

Chapter 3: Time and Eternity

Ecclesiastes 3:1–15

Isaac Watts’s hymn, “Our God, Our Help in Ages Past,” declares a critical point of Christian theology: our lives are short, but our God is eternal. The hymn declares, “Time, like an ever rolling stream, bears all its sons away; they fly, forgotten, as a dream dies at the op’ning day.” In light of this, the hymn reminds us to trust the God who has been help to his people throughout all generations—in ages past, and forward into eternity. Watts’s hymn echoes the themes of Ecclesiastes 3:1–15, where the Preacher explores the ways in which we are creatures trapped in time. We may have a sense of eternity (v. 11), but we cannot escape our time-boundedness. While all of our toil in time cannot gain us anything lasting and during (v. 9), this passage clears away errors about our approach to time in a way that reminds us of the time-related promise that the rest of Scripture bears witness to: *God gives Sabbath rest*.

Time (Eccl. 3:1–8)

The Preacher’s poem in Ecclesiastes 3:1–8 is probably the most famous section of the book, and perhaps one of the more famous sections within the entire Bible, due to its adaptation into popular song form by Pete Seeger, and especially as recorded by The Byrds in 1965. That song, written in the context of the Vietnam War, emphasized and pleaded for a return to a “time for peace,” from the last line of the poem. While that song largely follows the text of Ecclesiastes 3:1–8, the context of this poem within the larger argument of Ecclesiastes makes it clear that the Preacher himself did not write his poem as a peace anthem.¹

The Purpose for the Poem (Eccl. 3:1)

Instead, the Preacher’s poem weaves together a complex set of ideas that furthers his case about the vanity of the world. First, the business of life is endlessly changing, and never standing still. Thus, there is “a time” given for the wide variety of human experience, including both ordinary as well as the extraordinary moments of life.² Each phrase lists out two opposite, mutually exclusive ideas, standing not just for each of the items listed in each pair, but the totality of *all* human experience, encompassing everything in between.³ This is a figure of speech called a “merism.” The point is that every element on this list (and, by implication, even element included between each pair of opposites) is given in a particular time. The Preacher does not tell us how much time each element

¹ Shaw, *Ecclesiastes*, 36.

² Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, 32.

³ Miller, *Ecclesiastes*, 70.

is to receive, and neither does he suggest that these elements come in neat, orderly fashion.⁴ Rather, the Preacher seems to be echoing the point he made earlier about the way creation is always moving, but never arriving (Eccl. 1:4–7), especially as he considers the time allotted to every part of our toil (Eccl. 1:12–2:26; cf. v. 3:9).⁵

Second, the perpetual changes we experience in the course of life on this earth makes it impossible for us to find lasting rest and peace in any season of life. As Charles Bridges writes, “As well might we find rest on the tossing ocean, as in a fluctuating world.”⁶ Certainly, some of this ongoing change is good, since, for example, no one would want to plant anything if there were no chance to harvest the ripened fruit.⁷ Nevertheless, there is a bitterness to this merry-go-round of life, since it means that (1) the disastrous parts of this list have a season alongside the good parts, and (2) we have not entered into an eternal state, but remain mortal and subject to death.⁸ During this time, we are prisoners of the time, forced into a number of less-than-ideal choices because of the circumstances that we face at every *time* in our lives.⁹

Third, though, this poem also reminds us that it is God who appoints the season and the time for every matter under heaven. Although we do not have a firm grasp on the circumstances we encounter during our lives, nothing is random, chaotic, by chance, or out of control for God.¹⁰ This means, as Walter Kaiser observes, that life “is not one of chance or fate, for despite the haphazard *appearance* of things, God alone is in charge of nature and history.”¹¹ Indeed, the Lord is working all things together for our good (Rom. 8:28), which means that God establishes every season for a purpose—a purpose by which God is working everything together for our good.¹²

The Poem Itself (Eccl. 3:2–8)

Unsurprisingly, the Preacher begins with the concern foremost in his mind: life and death (v. 2a).¹³ There is a time to be born, and a time to die. Somewhat surprisingly, the Preacher follows his major meditation of the book with something that happens more regularly during the course of a lifetime, but not nearly as important: farming. So, there is a time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is planted (v. 2b). To “pluck up what is planted” does not refer to the harvest that comes at the end of a farming season, but to the removal of unwanted plants.¹⁴ The reason for pairing these two sets of pairs, then, is somewhat straightforward: planting and plucking up serve as metaphors for life and death.¹⁵

⁴ Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, 32.

⁵ Miller, *Ecclesiastes*, 66–67.

⁶ Bridges, *A Commentary on Ecclesiastes*, 48.

⁷ Kidner, *The Message of Ecclesiastes*, 38.

⁸ Garrett, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*, 298.

⁹ Kidner, *The Message of Ecclesiastes*, 38.

¹⁰ Bridges, *A Commentary on Ecclesiastes*, 48.

¹¹ Kaiser, *Coping with Change*, 96.

¹² Bridges, *A Commentary on Ecclesiastes*, 49–50.

¹³ Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, 33.

¹⁴ Miller, *Ecclesiastes*, 68.

¹⁵ Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, 33.

In the same way, v. 3 offers the same kind of parallelism: a time to kill / to break down, and a time to heal / to build up. Where v. 2 may have dealt with the major life events as immediately appointed by God, the idea of killing and healing is the act of a human being; however, even in these acts God asserts his ultimate sovereignty, declaring elsewhere that, “See now that I, even I am he, and there is no god beside me; I kill and I make alive; I wound and I heal; and there is none that can deliver out of my hand” (Deut. 32:39).¹⁶ The same may be said about breaking down (cf. Job 19:10; Ps. 52:5; Isa. 5:5; Jer. 18:7; 31:28; 45:4; Ezek. 13:14; 16:39; Hos. 10:2) and building up: “Unless the LORD builds the house, those who build it labor in vain” (Ps. 127:1).

Next, the Preacher speaks about the wide variety of emotional responses we experience through the course of life.¹⁷ There is a time to weep, as well as a time to laugh; a time to mourn, as well as a time to dance (v. 4). We are not meant to live our lives stoically, without responding to the various circumstances that occur around us. Theologically, these emotional responses are called our “passions,” describing how we feel when we are acted upon by someone else.¹⁸ God is eternal and unchangeable so that he does not have passions to feel one way now, and then another way later.¹⁹ We, however, are temporal and subject to constant change. For each passion, there is a season.

In v. 5a, the Preacher speaks about a time for casting away stones, and a time for gathering stones together. There is much debate on the meaning of this section; however, the most natural reading is to see this as a natural part of human work in an agrarian society. If the stones were useless (especially in the middle of a field to be used for farming), they were cast away; however, if they were useful (e.g., Gen. 31:44–51; Josh. 4:1–9; Josh. 7:26; 2 Sam. 18:17), they were gathered.²⁰ The contrast to these actions of work are the actions of relationships, where there is a time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing (v. 5b).

The pairs in v. 6 have to do with gaining and losing: a time to seek, and a time to lose; a time to keep, and a time to cast away. Then, as in v. 5, v. 7 seems to make a similar point by contrasting work and relationships: a time to tear, and a time to sew (work), compared to a time to keep silence, and a time to speak (relationships). Finally, v. 8 offers the same contrast, but from a small scale to a large scale: a time to love, and a time to hate (small scale, interpersonal relationships); a time for war, and a time for peace (large scale, international relationships). The emphasis is not (as Pete Seeger’s song suggests) on the very last item, *peace*, but on all the elements as a whole. Life is constantly changing, as we move from one season to another, and as everything receives its appointed time.

Toil (Eccl. 3:9–11)

¹⁶ Bridges, *A Commentary on Ecclesiastes*, 53–54.

¹⁷ Longman, *The Book of Ecclesiastes*, 115.

¹⁸ Mark Jones, *God Is: A Devotional Guide to the Attributes of God* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2017), 202–03.

¹⁹ *Westminster Confession of Faith*, 2.1: “...God...is...without...passions...” (cf. Acts 14:15: “We also are men, of like nature [lit., “like passions”; ὁμοιοπαθεῖς, *homoiōpatheis*] with you....” The implication of this verse is that a defining characteristic of *men* is to have “like passions” as a part of their shared nature. Furthermore, they offer this statement to give clear evidence that they are not *gods* (who do not have “like passions”), since the people thought that Barnabas and Paul were Zeus and Hermes.)

²⁰ Bridges, *A Commentary on Ecclesiastes*, 56–57.

If, then, everything has its season, so that we are always moving from one time to the next, the Preacher poses the obvious question: “What gain has the worker from his toil?” (v. 9). Certainly, our toil will bring modest gains here and there, but some work will need to be plucked up (v. 2), or broken down (v. 3), or wept over (v. 4), or cast away (v. 5, 6). Still other work may be ravaged by wars that will inevitably come (v. 8). The answer to the question is clear: nothing, ultimately, can be gained from all our toil under the sun.²¹ Indeed, this is business that God has given to “afflict” (ESV: “be busy with”) us (v. 10).²²

Taken by themselves, these conclusions might lead to outright despair. The Preacher, however, offers a few other details that tempers such a dark view on our lives. In v. 11a, he begins by stating that God “has made everything beautiful in its time.” While “beautiful” is the common meaning of this word in v. 11, a better translation here might be “appropriate,” or “fitting.”²³ The Preacher is hardly calling death and killing and hatred and war “beautiful.” Rather, he is saying that God has made an appropriate place for everything in this world—a place that he is ultimately using toward his own, ultimate purposes for the good of his people (Rom. 8:28).

The Preacher then continues, explaining the nature of the tension between God’s eternal purposes and our temporal limitations: “Also, he has put eternity into man’s heart, yet so that he cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end” (v. 11b). This is an incredibly important statement for understanding the Preacher’s message in Ecclesiastes. The Preacher explains that we have been given some kind of sense—some knowledge of, or intuition about, or awareness of—the full scope of eternity. As human beings created in God’s image, God gives us an awareness of the full scope of his work through the entirety of time and beyond, into eternity. This is what C. S. Lewis called *longing*, or *Sehnsucht*, or *joy*.²⁴ It’s a longing for something beyond the temporal limitations of this life—a heart for eternity.

And yet, we only have an impression of eternity, and a longing for it in light of the fleeting times and seasons we experience in this life.²⁵ We yearn to make sense of our own lives, and of the work that God has done from beginning to end, but we “cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end.” This makes us feel lost, confused, isolated, and “trapped in time.”²⁶ Nothing can satisfy this deep longing we have to get our minds around eternity.²⁷ We may seek to find satisfaction for our eternal desires in this or that, but nothing passing away from this world can fill such a whole in our hearts.²⁸ We should notice that this sense of eternity is something that the animals do not share, which is why they experience no distress over the fleeting times of every season of their lives. Animals were created to live merely earthly, natural lives, oblivious to the promise of eternity.

²¹ Kaiser, *Coping with Change*, 100; Miller, *Ecclesiastes*, 71.

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

²³ Miller, *Ecclesiastes*, 72.

²⁴ See C. S. Lewis, *Surprised by Joy: The Shape of My Early Life* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1955).

²⁵ Kaiser, *Coping with Change*, 101.

²⁶ Garrett, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*, 299.

²⁷ Eaton, *Ecclesiastes*, 95.

²⁸ Kaiser, *Coping with Change*, 102.

Trust (Eccl. 3:12–15)

In light of all this, the Preacher returns to a theme that he first stated in 2:24–26: since nothing temporal in this world can satisfy our eternal desires, then there is nothing better for us to enjoy the pleasures and goodness of this world for as long as we live (v. 12). This, the Preacher says, is “God’s gift to man” (v. 13). Only when we seek our satisfaction in the one who is infinite and eternal can our infinite and eternal desires be satisfied—and when those desires are properly satisfied are we able to enjoy life for what it is.

Finally, the Preacher closes this section with a statement of God’s eternity. While we are frail and small and time-bound and passing away like a mist, whatever God does endures forever.²⁹ As the author of Hebrews reminds us, God’s works were finished from the foundations of the world (Heb. 4:3). According to his eternal decrees, God created all things that exist, and he continues to uphold all things by his ongoing work of providence. So, nothing can be added to God’s good work, and nothing can be taken away from it. As we human beings reflect on the eternity of God’s work, we should “fear before him” (v. 15b).

By contrast, whatever we do has already been, and whatever is to be in the future, already has been (v. 15a). Even the things that seem lost, God seeks them and restores them, so that nothing is lost (v. 15b). In the face of a constantly changing world, nothing could give more confidence to those who love God. We can let go of burdens we saddle ourselves with as we imagine that we must produce something truly new and enduring in order to be worthwhile. Furthermore, we can comfort ourselves in the knowledge that nothing is truly lost with our God. We are not able to discern the full shape and scope of his wisdom, but we may rest in confidence that he *is* working according to his wise purposes, and that nothing can thwart his plans. Every season he sends our way is but one more chapter in his perfectly unfolding story.

“Give thanks for the LORD, for he is good, for his steadfast love endures forever” (Ps. 136:1)!

Discussion Questions

- 1) Was Pete Seeger right to understand Ecclesiastes 3:1–8 as pleading for peace in the world? If not, then what is the point of this poem? How do the pairs of contrasted elements (e.g., birth and death, war and peace) address the totality of human experience? What does the Preacher mean when he says that everything has its time and season? Who is the one who establishes the times and seasons of all things that happen in this world?
- 2) Why does the Preacher conclude his poem by asking the question in v. 9: “What gain has the worker from his toil?”? If everything has its season, what truly can we gain from all of our toil? How is the seasonality and constant change of this world “beautiful in its time” (v. 11)? What does it mean that God has put “eternity” into our hearts (v. 11)? Why is this sense of eternity such a gift, and yet so frustrating within our time-bounded experience?

²⁹ Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, 35.

3) Given the lack of true progress and gain that we can make by all of our toil, why should we “be joyful and...do good” as long as we live, and to “eat and drink and take pleasure” in all our toil (v. 12–13)? If this pleasure cannot give us lasting satisfaction, then how is this God’s gift to man (v. 13)? Also, given our temporality, why is it a comfort to know that whatever God does will endure forever (v. 14)? How does this help us to trust God?

4) In the rat race of life, how does God’s gift of Sabbath give us rest in the midst of our toil? In the midst of a time and season for everything, why is it significant that God has appointed one day in seven for Sabbath rest (Gen. 2:1–3; Ex. 20:8–11; Deut. 5:12–15)? What promises does God make to his people concerning the Sabbath (cf. Ex. 31:12–17; Isa. 58:13–14; Heb. 4:9–13)? How do you treasure the Sabbath rest that God gives you every Lord’s Day as you seek refuge in our eternal God?