



Sunday School Lesson Summary for April 30, 2006
Released on: April 27, 2006

"In God's Time"

Background Scripture: **Ecclesiastes 3:1-22.**

Printed Text: **Ecclesiastes 3:1-17.**

Devotional Reading: **Psalms 34:1-8.**

Time: between 971 and 931 B.C.

Place: Judah

Golden Text: "To everything there is a season, a time for every purpose under heaven" (Ecclesiastes 3:1 NKJV).

LESSON TEXT

Ecclesiastes 3 (New King James Version)

Everything Has Its Time

1 To everything there is a season,

A time for every purpose under heaven:

2 A time to be born,

And a time to die;

A time to plant,

And a time to pluck 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;

A time to embrace,

And a time to refrain from embracing;

6 A time to gain,

And a time to lose;

A time to keep,

And a time to throw 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 of war,
And a time of peace.**

The God-Given Task

9 What profit has the worker from that in which he labors? 10 I have seen the God-given task with which the sons of men are to be occupied. 11 He has made everything beautiful in its time. Also He has put eternity in their hearts, except that no one can find out the work that God does from beginning to end.

12 I know that nothing is better for them than to rejoice, and to do good in their lives, 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 whatever God does,
It shall be forever.
Nothing can be added to it,
And nothing taken from it.
God does it, that men should fear before Him.**

**15 That which is has already been,
And what is to be has already been;
And God requires an account of what is past.**

Injustice Seems to Prevail

16 Moreover I saw under the sun:

**In the place of judgment,
Wickedness was there;
And in the place of righteousness,
Iniquity was there.**

17 I said in my heart,

**" God shall judge the righteous and the wicked,
For there is a time there for every purpose and for every work."**

LESSON AIMS

After participating in this lesson, each student will be able to:

Learn that God is sovereign and in control of all that happens in the universe.

Be aware that yielding to God's will provides believers with a framework by which to evaluate life experiences.

Trust God in order to find meaning for your existence.

INTRODUCTION

We live in a microwave generation. It seems that mankind is constantly in a rush to get something done. We are a very impatient bunch; and our attention span gets shorter by the moment. I remember having read a cartoon years ago that showed in one panel several adult characters who had just been involved in an automobile accident. As each of them lay sprawled throughout the intersection, the text balloons above their heads showed their off-the-wall thoughts. One woman wondered what

she would fix for dinner that night. Another man thought about meeting a project deadline at work; and so on. The crash had occurred only seconds earlier, but their thoughts were now on other less urgent matters. We will learn in today's lesson that God's timing is perfect and that we must learn to rely on Him when the world gets dark and crazy-as it is now rapidly becoming. We must turn our attention to Him, and know that we are operating on His time, and not the other way around.

We learn in Romans 8:28 that "all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose" (NKJV). The ungodly may have a fatalistic philosophy, concluding that things just happen and nothing can be done to change them. Those who love God can see situations develop and conclude that He has a plan for them and is implementing it.

A common saying is that one can curse the darkness, or light a candle to dispel it. Our approach to life determines how we evaluate the various experiences we have. This lesson from Ecclesiastes teaches us that we must anchor ourselves in God and let all the pieces fall into place in due time.

LESSON BACKGROUND

Along with its opening verses and its closing command, the best-known part of the book of Ecclesiastes-which was written by Solomon; "the son of David, king in Jerusalem" (Ecc. 1:1, 12, 16)-is the "there is a season" passage (Ecc. 3:1-8). Its description of the many contrasting phases of life has struck a chord even with the irreligious.

What accounts for this passage's popularity? It seems to appeal to people's need for consolation and peace amid the changing circumstances of life. The idea taken from the passage by many is that since life is full of changes, we simply need to enjoy it as all there is.

Most people, even believers, look at this passage without much attention to its context. In truth, Solomon was teaching something quite different from what popular understanding would have us believe.

The most significant difference in understanding is that God, not man, is at the center of Solomon's teaching. It is God who orders our lives and brings about changes. The passage is not really a celebration of life's variety but a reminder that without God it is just a profitless round of activities (see Ecc. 2:26; 3:9).

God has set "the world (eternity)" (Ecc. 3:11) in our hearts. We are to experience what He sends as tokens of His love and as an encouragement to look to Him as the only answer to our longings.

QUESTIONS

God Appoints All That Happens-Ecclesiastes 3:1-8.)

1. What does Ecclesiastes 3:1 teach about all the events that happen in the world?

Contrary to the notion that the book of Ecclesiastes sets forth the pessimistic ideas of a man writing "under the sun," this verse really declares that there is an underlying purpose to all that happens in this world. The key is what our starting point is. Without God we cannot make sense of life. But if we acknowledge Him, then we can interpret all that happens through that lens.

The psalmist declared, "My times are in Your hand" (Psalms 31:15 NKJV). It is clear from the context of Ecclesiastes 3:1 that there is a proper time for everything that happens in the world because God has made it so. The very assertion of purpose presupposes a Purposer. Believers can take comfort in the fact that a powerful and loving God is directing our lives.

2. With what fundamental contrast did Solomon begin in verse 2?

Solomon began his list of fourteen pairs of contrasting events that sum up the experience of living in this world. He began with the most fundamental contrast of all--between life and death. God determines when we come into the world and when we will leave it as well. He sets the boundaries of the duration of our lives. The realization that death is an irrefutable part of existence in this fallen world should greatly affect our priorities and choices. Because our life will not live forever, we should not live as if it will--centering all our hopes on this present world. Jesus reminds us, "For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world, and loses his own soul?" (Mark 8:36 NKJV).

3. How should we understand the statement that there is "a time to kill" (Ecc. 3:3)?

There may be some who reject the notion that there is ever "a time to kill." Of course, without the presence of sin in the world, there would not be the horrible violence we read about in our newspapers. We also know that God is not the author of sin. On the other hand, we would not want to give up the precious doctrines of God's sovereignty and providence over all that transpires. Somehow, all the activities of man, whether constructive or destructive, ultimately serve to advance His purpose.

Many believers would argue that there are some occasions when killing is necessary, whether in self-defense or in the case of executing murderers or the killing of enemies during a government-sanctioned war. It is also important to heal, even in the places of killing, perhaps as America sought to do in the countries of Germany and Japan after World War II.

4. What are some of the time when it is appropriate to cry?

Most of us would rather never have to cry, unless we are crying tears of joy. But in God's providence, He sees fit to sometimes bring sorrow into our lives. Sometimes the weeping will involve sorrow over sins-whether our own, those of loved ones, or those of the nation. It was for the nation that Jeremiah became known as "the weeping prophet."

However, God is not some kind of cosmic killjoy. He actually delights in sending joy to His people. Contrary to the thinking of some sour-faced religious zealots, God enjoys His people's laughter. There is "a time to laugh," and God sends it.

God also sends times of mourning into our lives. When a loved one dies, it is only fitting to feel sorrow. It is not healthy or right to think that believers should never show that they are sad. We will naturally mourn when anything precious is lost or when we realize that a cherished goal will go unrealized.

On the other hand, God also sends times of great joy-when celebration or "dance" is called for, perhaps like what David did when the ark of the covenant returned to Jerusalem (see 2 Samuel 6:12-15). Of course, what we celebrate tells us much about ourselves and what we value in life.

5. To what may the gathering or throwing away of stones refer (Ecc. 3:5)?

God not only controls the boundaries of our lives and the seasons of life that mark our time on earth, but He is also sovereign over our possessions.

The throwing away and gathering of stones has been variously interpreted. One prepared a field for planting by clearing away stones, and in wartime one would gather up stones or strategically place them to damage an enemy's fields. But, some believe the reference is to the tearing down or constructing of buildings. Still others, taking the second part of the verse into view, feel it has to do with the gain or loss of friends. Whichever of the views we adopt, the overriding principle remains the same: God is superintending all that we have in life and what we do with it.

6. What are some of the contrasts that mark our relationships?

There obviously is some overlap between the various contrasts listed in this passage. We must be careful about trying to impose a rigid organizational pattern on them. The concluding contrasts in the list, however, do point to the fact that God controls the course of our human relationships-a subject touched on in verse 5.

Whether we like it or not, God brings times of confrontation and struggle into our relationships. Sometimes there are hard times even between friends. Proverbs 27:6 reminds us, "Faithful are the wounds of a friend, but the kisses of an enemy are deceitful." Sometimes we are doing the best thing for someone when we send a tough message leavened by a loving heart.

There are other times when we are given the task of reconciliation, of mending fractured relationships. This requires humility and often a willingness to forgive.

7. What is required in order to use our tongues properly?

Another area of God's sovereignty in relationships concerns the tongue. There are times when God calls upon us to remain silent. At other times He wants us to speak up. It takes much wisdom to be able to know which of these times it is at any particular moment. As Matthew Henry (b. 1662, d. 1714; English clergyman, writer, and sermonist) declared, "It is a great part of Christian prudence to know when to speak and when to hold our peace."

8. What does God mean that there is a time to hate (Ecc. 3:8)?

Considering the reference to war and peace that follows this verse, "hate" could refer to the outward enmity that is expressed in wartime. We should also remember, however, that the psalmist referred to hating unrighteousness and, on a couple of occasions, its practitioners (see Psalms 119:104; 139:21-22). Both in reference to war and to the cause of righteousness, hate seems to be wholehearted opposition to evil and to what opposes God's rule.

God Desires That We Turn to Him (Ecclesiastes 3:14-15.)

9. Why does God send so many contrasts into our lives?

No one season of life lasts forever. It is as if God were reminding us that earthly things are not an end in themselves. And, they aren't. Only the Lord gives them meaning. Hallelujah! He has given us a longing for meaning and a relationship with Him, but we cannot figure out how things work according to His plan (vs. 11). We must simply accept what He sends and be grateful (vs. 12-13).

In contrast to the ever changing world, God's purposes and plans are eternal (vs. 14). Therefore, it makes sense that we should turn to Him as the reason for living.

10. In what way should man have fear before God?

The fear spoken of in verse 14 is not a servile terror, but rather a reverent attitude that reflects a true consideration of God's greatness and character. In His love and grace, God desires a relationship with His creatures. He created the world as a place for man to exist in grateful fellowship with Him. He wants us to live in this world with our eyes set on Him.

Ever since the Fall (of Adam), however, man has sought to take on God's role for himself (see Genesis 3:5). In this effort man and woman are, of course, continually frustrated. "Nothing can be put to," or added to, God's purposes, and nothing can be "taken from it," either.

CONCLUSION

Far from being without importance, the events of life have lasting significance, for God can call the past to account ("requires an account of what is past" Ecc. 3:15

NKJV). This is an allusion to God's judgment on what man does with his time on earth (see Ecc. 3:16-17; 12:13-14).

Man-made reasoning, including philosophy, often appears to give structure to life's meaning, but it falls short of success at various points. What all believers need is an outlook not only structured by good reasoning, but also one that is rooted firmly in revelation. People can be wrong in their philosophies, but God is never wrong in His revelations. As we experience the contrasts of life, may we always seek to please our Maker.

PRACTICAL POINTS

God has appointed the time for all events; nothing happens that is not in His plan (Ecc. 3:1).

Life and death, health and sickness, building and destruction are balanced in God's plan (vs. 2-3).

Joy and mourning offset each other to enrich our lives (vs. 4).

Gain and loss are means God uses to balance and equalize the people of His creation (vs. 5-6).

Peace and conflict are balanced in history to avoid the extremes of apathy and chaos (vs. 7-8).

The more things change, the more they stay the same; progress does not change our basic condition or relation to God (vs. 14-15).

THOUGHT TO REMEMBER

Experiences in life might seem to be haphazard and confusing, but our steps are ordered (or ordained) by the Lord when we follow His master plan for us.

PRAYER

Dear Lord, thank You for your dominion over our lives and over all Your creation. You are so in control! May we realize that You are not governed by time, but that time was created by You for Your creation's benefit. May we find assurance in knowing that everything works together for our good because we love You and because we are chosen by You. We are grateful that what the enemy meant for our harm, You have turned to our good. Hallelujah! How joyful we are that You do all things so very well, and that redemption through Jesus Christ was lovingly thought out a long time ago to bring You glory and to bring a dying human race to Yourself. Thank you for loving us so and for doing things in Your perfect timing. It is in Your precious name that we pray-amen.

ANTICIPATING NEXT WEEK'S LESSON

The next and final four lessons of the quarter are based on selected texts from the book of Proverbs—a collection of statements made by Solomon and others that became part of the biblical wisdom writings.

The first seven chapters of Proverbs contain a father's words to his son, and the first lesson comes from chapters 2 and 3. Solomon made it clear that true wisdom begins with reverence for God. True wisdom is a lifelong search that is well worth pursuing.

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