

Memento Dei

Ecclesiastes 3:1-15a August 14, 2024

Is it a duck or a rabbit? I'm sure we've all seen the famous sketch - it's been around since 1892.¹ There are other puzzling images like it. Is it a goblet or two faces? A young woman in a fantastic hat or an old hag in a shawl? Is the dress blue and black or white and gold?

The Ambassadors is a painting that has puzzled viewers since 1533. When facing the image head on, you see a big blob on the floor between two men. Looking from the side, you see the blob is a skull. Historians believe it is meant to be a "memento mori" - a reminder of your mortality.²

Like many philosophers, the Teacher struggled with the illusive nature of human existence. We long for eternity but are trapped in time. We have so much ability but are powerless against the course of life. Is the human condition wonderful or meaningless?

The Teacher's description of the human experience has become a sort of duck/rabbit illusion to scholars. Some say he's a total pessimist. Others say he's an optimist.³ Some say this chapter lays out the "hopelessness of struggle against an arbitrary God."⁴ Others see a beautiful outworking of a merciful God's sovereign providence.

How can such different conclusions come from the same sketch? And, as God's people, what does it mean to live a full life? How do we respond to life's many experiences? Let's take a look.

Ecclesiastes 3:1 - There is an occasion for everything, and a time for every activity under heaven:

This begins the most famous section of Ecclesiastes, but notice that the Teacher changed his regular formula: It's not "every activity under the sun," but, "under heaven." By the end of our text we'll see that your life isn't just happening randomly. God is the One running the show. He is sovereignly administering His master plan all over the earth and specifically in your life.

As he starts to tell us about this plan, the Teacher describes it as *appropriate*. The word can also be translated as *beautiful*. It includes every activity, occasion, season, and moment that a human being might experience.⁵ Some of the things that follow happen only once, some happen in a regular cycle. Some are desirable, some are very *undesirable*. Some are individual, some are communal. But they are *all* on your calendar. They have been appointed to you by God on purpose.

Ecclesiastes 3:2 - a time to give birth and a time to die; a time to plant and a time to uproot;

¹ <https://www.businessinsider.com/optical-illusions-popular-famous-history-2019-6>

² *ibid.*

³ Michael Eaton *Ecclesiastes: An Introduction And Commentary*

⁴ *Abingdon Bible Commentary*

⁵ Philip Ryken *Ecclesiastes: Why Everything Matters*

In the Hebrew, this poem consists of seven paired lines. One commentator writes, “*The number seven [is] pointedly chosen because of its traditional association with the sacred.*”⁶

The ideas are straight-forward, so I’ll only make a comment or two about certain lines. For example, uprooting here (or your version may say “pluck”) can speak of clearing a field of unwanted plants so that you can then plant a desired crop.⁷

Some of these appointed moments we have agency in, others happen to us. You do not choose the day of your birth, for example. But no matter what happens, the Teacher is suggesting that *all* of it has a purposeful place in God’s plan. None of it escapes His notice or authority.

Ecclesiastes 3:3 - ³ a time to kill and a time to heal; a time to tear down and a time to build;

The Teacher isn’t condoning murder. This is capital punishment or justifiable homicide in self-defense.⁸ State-sponsored war might be included here as well.

Ecclesiastes 3:4 - ⁴ a time to weep and a time to laugh; a time to mourn and a time to dance;

The first line refers more to activities you do individually, and the second to things you do in a group. God made us with emotions and made us to group together. God forbid we become a culture that refuses to laugh or cry. Christians should resist our culture’s drift into isolation.

Ecclesiastes 3:5 - ⁵ a time to throw stones and a time to gather stones; a time to embrace and a time to avoid embracing;

In warfare, an invading army might cover fields with stones to destroy your ability to grow food.⁹ At other times, the community might come together to gather stones to build a wall for defense.

The Teacher is painting with big strokes. Life and death, interpersonal relations, *international* relations, celebrations and sorrows. Next, he turns to economics.¹⁰

Ecclesiastes 3:6 - ⁶ a time to search and a time to count as lost; a time to keep and a time to throw away;

Sometimes it’s good to be frugal and sometimes it’s good to toss the trash and buy a replacement. Sometimes we need to let go of something that we think is valuable but is actually going to weigh us down. Think of a ship that must jettison its cargo in order to survive the storm at sea.¹¹

⁶ Robert Alter *The Hebrew Bible: A Translation With Commentary*

⁷ Douglas Miller *Ecclesiastes*

⁸ James Smith *The Wisdom Literature And Psalms*

⁹ John Goldingay *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, And Song Of Songs For Everyone*

¹⁰ Iain Provan *The NIV Application Commentary: Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*

¹¹ Smith

Ecclesiastes 3:7 - ⁷ a time to tear and a time to sew; a time to be silent and a time to speak;

In this ancient Jewish culture, a person might express sorrow by tearing the front of their garment. Eventually, the sting of that sorrow would subside and, though the loss may still linger, it was time to sew the tear and carry on in life.

Ecclesiastes 3:8 - ⁸ a time to love and a time to hate; a time for war and a time for peace.

Is it ever right to hate? There *are* things God hates and we are to join Him in that hatred. Romans 12:9 tells us to hate what is evil and cling to what is good.

The poem comes to a close, but *unlike* the Proverbs, we're not told what to do. Proverbs gives *detailed* commands about how to act, *when* to speak, the way you should eat a meal when you're in the presence of a king, how to parent, what economic choices to make, on and on.

But here? No commands. No suggestions. We're simply told, "This is the stuff of life and it's all going to happen to you at some point that you can't control and all of it has an appropriate place."

After reciting his own, the Teacher responds with a rhetorical question:¹²

Ecclesiastes 3:9 - ⁹What does the worker gain from his struggles?

His conclusion is, "We are trapped in time and time is filled with all sorts of good and bad stuff, some of it leading to sorrow and death, so what does my life matter? If life just happens, what profit is there in the things I do?"

A man might spend months clearing a plot of land of all the stones, all the weeds, every pebble, hoping to plant crops to feed his family, only to then be drafted to fight in a battle where he is killed and the enemy army comes and covers his field with stones again.

In that case, life is futile, right? The Teacher hasn't used the term *hevel* in these verses, but that's what he's talking about. It's the problem he can't escape. The reality that keeps gnawing at him.

The New Testament confirms what the Teacher is about to reveal: Life *isn't* random. God purposefully established the way of things. Even what seems arbitrary is part of a heavenly plan.

Romans 8:20a - ²⁰For the creation was subjected to futility—not willingly, but because of him who subjected it—

God has *subjected* this world to futility. Why? Paul reveals why in the verses surrounding Romans 8:20, but let's see what the Teacher has to say first.

¹² Ronald Murphy *Word Biblical Commentary, Volume 23: Ecclesiastes*

Ecclesiastes 3:10 - ¹⁰ I have seen the task that God has given the children of Adam to keep them occupied.

God occupies Himself by keeping *us* occupied. Why does God involve Himself in our affairs? The Teacher gives us a revelatory hint like he likes to do. He calls us “the children of Adam.”

That makes us stop and consider why things are the way they are. Sorrow, suffering, and death weren’t supposed to be part of the our experience. But because humans wanted to be like God, because they wanted to depose Him and reign in His place, they brought sin into the world and with it all the consequences we now deal with as a result. So, God responded powerfully.

This is where different views on sovereignty diverge. Some say God’s sovereignty is deterministic, meaning *He* does all the doing. Every thing that happens is God forcing it to happen. That every person who dies and goes to hell was purposefully, sovereignly created by God *for* that destiny.

One of the many problems with that point of view is that it totally dismantles the character of God that is revealed in the Bible. That He is love. That He is good. That He is just. That He is merciful.

Rather than God’s sovereignty being a machine that even *He* is trapped in, we understand that God is sovereign *even over His own sovereignty!* And the Bible reveals things about how God’s sovereignty works: First, that God has freed the wills of all mankind to give us a genuine choice whether we will accept salvation or reject it. Second, that God’s sovereignty allows for flex in His providential accomplishments. The 40 year wilderness wandering. Esther. Hastening the arrival of the Day of the Lord in 2 Peter 3. How can God be absolutely all-knowing and totally in charge but also allow these sort of free-will choices? He’s sovereign over His sovereignty and He not only allows true, relational interactivity with between us and Him, He *desires* it.

When Romans 8 spoke of creation being subjected to futility, echoing the sentiments of the Teacher’s writings, here’s what else it says:

Romans 8:19-21 - ¹⁹ For the creation eagerly waits with anticipation for God’s sons to be revealed. ²⁰ For the creation was subjected to futility—not willingly, but because of him who subjected it—in the hope ²¹ that the creation itself will also be set free from the bondage to decay into the glorious freedom of God’s children.

Life is the way it is because God wants to adopt as many children as possible. Life/death, war/peace, weeping/laughing continues on and on while the Lord brings His plan to fulfillment.

“The Man Upstairs” is the Boss. He is absolute in charge. He is sovereign over all the affairs of this universe. You are at the mercy of His divine will. The good news is that this God is *merciful!*

Ecclesiastes 3:11 - ¹¹ He has made everything appropriate in its time. He has also put eternity in their hearts, but no one can discover the work God has done from beginning to end.

What a verse! In the first third, we learn that God not only has a specific timing, but that He makes all things *beautiful* in their time.¹³ Now, we cannot always understand the divine beauty of certain moments in our lives - moments of pain or sorrow or loss - but, because God is so sovereign and so powerful, He is able to bring beauty from ashes.

Here's one example from the New Testament. When Jesus' friend Lazarus died, He told His disciples He was *glad* that He wasn't there to heal Lazarus - it was a good moment for them. Now, it wasn't *lovely* that Lazarus died. In fact, Jesus *wept* at the tomb. But what followed was beautiful and timely and heavenly. God accomplished a good plan through that unique life moment.

Does that mean that God *causes* all the suffering on earth? He is sovereign after all. No. Sin entered the world through one man and death through sin, which then spread to all people.¹⁴ Today, God waits with long-suffering so that more people have an time to be saved. And as He waits, He works all things together for the good. He works with specific purpose. He invades human experience in His effort to rescue us from the futility of a life dominated by sin.

In the second part of verse 11 we read: God has put *eternity* in our hearts. We are hard-wired to know there is more to life. We know that there's something beyond our galaxy, something beyond the grave, something supernatural that calls out to our hearts.

But, we have a problem, and it's the third part of verse 11: No one can discover the work God has done from beginning to end.

Is this a cruel joke God is playing on us? Michael Eaton writes, "*We have a capacity for eternal things, [but] this inward 'eternity' has a negative result...man has found nothing in the finite, earthly realm which can satisfy the human heart.*"¹⁵

We were meant to have full, unbroken communion with God Himself. But sin has ruined our understanding. Now we are trapped in time, hounded by death, and our relationship with God has been broken. We can't comprehend His thoughts and His ways, not in full, even when we want to.

Even when we are born again and receive the mind of Christ, we *still* can't fully understand Him. Paul said, "Right now, we see in part and know in part. One day, we'll finally know everything."¹⁶ That's why we still can't grasp how sovereignty and free-will can work together. Which is why we should always remember the *character* of God, the loving and merciful nature of God. What kind of *Person* is God? That will help us fill in the gaps we have in our understanding.

¹³ Walter Kaiser *Ecclesiastes: Total Life*

¹⁴ Romans 5:12

¹⁵ Eaton

¹⁶ 1 Corinthians 13:9-12

Ecclesiastes 3:12 - ¹²I know that there is nothing better for them than to rejoice and enjoy the good life.

What is “the good life?” In our last passage, the Teacher told us to enjoy life. Now he qualifies it by saying, “enjoy the good life.” The problem is, he’s going to say in chapter 7 that there is no one righteous on the earth, no one who does good. Another truth echoed in Romans.

The good life, according to the Teacher and confirmed in the New Testament, is not the most comfortable life or the wealthiest life or the most exotic life. It is a life connected with God, surrendered to His will, and understanding of His purposes.

Paul explained to the Ephesians that our lives are God’s workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works that we’re meant to do.¹⁷ And so living the good life is walking with God with an active faith. That is the *best* life you could possibly have - a life that will be full of meaning and joy.

Ecclesiastes 3:13 - ¹³It is also the gift of God whenever anyone eats, drinks, and enjoys all his efforts.

God not only has eternal purposes for you, He also wants your day-to-day to be full of satisfaction. He doesn’t consider small parts of life unimportant. He wants each day to be occupied with His joy.

Of course not every instance of life is desirable. There’s going to be tearing, sorrow - even death. But God’s grace and His joy are *always* ours to experience because they are gifts we’ve been given.

Ecclesiastes 3:14-15a - ¹⁴I know that everything God does will last forever; there is no adding to it or taking from it. God works so that people will be in awe of him. ¹⁵Whatever is, has already been, and whatever will be, already is.

God is working all over the earth to get your attention so that you can discover what He has done for you, how He loves you, the plans He’s made for you, and what He wants to do with your life. When we try to live life outside of a personal relationship with God, we miss the point. What’s left is the futility of existence resulting from sin. If you try to live a life without a personal relationship with the God Who *gave* you life and *ordains* your life, you’ll only end up frustrated and aimless.

God works so that we will be in awe of Him - so that we will *fear* Him. Walter Kaiser writes, “*The fear of God appears in Ecclesiastes at seven crucial points. This fear is not an attitude of terror. It is instead a commitment of the total being to trust and believe the living God.*”¹⁸

God uses His sovereign power to draw you to Himself so that you can discover He is the Author of your life, He is the Savior of your soul, He is the answer to your longing, He is the Giver of every good and perfect gift. He is the source of real living. He is the Way, the Truth, and the Life.

¹⁷ Ephesians 2:10

¹⁸ Kaiser

Fearing God changes everything. It supplies the necessary context. It gives us a framework so that we can not only appreciate the real value of the things that happen to us, but also so that we can understand what the appropriate actions are for us to take as we respond to times and seasons.

Fearing God helps us navigate all those things we read about in the first 8 verses. Is someone near me weeping? Now I know I should weep with them with compassion and support. Is it time for me to love or time for me to hate? Well, as I embrace the Word of God, my priorities and affections get ordered according to *His* principles. Right and wrong, profitable and unprofitable become clear.

But it's not always cut and dry. Should I speak or should I be silent? It depends on the moment. It depends on what God might be ordaining for *your* life in *that* moment. You don't have to post every thought you have on social media just because you can.

Should I embrace or refrain from embracing? Those can be hard choices to make. As we commune with the Lord He will help us in those less obvious situations. He has a good work for you to walk in and He will lead you both in the big moments and the little moments of life.

Research shows that when people look at that duck/rabbit drawing, their immediate perception will change depending on the time of year.¹⁹ There are some other mental factors that come into play.

There were a lot of times when the Teacher looked at life but saw death. The images around him were a *memento mori* because he so often forgot to include God in his thoughts - in the pursuit of his life.

When we remember God, remember that *He* is the Giver of life and that He gives it on purpose, for a reason, then our experiences come into focus. Our daily lives can be a *memento Dei*.

God has a sovereign plan that He is accomplishing. It's a beautiful plan and we have a part to play in it. Our part is not arbitrary, it's not random. It's tailor made for God's glory, our satisfaction, and the benefit of those around us.

The best life we can live is to play the part the Lord has written for us. Though not always easy, it is full of beauty, joy, dignity, and purpose. As you face the moments ahead, remember your God in heaven Who gave you your life on purpose, has appointed your life with many moments, and intends to make a forever difference out of the times and seasons He brings to you.

¹⁹ <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/science/duck-and-rabbit-illusion-b1821663.html>