



Sunday School Lesson for February 1, 2004.
Released on January 30, 2004.

Study Ecclesiastes 3:1-15. A Time for All Things
Questions and answers below.

TIME: about 950 B.C.
PLACE: Jerusalem

Ecclesiastes 3:1-15

- 1 To every thing there is a season, and a time to every purpose under the heaven:
- 2 A time to be born, and a time to die; a time to plant, and a time to pluck up that which 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 get, and a time to lose; a time to keep, and a time to cast away;
- 7 A time to rend, 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 of war, and a time of peace.
- 9 What profit hath he that worketh in that wherein he laboreth?
- 10 I have seen the travail, which God hath given to the sons of men to be exercised in it.
- 11 He hath made every thing beautiful in his time: also he hath set the world in their heart, so that no man can find out the work that God maketh from the beginning to the end.
- 12 I know that there is no good in them, but for a man to rejoice, and to do good in his life.
- 13 And also that every man should eat and drink, and enjoy the good of all his labor, it is the gift of God.

14 I know that, whatsoever God doeth, it shall be for ever: nothing can be put to it, nor any thing taken from it: and God doeth it, that men should fear before him.

15 That which hath been is now; and that which is to be hath already been; and God requireth that which is past.

Lesson Background

The book of Ecclesiastes is not often studied in our churches and Sunday schools. As a result, we have missed many of the valuable lessons it has to teach us. In some ways it presents a rather pessimistic and even cynical view of life. Yet these very elements make it most worthy of study, for many of the views expressed in this book are as prevalent today as they were when Ecclesiastes was written three thousand years ago.

In the book of Ecclesiastes, Solomon described the emptiness of life apart from God. He wrote about this in order to challenge his readers to realize that real meaning in life cannot be found except through knowing God and His ways. He explained his struggles to find a proper world view, endeavoring to fit all the pieces of life's puzzle into a meaningful whole. In his search he discovered that a world view that does not rise above the horizon of man himself is useless and meaningless, leaving a person empty.

This life is full of questions and perplexities. Ignoring God results in many unanswered questions and unresolved problems. Knowing and understanding God, however, results in a meaningful and joyful life, for He is the Creator of all life and the One who sustains and guides us through it. While Ecclesiastes is a record of Solomon's search for this meaningful life, it was written to emphasize the joy that accompanies a person who finds it.

Discussion About Time (Ecclesiastes 3:1-8)

1. What does Solomon mean by "To everything there is a season..." (v. 1)?

Solomon introduces a series of contrasts of things that may be observed in nature and in a variety of human activities. The seasons are not limited to the four seasons of the year, but apply to a whole range of activities that people are engaged in or observe.

We should not conclude that every earthly pursuit apart from a spiritual context is worthless or wrong. As Solomon thought about it, he realized that many of the daily events of life are divinely appointed and will happen without any planning on our part. In the normal events of nature, for example, everything has a beginning and an end. In the course of things, unpleasant and painful situations will arise, but those too are under the controlling hand of God.

"Blind fate would be a terrible consolation, but how comforting it is to know that the events of the universe are ordered by a compassionate, gracious, long-suffering, faithful God. If tragedy strikes, we have but to wait patiently for the hour of redemption . . . Everything is ordered by God, without any dependence upon man's approval, at a divinely appointed time, according to God's plan and providence" (Criswell, *The Believer's Study Bible*, Nelson).

2. What is the first example given showing that life contains certain events that are beyond our control (v. 2)?

The first example given in this series of contrasts pairs the beginning of life with the end of life. Every person has experienced birth and, barring the return of the Lord, will experience death. Modern medicine has made it possible for premature babies to survive. Medicine is able to extend life expectancy, yet all of us will still experience the birth-death cycle.

All the other activities the writer uses fall between these two events. The first is a recognition that there is a time to plant. Those living in an agricultural economy are keenly aware of this, and that planting time is not the same for all crops.

There is also a time to pluck up those crops. Annual crops must be harvested or plowed under. Even trees that are set out have a definite life span depending upon the species, and in the cycle of life must eventually be cut down and disposed of.

Further, there is a time to plant and uproot in a nonagricultural sense (see Jeremiah 1:10; 4:3; Matthew 13:24-30). Knowing just when those times come requires spiritual wisdom.

3. What did Solomon observe about human behavior (vs. 3,4)?

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 times."

Killing and healing are activities in which God has designated some amount of human control. Judges sentence to death according to law, and soldiers kill the enemy to protect a country. Doctors, on the other hand, do all they can to heal those who are diseased or wounded. Both building and tearing down buildings are normal, because the ravages of time necessitate the replacement of crumbling structures.

The two phrases in Ecclesiastes 3:4 are parallel in thought, with the first half of each phrase referring to expressions of sorrow and the second half referring to expressions of happiness. We understand the logic of these expressions, for there are occasions when laughter and dancing would be out of place and other occasions when weeping and mourning would be completely out of character. For example, laughter would never accompany the giving of bad news, and mourning would have no place in the joy over the birth of a baby.

The ancient Israelite people do not hesitate to display their emotions. Mourning over a death, for instance, often follows definite rituals that include hiring professional mourners as seen in Jesus' day (Mark 5:38-41). Dancing is often a part of a wedding ceremony. It can also be an act of religious devotion, as in the case of David when the ark of the covenant was returned to Jerusalem (2 Samuel 6:14).

4. Why was the observation about casting and gathering stones meaningful to Israel (v. 5)?

An interesting command to Israel relative to their enemies can be found in II Kings 3:19. God said, "Ye shall . . . mar every good piece of land with stones." In a different set of circumstances a farmer who wanted to cultivate a field filled with stones would have to remove them by gathering them. Either of these activities was good, depending on the circumstances.

Another interpretation is that this describes clearing the ground of small stones in preparation for building and the gathering of larger stones to use in the construction.

Not every time and place is proper for the showing of affection, but the showing of affection is important in human relationships. Israel's society was much more concerned about this than ours is. The next phrase, referring to getting and losing (v. 6), seems to mean searching and stopping the search. The Hebrew word translated "get" means to search out something, implying striving for it. The word for "lose" means to wander away, in other words, to stop the search. We often determine such activity by the circumstances and by common sense.

The same is true of keeping something or throwing it away. Since it is not possible to hoard everything, we must be wise in finding the right time for getting rid of things.

5. What wisdom did Solomon share concerning dealing with others (vs. 7,8)?

The Israelite culture included the regular practice of tearing clothes when mourning. This makes God's statement in Joel 2:13 meaningful: "Rend your heart, and not your garments, and turn unto the Lord your God: for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and of great kindness, and repenteth him of the evil." This first part of Ecclesiastes 3:7 thus may refer again to mourning or grieving (v. 4).

Sometimes we fail to recognize that it is better to remain silent and patiently wait for the right time to speak. Age and wisdom know this better than youth and immaturity. It is impressive to read in the book of Job that Elihu remained silent during the entire discourse of Job with his three friends. Only after they had concluded did he speak.

A perfect example of the wise use of silence is given in Proverbs 26:4,5: "Answer not a fool according to his folly, lest thou also be like unto him. Answer a fool according to his folly, lest he be wise in his own conceit." There is a time to remain silent, and there is a time when speaking out is necessary.

Loving and hating as well as war and peace have their places. God serves as an example in that He loves sinners but hates the sins they commit. We too should love those who desperately need to know the Lord, but we should not become involved in their sinful activities in order to reach them. Verse 8 in our lesson text has what is called a chiasmic structure (A B B A). Love and peace go together, as do hate and war. They are clearly opposite and therefore effectively close Solomon's list with emphasis on the extremes we find in life.

From Time to Eternity
(Ecclesiastes 3:9-15)

6. What question did Solomon pose as a pivotal thought (v. 9)?

Solomon began this book with a statement and a question: "Vanity of vanities, saith the Preacher, vanity of vanities; all is vanity. What profit hath a man of all his labour which he taketh under the sun?" (Eccles. 1:2,3). He then explained his search for meaning in life by looking at cyclical events (vs. 4-11). In chapter 2 he detailed his search through pleasure, hard work,

and the accumulation of wealth (vs. 1-10). He concluded that "all was vanity and vexation of spirit, and there was no profit under the sun" (v. 11).

Once again Solomon had reflected on events in life, realizing that for everything there is a specific time and purpose (Eccles. 3). Once again, however, he arrived at the conclusion that something was missing. Even though a worker follows the normal pattern of life and all its divinely appointed activities, something more is needed to

make his life profitable. The implication in the Hebrew word behind "profit" (v. 9) is something that excels. Life is full of activity; but the question really is, What makes it truly excellent and meaningful?

Solomon came to realize that the activities themselves do not reach the intended goal. In the verses to come, he brought God into the scene.

7. How did Solomon's realistic attitude help examine and evaluate the activities of life in verses 10 and 11?

In verse 10 Solomon mentioned that he had come to grips with how mankind is supposed to examine and evaluate the activities of life. We must be careful not to allow this passage, taken in isolation, to cause us to become cynical. Elsewhere, Solomon notes the importance of work (Ecclesiastes 3:22; Proverbs 14:23; 21:25). So does the apostle Paul (2 Thessalonians 3:10).

Work, properly approached, provides us with purpose and a sense of fulfillment. Our creative work benefits both others and ourselves. When Solomon asks, "What profit hath he that worketh in that wherein he laboreth?" we can answer nothing! if a person works merely for selfish, this-worldly purposes. But for a person whose work lays up "treasures in heaven" the "profit" is great indeed! (See Matthew 6:19-21).

We are not expected to simply live life without understanding. Because of the many inexplicable events that are part of it, we are to use life to search for the truth and meaning God wants us to find.

In verse 11 Solomon specified some of the process involved in searching for that truth and meaning. First is the fact that God has made everything beautiful in its time (v. 11). The Hebrew word translated "beautiful" here seems to mean "appropriate." Every activity of life has an appropriate time in God's plan. This points out the providence of God in planning each thing that occurs. Nothing that happens is accidental; nothing catches God by surprise.

Second, God has put eternity in everyone's heart. A study of the word translated "world" (v.11) reveals that Solomon was thinking of that which is eternal, concealed from us beyond the world we know. In every heart there is a desire to know what is beyond this life, even though many ignore it and even deny the existence of God.

Third, Solomon said that no matter how hard we try, no one can ever understand all the works of God. We know He is here and is in control of everything, but we do not have the capacity to mentally grasp the vastness of His doings. This leads many to conclude that life is confusing and meaningless. Those who leave God out of their lives, however, will never understand life.

8. What are we to do about our lack of ability to comprehend (vs. 12,13)?

Solomon answered that the best thing for us is to rejoice and do good. God has given us the gift of eating, drinking, and enjoying all that we engage in. In other words, we should stop worrying about the things we cannot comprehend and focus on and enjoy the good things God allows. God does not intend for us to understand everything, but He does desire that we have joy as we trust Him to control the circumstances of life.

We are all familiar with giving and receiving gifts. The purpose of a gift is to show someone that we appreciate him, think highly of him, and love him. The result we desire from him is enjoyment of the gift. Solomon said that enjoyment in whatever we do on this earth is the gift of God. His purpose is not to make us sad and depressed but rather to allow us to enjoy all the good things He sends our way.

Granted, not every circumstance in life is pleasant, but when we recognize God's hand in such circumstances, we can experience joy.

In November of 2001 Lisa Beamer, wife of Todd (killed on United Airlines Flight 93 on 11 September), addressed a group of women. After explaining some of her feelings, she said, "We're left with choices about what we will do with these feelings. The choices for people like me-and for many of us in this room-are to look at all the things we've lost or to look at all the things we have; to become bitter or to become better; to live in fear or to live in hope. I've chosen to live in hope" (Let's Roll, Tyndale).

9. What was Solomon's final observation about God's workings (vs. 14,15)?

The work of God is eternal, perfect, and immutable. Everything He does will endure forever. Nothing can be added to what He does; nothing can be taken away. The reason God is this way and works as He does is so that people will revere Him, knowing He is in complete, absolute control (v. 14). This is emphasized by the fact that nothing is new for God. He controls all things, as is seen in the repeating cycles of events (Eccles. 1:9).

The phrase "God requireth that which is past" (v. 15 of today's lesson) is a difficult one to translate. Some think it means God requires cyclical events to return again and again. Some interpret it as saying God's government never changes but remains constant. Others think it warns us that God is going to require of us an accounting of how we have viewed and handled life, especially as to whether or not we have included Him in it.

Although we may not be able to determine the precise meaning here, we can certainly draw from it that God's control is eminent. He is the beginning and ending of all reality, and what happened in the past was just as much under His control as anything that will ever happen. It is wise, therefore, to commit ourselves to obey Him and to center our lives around Him.

PRAYER

Almighty God, although we live in a world that is wracked with decay and destruction, let us not fall into the throes of gloom and despair. Give us the vision to see beyond all these things. Remind us again that a day is coming in which You will set all things right. In Jesus' name, amen.

THOUGHT TO REMEMBER

"The Lord is my rock, and my fortress, and my deliverer" (Psalm 18:2).

ANTICIPATING THE NEXT LESSON

Our lesson next week reminds us to remember our Creator, especially when we are young. Study background Scripture: Ecclesiastes 11,12.

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