



The following is the summary of the Sunday sermon that is sent to the body at Steadfast in an email called "The Weekly"

Ecclesiastes 3:1-15

The Providence of God Over All of Humanity

Solomon's personal experience and the restlessness of nature have laid the groundwork for the inescapable conclusion that enjoyment and happiness, if they are ever to be within humanity's reach, must come as direct gifts from God to people of faith. The wicked, meanwhile, are left with the aggravating and empty task of accumulating goods that could soon be converted to the uses of those who fear God.

As we begin this familiar section, let's first summarize the conclusions Solomon reached at the end of his investigation, which extends through chapters 3, 4 and 5. His penetrating conclusions are summarized in 5:18-20:

- God's proposed course for living is "good." (5:18a).
- God's plan can also be declared to be a "beautiful" path to travel. It possesses aesthetic and practical qualities, along with moral perfections (5:18b)
- Enjoyment, not worldly accumulations, is the principle end to be sought. Therefore, neither the plan of God nor human-based religion was ever meant to stifle pleasure and joy in possessing things or in life itself (5:18c).
- The human being who has learned the secret of enjoyment as a gift from God will not be anxious over the length of life. Enjoyment overcomes the brevity and impermanence of life. Each day is a gift from God (5:18d-19).
- God Himself is the source of joy and contentment. Humans are to enjoy life because they enjoy the person of God Himself. (5:20b).

God's Providence Over All of Humanity, 3:1-15

In this familiar section, Solomon establishes God's providence over all human activity. His thesis is that every action of humanity can be traced to its ultimate source, an all-embracing plan that is

administered by God (see 3:1). All is a part of the eternal, immutable, inscrutable providence of God. Here we see the distinct contrast between humanity's brevity and God's eternity. We must be astounded at God's constancy. God is not like us. He is the Creator and the Judge of all the earth (see 12:14). In this chapter we get the most beautiful contemplation on our passing, changing times in contrast to God's unchanging, eternal fullness. His eternity provides a stunning contrast to our vaporous lives, and a trustworthy support to all the events of world history. It is the combination of these two perspectives that provides the anchor to our lives of change.

v. 1–The Thesis: "Everything," every human activity (i.e., the deliberate, willful acts of humans) has its proper time (i.e., a point in time) and season (i.e., a duration of time).

vv. 2-8–Solomon now illustrates his thesis with a poem of 14 opposites (a figure of speech called a merism), each of which occurs within time. These are polar opposites in a multiple of seven.

- He begins his list with birth and death, suggesting the totality of one's life–v. 2a
- A time for the deliberate acts of one who begins and ends vegetable life (a farmer and agriculture)–v. 2b
- A time to take and save (i.e., heal) human life–v. 3a
- A time to construct and destroy buildings–v. 3b
- Now Solomon deals with the human responses to the "activities" of vv. 2-3. A time to weep (mourn) and to laugh–v. 4a
- A time to mourn and dance (=joy)–v. 4b
- A time to scatter (i.e., throw away) the building materials of v. 3b and a time to gather the building materials of v. 3b–v. 5a
- A time for a man and a woman to embrace and to not embrace–i.e., demonstrate affection for one another–v. 5b
- A time to search for something and to end the search (i.e., give it up for lost)–v. 6a
- A time to keep material things and then a time to discard those material things–v. 6b
- A time to tear (i.e., clothing as a manifestation of mourning, as in v. 4) and a time to mend those clothes torn for mourning–v. 7a
- A time for being silent (as in mourning) and a time for speaking freely (when not in mourning)–v. 7b
- A time for love and hate–the most powerful of human emotions–v. 8a

- A time for war and peace—the results of the two most powerful human emotions—v. 8b.

v. 9—As he did in 1:3, Solomon again rhetorically raises the question of the value of human work. Why does he do this? Now Solomon has a different perspective in posing this question: All life is under the appointment of Providence, of God—birth, death; growth, harvest; joys, sorrows; acquiring, losing; speaking up, being silent; war and peace. Since everything has its time from God, all the labor of humanity cannot change the times, circumstances or control of events.

v. 10—same answer as in chapter 2—there is no gain for the toil—it is a “burden.”

Solomon now makes three observations about this “burden”:

- v. 11a—God has made everything “beautiful in its time”—God, in His providence, has an appropriate time for every activity that Solomon discussed in his 14 polar opposites.
- v. 11b—God has placed “eternity in the human heart”—God has placed within each human the deep-seated desire, a compulsive drive, to know the eternal significance of all we do. Because humans bear God’s image, humans seek to appreciate the beauty of creation, the character, composition and meaning of the world, and to discern its purpose and destiny. There must be some coherence to the parts, a metanarrative to life, the universe, and everything else—to explain the mini-narrative of my individual life. There is a God outside the changing times who has written the story of the world from the fountain of His eternal fullness.
- v. 11c—Yet, no human can ever understand the sovereign, eternal plan of God in all its fullness and complexity. God is not bound by the changing times in the way we are: “The times” happen to us, but God happens to the times. For that reason, He is able to make each time and each event beautiful in its moment. We are the ones who cannot see the end from the beginning and work out what the coherent narrative is; but God can. When something starts and something ends, God has done it. That is why human labor often seems so insignificant and meaningless: We do not have the divine perspective or the divine omniscience. This is what produces the frustration, the uncertainty and sense of meaninglessness.

vv. 12-13—In light of v. 11, what then shall we do as humans? Solomon gives the same counsel he gave in 2:24-26: Be happy, do good, eat and drink (the fruits of labor) and find satisfaction in work. All this is a gift from God.

In light of our discussion from Colossians 3:22-4:1, this makes sense. We must trust God and seek to serve Him. Trust in Him is what brings the ultimate eternal significance to all of our activities.

v.14—Solomon appeals to God’s attributes to make it clear that God is not arbitrary. He and all He does are eternal, immutable and perfect. The response God desires from humanity is worship, reverence and awe (“fear”). Why such a response? Walter Kaiser writes: “The one who fears God

dreads nothing more than God's disfavor. Such a worshiper wants nothing more than to know the living God intimately and submit to His will. And God Himself wants to be known and obeyed by man; accordingly, He has shut man up to the enigma of life, yet given him an unquenchable hunger to know how it all, from the simplest to the most profound, fits with everything else."

v. 15—Here Solomon repeats his argument in v. 1:9: Nothing can be added or taken away; it is all a part of God's plan. What does Solomon mean by his statement, "God seeks what has been driven away" [ESV] (or "God will call the past to account?" [NIV]). God can call back the past and connect it with the future—the hint of the divine evaluation in the future of the past deeds of humanity. God's government of the world remains the same and everything is accountable to Him. The past does repeat itself, but that does not absolve people of their accountability. Ecclesiastes 3:17 declares that "God will judge the righteous and the wicked, for there is a time for every matter and every work." For that reason, we have a profound confidence for the future, an unalterable hope. We see ourselves as merely temporal; world inhabitants who know that every single moment, every act, every injustice, every wickedness, and every act of righteousness too will have its day in court. How? The answer is in God's eternity. God's eternity enables Him to recall every moment there has ever been and to call it to account before Him.

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