

“Does Anybody Really Know What Time It Is?”

Ecclesiastes 3

Part One

Solomon began the book of Ecclesiastes with a distressing summary of life on earth:

Ecclesiastes 1:2 "Vanity of vanities," says the Preacher; "Vanity of vanities, all is vanity."

“Vanity” is used repeatedly in this book. The word literally means emptiness, futility, vapor, breath, nothingness, that which vanishes quickly and leaves nothing behind.

Solomon’s summary is so distressing that some commentators seek to dismiss it by saying he is only describing life while you are backslidden.

For sure, Solomon went through a long period of backsliding. But “vanity” is not just Solomon’s summary of life on earth while he was backslidden. It is, in fact, God’s summary of life on earth!

In Romans 8:20 you learn that God Himself “subjected [His creation] to vanity.” God Himself subjected His creation and His creatures to “vanity” because of mankind’s sin in the Garden of Eden. Because of man’s disobedience there is disease, decay, disaster and death. Life is an enigma, a mystery; it is filled with unanswered and unanswerable questions; it seems senseless and is filled with perplexities. God will one day deliver you from vanity, but for now life under the sun can honestly, accurately be summarized by the word “vanity.”

Life on earth, also called life “under the sun” in this book, is vanity. But, since God Himself subjected it to vanity, God Himself is still sovereign over life on earth. Let me put it another, simpler way: Life under the sun is still under God’s complete control.

The first fifteen verses of chapter three present an exhortation and an encouragement about life under the sun being under God’s complete control. We’ll take it in two parts. This morning we’ll see the exhortation is to realize that your life under the sun is under God’s complete control.

Some of you old timers and oldies radio fans will recognize these words as having been put to music by the Byrds in the sixties. As with just about every other passage in Ecclesiastes, there is a debate over whether these couplets are pessimistic or optimistic. It may surprise you, but my opinion is that they are neither pessimistic or optimistic! They simply state the facts of life under the sun. It is your relationship to God that will determine whether they are pessimistic or optimistic. But the words themselves are simply the facts of life.

Ecclesiastes 3:1 To everything there is a season, A time for every purpose under heaven:

The word “season” is a key word in our discussion. It means a definite, set time. Like the seasons of the year, there is a definite, set time for all the things that will be listed in verses two through eight. It doesn't just mean that they all will occur eventually as your life under the sun progresses; it means that there is a definite, set time when certain things will occur, and when certain things won't occur.

When you have a definite, set time for something to occur, you call it an appointment. That is the sense in which Solomon is using the word. You have a series of appointments to keep during your life under the sun.

Who or what is it that makes these appointments for you? It's either fate, or it's your heavenly Father. In verses nine through fifteen the word “God” occurs six times; the word “He,” referring to God, occurs twice; the word “Him,” again referring to God, occurs once. Nine times in five verses you are told God is the One Who makes you your definite, set, series of appointments during your life under the sun.

Theologians call these appointments God's providence. There are many complicated theological definitions of providence. What they all amount to in common language is that God is in complete control of His creation.

His complete control of His creation is summarized in the series of couplets in verses two through eight. In verse two you read,

Ecclesiastes 3:2 a time to be born and a time to die...

In light of what you learned in verse one, verse two is saying something more than people are born and people die. It is saying that you have appointments with birth and with death that were set at definite times by God!

You have – actually, you had – an appointment with birth:

Psalms 139:13 For You formed my inward parts; You covered me in my mother's womb.

Psalms 139:14 I will praise You, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made; Marvelous are Your works, And that my soul knows very well.

Psalms 139:15 My frame was not hidden from You, When I was made in secret, And skillfully wrought...

And you have a very definite, set appointment with death:

Job 14:5 Since [a man's] days are determined, The number of his months is with [God]; You have appointed his limits, so that he cannot pass.

Birth and death are not human accidents; they are divine appointments.

That is the sense that you are to have of all these verses. God is in complete control. Verse two goes on to say,

Ecclesiastes 3:2 ... A time to plant, And a time to pluck what is planted;

Men may plow and sow, but only God can give the increase (Psalm 65:9-13).

Ecclesiastes 3:3 A time to kill, And a time to heal...

This probably refers, not to war (verse 8) or self-defense, but to the results of sickness and plague in the land (1 Samuel 2:6). God permits some to die while others are healed.

Ecclesiastes 3:3 ... A time to break down, And a time to build up;

God told Jeremiah that He was the One Who destroyed nations, and He was the One Who built up nations.

Ecclesiastes 3:4 A time to weep, And a time to laugh; A time to mourn, And a time to dance;

No one chooses to have an appointment with weeping and mourning. Tragedies come into our lives against our own will, but in the permissive will of God.

Ecclesiastes 3:5 A time to cast away stones, And a time to gather stones; A time to embrace, And a time to refrain from embracing;

This couplet can be a little confusing. Israel was an agricultural country. When an enemy was preparing an invasion, or laying siege, they would put stones in the fields to ruin them for cultivation. Once peace was achieved – once there was “embracing” - the stones would be gathered and removed.

Ecclesiastes 3:6 A time to gain, And a time to lose...

"A time to search and a time to give it up for lost" is another translation. Again, it speaks of things happening that are not under your control.

Ecclesiastes 3:6 ... A time to keep, And a time to throw away;

This might refer to the reality that nothing material lasts, but is constantly decaying against our will.

Ecclesiastes 3:7 A time to tear, And a time to sew; A time to keep silence, And a time to speak;

This probably refers to the Jewish practice of tearing one's garments during a time of grief or repentance (2 Samuel 13:31; Ezra 9:5), and of the wailing that accompanies grief.

Ecclesiastes 3:8 A time to love, And a time to hate; A time of war, And a time of peace.

Although humans seem to bring these upon themselves, the Bible is clear that the ebb and flow of nations is under God's control.

I hear the objection: If God is in control, then He is responsible for everything that happens and we cannot be held responsible or accountable

for our choices. The truth is – We do have real choices and we will be held responsible and accountable! Look at verse fifteen:

Ecclesiastes 3:15 That which is has already been, And what is to be has already been; And God requires an account of what is past.

You do have choices, and you will be held accountable for them. Exactly how God is in complete control and how we also have free choices, the Bible nowhere explains to us. But it most certainly teaches both, and we cannot therefore deny either.

Solomon is not attempting to reconcile God's providence and your free choices. He will reflect on some apparent contradictions, beginning in verse sixteen and following. But for now he is simply stating the facts of life under the sun: Life under the sun is under God's complete control.

Is that pessimistic? Or is it optimistic? It all depends upon your relationship to God!

