



# Ecclesiastes

*Does Life Have Meaning?*

The third chapter of Ecclesiastes records the best known verses in the book and some that most every person has heard even if they do not realise they are from the Bible. The key thought is found in 3:1, “For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven.”

## **A Time for Everything**

### **Ecclesiastes 3:1-22**

The main thought contained in 3:1-9 is this: God is in control so live your life for him with this knowledge.

Our God is the Creator of time. He existed before time and created all that is. This ought to give us a great deal of comfort and confidence. This reminds us that there are some happenings in life that we have some control over and others that we do not. Qoheleth, as Solomon calls himself, is saying that there are seasons to life. There are many events and activities that mark our lives.



In Ecclesiastes 3:1-8, we are presented with a list of fourteen events that happen in the lifetime of an individual. “The fact that Solomon utilised . . . opposites in a multiple of seven and began his list with birth and death is highly significant. The number seven suggests the idea of completeness and the use of . . . opposites . . . suggests totality.”<sup>1</sup> Since he begins with life and ends with death, he is telling us about the events that happen throughout our lives.

Our lives are ordered by time; in fact Solomon uses the word time 29 times in the first eight verses of Ecclesiastes 3.

### **1. Define the word “season” and “time.” Is there a difference in meaning between these two words?**

The very beginning of our lives is remembered in verse 2 where we read that there is a time to be born or a better translation is: “a time to give birth.” Our birth is outside of our control; a newborn does not choose the time of his birth and his mother does not know the exact timing until the delivery is near. Our birth was not our choice and it was God who knit us together in our mother’s womb.

The God who made you and knit you together in your mother’s womb (Psalm 139:13) has brought you into this world in this time and in this place. God is in control of life and death. A birth takes

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<sup>1</sup> Glenn, Donald R. "Ecclesiastes," in The Bible Knowledge Commentary: Old Testament, p. 983.



place in this world every three seconds. In the next hour 1,200 people will be born. Not one chose when, where, or if to be born.

Just as we had no choice in the time and place of our birth, we don't have much choice in the timing of our own death. Solomon continues in verse 2 by saying that there is a time to die. A person on this earth dies every eight seconds so in the next hour 450 people will depart this life.

While we think very little of death when we are young and strong, but birth and death serve as the bookends of our lives and during the years of our lives, the sovereign God has ordered that many kinds of events will happen to us.

This Scripture is not teaching that God predestinates all the events of our life. God gives us free-will, but we live in a world that is ordered by God. Birth and death are only two of the events that each of us face. Our free-will is evident in some of the events Solomon lists like the planting and harvesting, but it is God who has set the seasons in order and God who provides the rain. To farm successfully one must plant and harvest at the appropriate time.



We can even alter the length of our life by ending it unnaturally and have a limited influence our lifespan by the choices we make in eating, drinking, smoking, etc., but largely the timing of our own death is outside of our control. Certainly none of us can permanently postpone our own death.

Solomon teaches that God through his providence has placed order in this world and each of us live within this order. In Ecclesiastes 1:4 Solomon wrote, "*A generation goes, and a generation comes, but the earth remains forever.*" God's grant of free-will to man is largely why Solomon writes. He wants young men to avoid some of the mistakes he has made. God allows us the choice of following him or rebelling against him.

## 2. Many people in life say, "I wish I were older" or "I wish I were younger." After reading Ecc. 3:2, how would you answer them?

## 3. Can the events of life mentioned in 3:2-8 be changed or avoided? Why or why not.

### The Events of a Generation Under Heaven

#### Ecclesiastes 3:1-8

|                            |                                    |
|----------------------------|------------------------------------|
| a time to give birth       | a time to die                      |
| a time to plant            | a time to pluck up what is planted |
| a time to kill             | a time to heal                     |
| a time to break up         | a time to build up                 |
| a time to weep             | a time to laugh                    |
| a time to mourn            | a time to dance                    |
| a time to cast away stones | a time to gather stones together   |
| a time to embrace          | a time to refrain from embracing   |
| a time to seek             | a time to lose                     |
| a time to keep             | a time to cast away                |
| a time to tear             | a time to sew                      |
| a time to keep silent      | a time to speak                    |
| a time to love             | a time to hate                     |
| a time for war             | a time for peace                   |

Solomon wrote, "*There is a time for everything, and a season for every activity under heaven.*" We must remember is that we live in a world that passes through seasons. Prepare for the seasons of your life and prepare to minister to others as they pass through the seasons of their own lives.

As we go about our daily lives we encounter others who are experiencing all the various events of life. We see young people who are thinking about the next day at school, young adults anticipating marriage or the birth of a child. We encounter people each day who have suffered the loss of someone they loved and others who are sick themselves. Most of the people that we see each day are lost because they don't know Jesus as Lord. What an opportunity we have to minister and evangelise when we understand God's providential order.

In Ecc. 2:24 Solomon wrote, *"There is nothing better for a person than that he should eat and drink and find enjoyment in his toil. This also, I saw, is from the hand of God, for apart from him who can eat or who can have enjoyment?"*

Now here in Ecc. 3:1-8 he has urged man to look at the various happenings in life. Man should "see that there is nothing better than to resign himself to the work and pleasures of the day, recognizing that this is a gift to man from the hand of God."<sup>2</sup>

Ecc. 3:9 poses the same key question that we was in Ecc. 1:3. *"What gain has a worker from his toil?"* The answer is "None!" "In all of man's actions and under all circumstances he depends upon times and seasons which are beyond his control."<sup>3</sup> It is all part of God's divine providence to give men labour (3:10), but that labour should reinforce man's limitations and God's blessing. In fact, when we realise God's blessing and the order he has placed in this world we should see it as *"beautiful."*

#### **4. What is God's providence and how does that relate to man's free-will?**

#### **5. What is meant by God putting "eternity into man's heart?" What are man's limitations in understanding God and eternity?**

#### **6. How do we see God's sovereignty and providence in Ecc. 3:14-15?**

If God is sovereign and his providence cannot be altered then why is there evil in the world? Why is there wickedness in the place of justice and righteousness?

We understand that man's free-will allows him to act unjustly and unrighteously. Solomon knows that God will act as judge and ultimately set things right (Ecc. 3:17)

#### **7. How and why is man tested in 3:18?**



##### **Truth**

"I perceived that there is nothing better for them than to be joyful and to do good as long as they live; also that everyone should eat and drink and take pleasure in all his toil —this is God's gift to man." (Ecc. 3:12-13)

<sup>2</sup> Kidwell, R. J. *Ecclesiastes & Song of Solomon*. (Joplin, Missouri: College Press, 1977), 77.

<sup>3</sup> Smith, James E. *The Wisdom Literature and Psalms*. (Joplin, Missouri: College Press, 1996), 730.

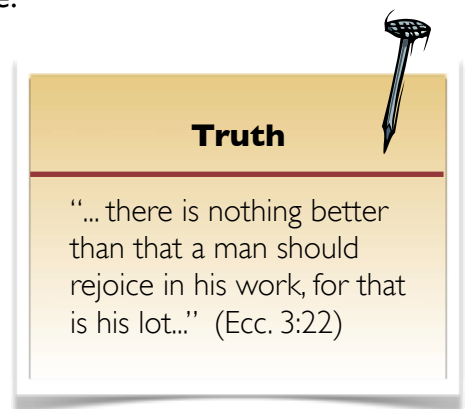
## 8. In what ways are men and beasts alike?

Men and beasts both face death, but the meaning of they “all go to one place” does not refer to eternity, but rather the earthly decay of the physical body. Verse 21 is a difficult one to translate from the original Hebrew into English. It can be translated as a question, it can suggest a “maybe” answer, or may affirm a truth through a question.<sup>4</sup> The best interpreter of Scripture is Scripture and the judgment of man and eternal reward or punishment is a common theme throughout the Scripture, so we take this to be a statement of fact. Man has an eternal destiny while the beast does not.

Verse 22 concludes this chapter advising man to rejoice or enjoy his work in the present and not concern himself about his future days on the earth since he cannot know what they will bring. James E. Smith writes, “...man’s happiness is to make the best of the present, and cheerfully to enjoy what divine providence offers, without anxious care for the future.”<sup>5</sup>

Ecclesiastes 3 teaches us that much of life is out of our control, but is ordered by God’s providence. We all live within the seasons of life that God has put into place. We do have free-will to work, do good, and enjoy our labours, but trying to change the unchangeable will bring us frustration. While we have life, we should enjoy the present blessings that God brings.

## 9. How can enjoying the present and not concerning oneself with either the unalterable seasons of life, or with the unknowable future, bring contentment?



<sup>4</sup> Kidwell, R. J. *Ecclesiastes & Song of Solomon*. (Joplin, Missouri: College Press, 1977), 86.

<sup>5</sup> Smith, James E. *The Wisdom Literature and Psalms*. (Joplin, Missouri: College Press, 1996), 737.