apart from God. That certainly is also true.

It's in this spirit that Solomon simply concludes in verse 12, **I know that there is nothing better for them than to rejoice and to do good in one's lifetime; moreover, that every man who eats and drinks sees good in all his labor—it is the gift of God.** So just enjoy life as much as you can was Solomon's conclusion, and do good to others, knowing that relaxing over a meal and finding some good in your labor is the gift of God. Now that's true, as far as it goes, but Solomon never looked beyond history. He never looked beyond the boundaries of your life to eternity.

And with that said, the NT corrects this limited view in two ways. First, it tells us the purpose of our lives, living and dying, loving and hating is to glorify God in all we do. Turn to Rom 11:36. In this passage, Paul revealed that you can only see the broad outlines of what God is doing in history, you can't understand all the details because those things are beyond searching out. But he concluded this in verse 36, "For from Him and through Him and to Him are all things. To Him be the glory forever. Amen." His conclusion is that we know that all that he is doing is for His glory. So our lives should be lived for His glory. That is the ultimate purpose of God for history. It is a doxological purpose, a wonderful purpose. The dedicating of our lives to the glory of God then, is how we should live. Now when we do it results in the second corrective. Second, there is profit beyond the grave. Solomon said there is no profit. But living for the glory of God pays dividends in the form of rewards in the eternal state. This point of view takes us beyond the temporal. Solomon just looked at our lives, our activity in this life, he never looked beyond that. It was all about life under heaven, life here on earth. But if we look at it from beyond the earth, in heaven, I think we see that there is profit to our work. All the passages about rewards contribute to the corrective. Jesus said, "Store up for yourself treasure in heaven, where no thief comes near nor moth destroys." How do we do that? We live for His glory. How do we do that? We live by the Spirit and not the flesh. In this world all we produce in the flesh goes to corruption. But in this world all we produce by the Spirit goes into a treasury in heaven that is dispensed to us in the form of reward in the resurrection. So we do experience a wide range of opposite experiences that seem to cancel one another out as having any profit in this life, but when we look beyond that and think about the fact that He is taking account of what we are doing by the Spirit, then we can see that there are rewards that He is planning to give us. So what we do in this world, or rather, how we do it, our motives, the source of our doing it, all that is taken into account by God, whether it brings glory to Him or not, and He rewards us accordingly.

¹ Merrill F Unger, *Unger's Commentary on the Old Testament*, 1081.

² Roy Zuck, *Basic Bible Interpretation*, 138.

³ Biblical Studies Press, *The NET Bible First Edition*; Bible. English. NET Bible.; *The NET Bible* (Biblical Studies Press, 2005).

⁴ Donald R. Glenn, "Ecclesiastes," in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures*, ed. J. F. Walvoord and R. B. Zuck, vol. 1 (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1985), 983.