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THE QUESTIONS AND THE QUEST:

THE QUESTION OF TIME

ECCLESIASTES 3:1-15

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3:1-15 – THE QUESTION OF TIME

Introduction to the Text

Time, what is time? In a technical sense, time is the continuous progression of existence that occurs in apparently irreversible succession from the past to the present, and into the future. This is what clocks record – the chronological and progressive advancement of existence. The word “season” is also used in Solomon’s inquiry of time; however, he is not referring to weather but providence. In biblical Greek, there are two words for “time.” There is *chronos*, which is the measurement of time, the chronological advancement of time in the technical sense. However, there is also the word *kairos*, which is translated as “opportunity,” “right time,” or “appointed time.”¹ In this sense, the word refers to God’s timing, or providence. The Septuagint – which is the Greek translation of the Old Testament – uses the word *kairos* in Ecclesiastes 3:1-9. Correspondingly, the Hebrew words *zeman* (season) and *ret* (time) follow the same pattern, chronology and providence. In Ecclesiastes 3:1-15, Solomons’ inquiry consists about chronological time, God’s sovereignty over the seasons and times in the lives of people, and how man can enjoy his time here on earth.

Review. In the previous pericope (2:12-18), the assumption is that goal of wisdom is the preservation and flourishing of human life. The question here is, in essence, “If wisdom fails at accomplishing this goal, then what’s the point of wisdom?” Let’s just be honest; death is not preservation or flourishing. Death is death, to be frank. So, it seems wisdom cannot accomplish the very goal for which it seeks to serve.

Preview. Solmon, after several failed inquiries into meaning and purpose

¹ Ezra 10:14; Neh 2:6; 10:35; 13:31; Est 9:27; 31

under the sun, gives concession to God when inquiring about seasons and time. God is in control of the seasons of life a person goes through and time itself. This shows the matchless power of God. However, in his goodness, God makes “everything beautiful in its time,” and graciously informs us that we can have joy, do good, and take pleasure in our life’s work (3:12-13) through the seasons that God brings us through. If the previous pericope called for our acceptance of the reality of death, the current section describes how to enjoy the various seasons leading up to death: *seeing them as a gift*.

Theological focus. Solomon’s focus is on time and seasons of life that people experience under the sun. There is an apparent appropriateness to each of these times or seasons through the course of one’s life. Solomon then exhorts man to enjoy his limited time on earth, and then there is God’s sovereign control over time. We might have tendency to read Ecc 3:1-9 and think these are events that people choose to do but miss the fact that these events that God does too (Ecc 3:14-15).

However, we would be missing the picture if we understood the times and seasons in life as simply things that people do – weep, mourn, laugh, dance, plant, pluck up, ect. It is God who is behind everything because these are “divine actions before they are human activities.”² Solomon’s poem in 3:1-9 uses the word “time” 27 times (4x7), over the 14 lines (2x7) of the poem. The number seven is the biblical number for completeness, and this indicates that Solomon, without having to name every instance that occurs in time, is addressing the totality of time and circumstances that people encounter in their lives.³ To put it another way, God does everything at just the right time. This is far from a teaching that man is subject to a fatalistic life. Rather, it teaches

² Ryken, *Ecclesiastes*, 81.

³ Greidanus, *Preaching Christ from Ecclesiastes* (William. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2010), 72.

that everything has a “fitness” to what happens.⁴

Structure. The structure of 3:1-8 consists of two patterns, a chiasm with the inner brackets addressing the time and seasons of life, and outer brackets addressing their scope. Then the poem consists of pairs of opposites.⁵

Structure of Ecclesiastes 3:1	
A	For everything (3:1a)
B	there is a season (3:1b)
B'	a time (3:1c)
A'	For every matter (3:1d)

Structure of Ecclesiastes 3:2-7			
verse 2	+ giving birth	2	- dying
	+ planting	2	- uprooting
verse 3	- killing	4	+ healing
	- tearing down	4	+ building up
verse 4	- weeping	4	+ laughing
	- mourning	4	+ dancing
verse 5	+ throwing stones	4	- gathering stones
	+ embracing	4	- refrain from embracing
verse 6	+ searching	4	- giving up searching
	+ keeping	4	- throwing away
verse 7	- tearing apart	2	+ sewing together
	- being silent	2	+ speaking

Structure of Ecclesiastes 3:8	
A	time for love (3:8a)
B	time to hate (3:8b)
B'	time for war (3:8c)
A'	time for peace (3:8d)

⁴ Ryken, *Ecclesiastes*, 81.

⁵ Barrick, *Ecclesiastes*, 63–64.

The first verse forms a chiasm which focuses on God's sovereignty in the times and seasons in the lives of people. Ecc 3:2-8 follows a structured pattern consisting of pairs of opposites. Ecc 3:2-7 exhibits a 2/4/4/2 pattern, which can be seen by the positive (+) and negative (-) expressions of each time or season. The final verse forms a chiasm. All of this provides a structured and organized approach to Solomon's inquiry of time. In the second section of the pericope, there is then a focus on the business that God has given to men to be busy with (3:10-13), then there is a meditation of God's sovereignty and providence over time (3:14-15).

Exposition of the Text

The clear implication of this poem in Ecc 3:1-9 is that humans are bound by time and divine appointments which they do not control.⁶ This implicit truth will be made explicit in Ecc 3:10-15. Humanity can rest easy in the sovereignty of God knowing that God "has made everything beautiful in its time" (Ecc 3:11). This is the key to enjoying life in which we are not sovereign, possess total autonomy, or can exercise self-determinism. Enjoyment under the sun consists in trusting the times and seasons God has for you.

Ecclesiastes 3:1-9

Ecc 3.1 – A season and time for everything. Solomon asserts there is a "time" for everything. Time here is not simply the chronological progression of events, but the divine ordering of events of a sovereign God. Humans can no more determine or manipulate the meteorological seasons of the globe than they can the circumstantial seasons of their life, or the lives of others. Further, there is an orderliness to God's

⁶ Jordan Wesley Jones and Christopher R. Pasarella, *Ecclesiastes and Song of Songs: A Commentary for Biblical Preaching and Teaching* (Kregel Ministry, 2024), 93.

timing. Birth comes before death, planting comes before plucking up, tearing comes before sewing, and so forth. While that can be seen as logical and plain to our minds, it is only logical and plain because God has made it so.

Ecc 3.2 – A time to be born and to die. Birth and death are universal experiences that everyone will experience, and they serve as the bookends of human existence under the sun. When Solomon describes this, everyone can immediately identify and resonate that we have a certain amount of time; bracketed by life and death. We see the same truths regarding Jesus. There was a time for him to be born, “when the fullness of time had come” (Gal 4:4). He also knew when it was time for him to die (Jn 12:23-27; 13:1; 17:1; Acts 5:1-11) for the ungodly (Rom 5:6). But Jesus goes further, he also rose at the right time – on the third day (Lk 24:45-46; 1 Cor 15:4). So, while humans are given a time to be born and a time to die, those who have repented of their sins and put their trust in Christ will be resurrected in God’s timing, which is “at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we shall be changed” (1 Cor 15:51-52).

A time to plant and to pluck up. In an agricultural culture, this would have been a universal experience for Solomon’s readers with clearing and planting fields. Theologically, this language is also applied to God’s people. The language of planting symbolizes God establishment and covenant with Israel (2 Sam 7:10; Ps 80:8-15; Isa 5:1-7; Amos 9:15; Eze 36:33-36). The language of plucking up or uprooting symbolizes judgment and destruction (Jer 1:10; 12; 14-17; 45:4; Deut 29:18-28). Jesus knew when it was time to plant. He said, “I am the vine, you are the branches” (Jn 15:5). He was using his disciples to “replant the vineyard of the people of God.”⁷ Jesus compared the kingdom of God is compared to soils where seeds were sown (Matt 13:1-9). Jesus also knew there was a time to pluck up, or harvest (Matt 9: 35-38; 15:13; Lk 13:6-9).

⁷ Ryken, *Ecclesiastes*, 83.

Ecc 3.3 – A time to kill and to heal. The Hebrew verb *harog* means “to kill,” and is a general term. It could have been used to describe murder (2 Ki 9:31), legal execution (Deut 13:9), or even taking life from plants (Ps 78:47). English has a range of technical words such as assassinate, murder, premeditated murder, manslaughter, involuntary manslaughter, and other ways to delineate intent and culpability. Often times the Hebrew, however, requires we discern the meaning of “kill” from the context. So, what does Solomon intend when he uses the word? Murder? Legal execution? Manslaughter? Does he speak of humans killing humans? Animals killing animals? Humans killing animals? Does he speak of sentient life, or plants? The answer, it seems, is that Solomon is speaking to all the possibilities of these instances. Throughout the Bible, God affirms necessary times to kill (Gen 9:6; Josh 6:17; Rom 13:1-7) and to heal (2 Chron 7:14; Isa 53:5; 1 Peter 2:24). Jesus’ earthly ministry was a time to proclaim good news, liberty, healing, and the Lord’s favor (Lk 4:18-19). With his second advent, Jesus comes “inflicting vengeance” on unbelievers. They will “suffer punishment of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord” (2 Thess 1:5-10; Rev 9:11-16). Ultimately, this is all under the superintendence of God’s sovereign hand and timing (Deut 32:39).

A time to break down and build up. It is best to understand this in a general sense. Most anything in this life can be torn down or built up. In the Old Testament, the idea of “breaking down” often happened in the context of war, as when breaking down the walls of a city.⁸ After a battle, a city could be rebuilt, or “built up” (Neh 4:6; Isa 61:4; Eze 36:33-36). Jesus also knew there was a time for the temple to be broken down, both the tables of those who were seeking to profit off God and the temple itself (Jn 2:19). Yet, there was also a time when he was going to rebuild the temple and his church (Jn 2:19-21; Matt 16:18).

⁸ 2 Ki 14:13; 2Chron 25:23; 26:6; Neh 4:3; Job 16:14; Ps 60:1; 80:12; Isa 5:5.

Ecc 3.4 – A time to weep and laugh, mourn and dance. In the Bible, mourning and dancing are social activities in which people commiserate over lamentable circumstances or joyful occasions. In the Bible, laughing is an expression of joy, but often the joy in the context of a promise that has been fulfilled (Gen 21:1-7; Ps 126:2; Lk 6:21). It also displays a light heart that trusts God regarding the future (Prov 14:13a, 31:25). The concept of mourning is expressed most often for funerary grieving (Job 1:20-21; Lam 5:15), but also other lamentable circumstances; particularly sin.⁹ Dancing is reserved for celebration.¹⁰ There are times when it is right to weep, and there are times when weeping is right but should be moderated (2 Sam 19:1-8). There are times when failing to mourn is wrong (1 Cor 5:2).

Ecc 3.5 – A time to cast away stones and gather stones. What it means to “cast away stones” and “gather up stones” is not certain, and several proposals have been made by various scholars and authors. It could be the accumulation and distribution of wealth,¹¹ casting stones to make a field unworkable during warfare (2 Ki 3:19, 25), clearing a field of stones to prepare the soil (Isa 5:1-2), or the use of stones as counters to record the number of sheep in a flock (Lev 16:8-10).¹² Rabbinic tradition suggested that this is a euphemism for intimate contact, however such an interpretation seems “arbitrary.”¹³ It seems best to understand the saying as destroying (casting stones) and cultivating fields (gathering stones) during battle. Also, Jesus knew when to cast stones, and when to hold them. In one of the most well-known narratives in John’s gospel, there is a woman who is caught in adultery and brought before Jesus. They ask

⁹ 1 Cor 5:2; 2 Cor 12:21; Jas 4:9; Rev 18:11, 15, 19

¹⁰ Exod 15:20; Jer 31:3-4, 13-14; Ps 149:3; 150:4; Job 21:11; Jud 11:34’ 2 Sam 6:14

¹¹ Provan, *Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*, 88.

¹² Garrett, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*, 14:298.

¹³ Michael V. Fox, ed., *Ecclesiastes*, 1st ed, The JPS Bible commentary (Jewish Publication Society, 2010), 21.

her if she should get stoned according to the law of Moses. Jesus' famous response was "Let him who is among you be the first to throw a stone at her." Each man, being convicted in his own mind of his sin, walked away. Jesus held his proverbial stone (John 7:53-8:11).¹⁴

A time to embrace and refrain from embracing. Embracing can have platonic connotations (Gen. 29:13; 33:4; 48:10), or sexual connotations (Song 2:6; 8:3; Prov 5:20). The idea of refraining from sexual embracing is supported during time of ceremonial uncleanness (Lev 18:19), during times of war (2 Sam 11:11), and during times of mourning (Zech 12:12-14). Similarly, the New Testament knows of a time to embrace and a time to refrain from embracing (1 Cor 7:5).

Ecc 3.6 – A time to seek and to lose. We are not told what is being sought or lost, but this too is a universal experience. What is rendered as "a time to lose," would most clearly be translated as a "time for letting go"¹⁵ or to "give up as lost."¹⁶ This more clearly conveys the idea that there is a time to seek after things, and there is a time to give up on seeking something. Who has not sought something and eventually had to give up on finding what was lost? Jesus came to seek and save the lost (Lk 19:10). Jesus also sought his wandering sheep and would even leave the 99 sheep to seek the single sheep that was lost (Lk 15:3-7; Matt 18:12-14). However, Jesus also knew when it was time to give up on those he called to follow him. On the sermon on the mount, he warned his listeners not to "cast their pearls before swine" (Matt 7:6). When he sent out the 70, he told them that:

"... if anyone will not receive you or listen to your words, shake off the dust from your feet when you leave that house or town. Truly, I say to you, it will be more

¹⁴ This portion of Scripture is very likely not inspired; however, it has been included in the tradition of Scriptures.

¹⁵ Heim, *Ecclesiastes*, 186.

¹⁶ Ludwig Köhler and Walter Baumgartner, *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*, ed. M. E. J. Richardson (Brill, 2001).

bearable on the day of judgment for the land of Sodom and Gomorrah than for that town” (Matt 10:14-15).

This is a reminder to us to be judicious and prayerful when we are seeking those who need to the gospel and to discern when to “let go” of those who are rejecting the message of the gospel.

A time to keep and to cast way. The latter half of this verse makes a similar statement with asserting there is a time “to keep, and a time to cast away.” The word “keep” also carries the meaning of “guard,” or “watch over” (Ps 25:20). In this sense, the most important things we can keep are Jesus’s commandments (Jn 14:15-24).

Conversely, there is a time to cast away. This underlines the fact that nothing in this world is ours to keep forever. Everything under the sun will eventually be “cast away.” The term is emphatic; it has a force to it. It is not simply something that was lost, but something that was deliberately removed from our lives. While there is wisdom in exercising this so that our houses may not be filled with clutter, it also carries a spiritual sense to it. When a person repents of their sin and turns to Christ, there are many things that were once adored that must now be cast away. Some things that must be cast away are in the category of sin (Matt 5:29-30), and some are cast away so that one may not be hindered from growing in maturity (1 cor 13:11).

Ecc 3.7 – A time to tear and sew. The word “tear” has several connotations in the Bible, such as repentance when tearing garments (2 Sam 3:31; Isa 64:1), to cut out (Jer 22:14; 36:23), or split in half (Isa 4:1; 1 Ki 11:11-13). The word “sew” is not used frequently in the Old Testament (Gen 3:7; Eze 3:18; Job 16:15). The meaning of tear and sew should not be taken metaphorically, but as a common experience of mending various things throughout life. In keeping with the theme of timing, Jesus also uses the analogy of sewing and tearing to explain to that there is a proper time for both, and the timing can be critical (Lk 5:36-39).

A time to keep silent and to speak. There is a time to “shut up,” (Job 13:5,

Jud 18:19; 2 Kings 2:3) and a time to “speak up” (Isa 62:1; Isa 20:9; Est 4:14). In other words, there’s a fine line between being a prophet and a jerk (Prov 29:11). Wisdom knows where that line is (Ps 141:3). Knowing when to lay your hand on your mouth is a theme in Ecclesiastes¹⁷ and the rest of the Bible (Jas 3:1-12). Exercising wisdom in this regard can spare someone from embarrassment (Prov 17:28) and even physical assault (Prov 10:14; 18:6; 30:32-33). Jesus also knew when it was time to speak, and when to keep silent. The prophet Isaiah wrote that Jesus “was afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth” and he was “like a sheep that before its shearers is silent, so he opened not his mouth” (Isa 53:7). This prophecy was fulfilled when Jesus stood before Herod (Lk 23:9) and Pilate (Matt 27:12-14). He also knew when it was time to speak even revealing himself as the promised Messiah (Lk 4:21). May God give us the wisdom to exercise silence when needed, and to speak up when boldness honors the Lord.

Ecc 3.8 – A time to love and hate. We tend to want a flat, one dimensional, God. In other words, we want to be able to understand everything about God. We can get a sense of how this can manifest in each one of us when we read a verse like this, and the Bible says there is a time to “hate.” Yet, logically, God’s hatred is part of his holy character. Because he is holy, he hates sin.¹⁸ His people are also commanded to hate the sin that God hates, because believers to be holy as he is holy (1 Pet 1:16). B

A time for war and peace. There is a relationship between the words in this verse. While love and hate are emotions, peace and war are sociopolitical conditions.¹⁹ The feelings of love and hate precipitate the sociopolitical conditions of war and peace, just presented in reverse order in the second half of the verse.²⁰ Since there is never

¹⁷ 5:1-7; 6:12; 7:5-6; 8:2-4, 17; 9:3, 17-18; 10:3, 12-14, 20

¹⁸ Prov 6:16-19; 8:13; 13:5; Ps 5:5; 11:5; 26:5; 97:10; Zech 8:17; Hos 9:15.

¹⁹ Garrett, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*, 14:298.

²⁰ Jones and Pasarella, *Ecclesiastes and Song of Songs*, 97.

going to be a time where man expels all hate from his heart, there is never going to be a perfect peace on the earth, hence there is an appropriate time for war. Biblically, there are many examples of God leading Israel into war, and God himself is even characterized as a warrior (Exod 15:3). As Christians, the primary and ongoing war in our lives is with sin (Rom 7:23, 8:13).

3.9a. The logical conclusion and question, given the observation that man is not in control of time, is what do people actually “gain” from all their labors given that life and its patterns are set well outside of the human boundaries of control? In other words, if God places limitation on these, what’s the point of laboring toward knowledge and personal gain? There are appropriate times for every season, every action, and every point in life. Man is subject to what God has appointed, and only God can know the perfect response in all seasons. Man’s lot is to accept that lot and enjoy the gifts of God that he has given to man.

Ecclesiastes 3:10-15

The following section makes explicit what the poem in Ecc 3:1-9 implied: God has set time and knowledge boundaries that are beyond the scope of human manipulation and control.

3.10. Whereas the natural forces of earth that were mentioned in the opening chapter: the wind, the sun, the streams, and now the seasons – their manifest master is revealed as God himself.²¹ No groundhog will dictate to God when the winter season ends. Moreover, no human can dictate to God the season of life they want to be in. He is the one who gives men their lots in life (3:10), he has done everything “from the beginning to the end” (3:11), limits what men can understand (3:11), gives man the gift and ability to enjoy life (3:13), does things that will last forever (3:14), and sustains

²¹ Jones and Pascarella, *Ecclesiastes and Song of Songs*, 93.

everything (3:15).

3.11. We instinctively yearn to know the purpose and plans that God has for our lives, but we can only attain a very limited understanding. This is by design, and the life of the believer must be content with the amount of knowledge that is revealed to us (cf. Deut 29:29; John 16:12-13). The word “beautiful” carries the sense of being “appropriate.”²² God know what he is doing in the lives of men, and he knows when the appropriate time is. If this can be understood and internalized, then the difficult times of life can be manageable through the pain, because we know God is walking with us (Ps 23:4).

3.12-13. In the middle of his affirmation of the sovereignty of God, Solomon gives insight to enjoy the seasons, times, and gifts that he has given humanity “under the sun.” He simply says to be joyful and to “do good” all the days of your life. He instructs humanity that they should “eat, drink, and take pleasure in all [his] toil,” because this is God’s gift to people. The way to enjoying life under the sun is through accepting the times and seasons that God ordains for your life and the work he has placed before you each day. Rather than pursue the vanities of life, we are to accept the lot that God has given us – this is a gift that is from God.

3.14-14. When assessing the works and the works of God, it is apparent that God is the one who does permeant, eternal, lasting, and meaningful things.

Redemptive Focus

What are we supposed to learn from this pericope of Scripture? No doubt that time is the primary theme because it is mentioned 29 times. But what does Solomon want us to learn *about* time? Is it how people should respond wisely during the seasons of their lives? Is it about God establishing the times and seasons of the lives of

²² Garrett, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*, 14:299.

people under the sun? Or is it a combination of both?

Trusting God's timing. How do you know you trust God with seasons and times in your life? A primary way to know is how angry you are, or you lack the joy of being able to enjoy life, enjoy family, enjoy the work of your hands. Of the aloes of tike sends you a season where you have a boss you don't agree with — are you still able.

Enjoy the time. The blessings of this life a gift from God, and so are the seasons and times of life. Therefore, God also calls us to enjoy them. Some seasons if life may be more difficult to enjoy, but no matter the seasons of life that we are in — God's blessings to you still evident. Therefore, we can seek to enjoy our seasons by counting the blessings he has graciously given us.

Conclusion and Summary

God the Lord of time, the seasons, and circumstances in our life — and in all history. And in that history, the greatest seasons that humanity has ever enjoyed is the time when God walked among his people on earth. In the fullness of time, Jesus was born, suffered, crucified, died, was buried, and rose again. He conquered death, and you have a limited amount of time on this earth before you will see his face to face and give an account for your life — the time of judgement. The apostle Paul tells the Corinthians that “now is the day of salvation” (2 Cor 6:2). If you have not turned from you sins, trusted in Christ, and followed him if a life of faithfulness — God tells you the time to repent is now. Don't wait. Come now.

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