



## [Ecclesiastes 3:15](#)

(15) That which is has already been,  
And what is to be has already been;  
And God requires an account of what is past.  
*New King James Version*

[Ecclesiastes 3:15](#) is an illustration that shows the breadth and depth of God's sovereignty over time and the events of life. To picture this more clearly, we have to perceive time as a moving reality. It is as though it is coming toward us and moving away from us simultaneously.

Though time is involved in this statement, the emphasis is more on the *events* that happen within time rather than time itself. We can perhaps understand this verse better as saying that what is happening right now, *already* happened in the past, and what *will* happen has already happened. It is a way of saying that, in one sense, time cannot be broken into parts. Time and the events happening within it of and by themselves are a whole. Thus, Solomon is essentially saying, "Past, present, and future are bound together."

In what way is this so? Time and the events happening in it are parts of a continuous stream. Solomon's point is again that only [God](#) is in perfect control of both time and its events, and He can seek out and bring back into existence in the present what happened in the past. Thus, Solomon's comment in [Ecclesiastes 1:9](#) is a parallel: "What has been is what will be, and what has been done is what will be done, and there is nothing new under the sun" (ESV). In plainer language, history repeats itself.

Names, personalities, ethnicities, locations, dates, languages, clothing, and weapons change, but the core of the events is essentially the same. We can learn from history what works and what does not. Thus, we have the saying by George Santayana, "Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it." This makes the Bible an even more valuable source of guidance in wisdom and right conduct because

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God gives true accounts of what happened, not ones embellished by men's prejudices.

One might wonder why God would essentially repeat what is said in [Ecclesiastes 1:9](#) just two chapters later. The reason is that there is a major difference in the contexts. In [Ecclesiastes 1:9](#), the statement is used negatively, suggesting life is nothing but repetitious vanity. In [Ecclesiastes 3:15](#), though, it is mentioned explicitly within the context of God's sovereignty—He is in control, and He makes positive use of history repeating itself for mankind's benefit.

Many alternative renderings of the last phrase of verse 15, “God requires an account of what is past,” are quite hopeful:

- » *The New International Version*: “God will call the past to account.”
- » *The Revised Standard Version*: “God seeks what has been driven away.”
- » *The American Standard Version*: “God seeks again that which is passed away.”
- » *The New English Bible*: “God summons each event back in its turn.”
- » *The Amplified Bible*: “God seeks that which has passed by.”

Though each translation is somewhat different, each has two elements in common: God is looking for something, and it involves time, an event that occurred in the past. Why is He doing this? What instruction is there for us here?

We tend to think that former days are gone forever. However, Ecclesiastes 3 shows that this concept is not totally true because history keeps repeating itself. In fact, we are learning that God causes this repetition. Verse 15 confirms this fact once again, but it adds a positive twist to it. Why would God do this?

A prominent theme in Ecclesiastes is judgment. The book ends with the statement that God will bring every deed into judgment ([Ecclesiastes 12:14](#)), pointing directly to a reason why everything matters. It is obvious that God, who is in control, brings up the past for His purposes. God always does things with good purposes in mind. In this verse, the language is quite positive: He does not bring the past up for the purposes of condemnation but for redemption. Our Savior God is a Redeemer.

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He is seeking to help those who have truly made a mess of their past—that includes all of us. This verse provides evidence that by His grace He is seeking to recover and restore what seems from our point of view to be forever lost. Earlier in the chapter, Solomon says that the work of God endures forever ([Ecclesiastes 3:14](#)). This verse suggests that, since we are God's work, He will use His powers to make sure that our labors are not in vain. He will make things beautiful in His good time by enabling us to profit even from our messes.

This is not to suggest that those messes will be completely resolved, and everybody is happy, happy, happy! No, but He has the power to bring experiences from our past to mind, facilitating us to sort through them with a great deal more clarity than we had when they originally happened. Thus, He helps us recall incidents with honesty that helps us learn what we should and should not have done or said, and resolve to conduct ourselves far better going forward. He helps us to grasp whether [repentance](#) should occur if a similar situation happens again.

Should we forgive and forget? Should we be more patient and kind? Should we sacrifice our pride? Should we be firmer, insisting that godly actions be done to uphold righteousness? He may reveal to us how an event's outcome could have been far more profitable for all concerned.

— John W. Ritenbaugh

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