

Ecclesiastes And Christian Living (Part Four): Other Gifts

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Ecclesiastes 3 makes clear that God is sovereign over time as well as over the flow of events He is overseeing in the outworking of His plan and purpose. God leaves no doubt that He is intimately involved in the lives of His children to ensure that they fit within the framework of the body of believers that He is preparing to rule over the earth under Jesus Christ at His return.

His aim is not merely that we generally fit but that we specifically fit, prepared for the responsibilities He assigns. We learn this principle from observations of God's creation, as King David testifies in Psalm 139:14, "I am fearfully and wonderfully made; marvelous are Your works, and that my soul knows very well." Even as our physical bodies are marvelous creations, God's spiritual preparations of us for His Kingdom as the Bride of Christ is a more spectacular, fully functioning achievement. Thus, His work of creation continues.

Solomon writes in Ecclesiastes 3:10-15:

I have seen the God-given task with which the sons of men are to be occupied. He has made everything beautiful in its time. Also He has put eternity in their hearts, except that no one can find out the work that God does from beginning to end. I know that nothing is better for them than to rejoice and to do good in their lives, and also that every man should eat and drink and enjoy the good of all his labor—it is the gift of God. I know that whatever God does, it shall be forever. Nothing can be added to it, and nothing taken from it. God does it, that men should fear before Him. That which is has already been, and what is to be has already been; and God requires an account of what is past.

Among the mysteries that everybody must face is "Who am I?" and "Why am I here?" Another version of those questions is "Why was I born?" A partial but probably unsatisfying answer is that, unless God calls and reveals Himself to a person, he will never find the clear, detailed answer. Thus, Solomon states in verse 11, "No one can find out the work that God does from beginning to end." So that the called, those to whom God has revealed Himself, are thoroughly convinced of the great gift God has given them, a fuller version of this declaration appears in Ecclesiastes 8:17:

Then I saw all the work of God, that a man cannot find out the work that is done under the sun. For though a man labors to discover it, yet he will not find it; moreover, though a wise man attempts to know it, he will not be able to find it.

God undoubtedly planned much of this blindness. This does not mean that people will never hear the answer to "Why was I born?" in their lifetimes. But unless God is directly involved in calling them for His purposes, their hearing the simple and plain truth of it will not have the life-changing impact needed to change the direction of their lives. A person must be gifted by His calling (Matthew 13:10-17).

Three Invaluable Gifts

In the previous article, we focused on two specific truths regarding time and our trials: 1) God's personal involvement in our lives and 2) the sense of eternity He has placed in our hearts. It began in the last three verses of chapter 2, which announce that God gives gifts. By means of some of those invaluable gifts, everyone born, called or not, can receive a measure of knowledge that can prove to be helpful to their well-being.

Paul writes in Romans 1:18-20:

For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who suppress the truth in unrighteousness, because that which may be known of God is manifest in them, for God has shown it to them. For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even His eternal power and Godhead, so that they are without excuse.

Clearly, mankind has been gifted with an awareness of God's existence. Like most things in life, this awareness must be confirmed, developed, and lived by in greater detail, but the proofs of God's existence are readily available through an honest observation of the creation. The evidence is so obvious that, in God's judgment, it leaves humanity without justification for not knowing of His existence. What is really difficult is proving God does not exist! Most people merely accept His existence as a fact, but few appear to make it foundational to their way of life. On the other extreme are those who utterly reject it because they have faith only in what they call "science." That faith is an impossibility because they have no scientific answer to where life came from in the first place.

Romans 2:14-15 adds a second gift:

. . . for when the Gentiles, who do not have the law, by nature do the things in the law, these, although not having the law, are a law unto themselves, who show the work of the law written in their hearts, their conscience also being witness, and between themselves their thoughts accusing or else excusing them. . . .

Similar to the fact of God's existence, in that it needs to be expanded upon and more precisely understood, is the truth that God has given mankind the basic elements of right and wrong to enable humanity to govern itself for the purposes of communal living.

Ecclesiastes 3:11 completes this trinity of invaluable gifts: "He has made everything beautiful in its time. Also He has put eternity in their hearts, except that no one can find out the work that God does from beginning to end." God has given everyone a spirit and a sense of eternity, enabling people to think both backward and forward in time.

Men innately know that there is more to life than what they experience physically. However, they do not grasp the precise connection between their awareness of eternity and their present physical lives. They do, however, vaguely grasp that somehow the immortality they envision has some connection with what they are experiencing in the present. Like the other gifts, this, too, is greatly botched, and misunderstanding is universal. The most common assumption is that we already possess it. But, if linked with revealed truth as God intended, it greatly aids people in thinking about the past concerning God's creative powers, His purpose, His sovereignty over all things, and how the individual fits into the present and future.

God has given these and more gifts to all humanity, but only those called by Him are given more detailed and true explanations that will build their faith, enabling them to live by it. Unless God gives the details, we are all much like terribly near-sighted people who more or less feel their way along. Until they are called, the grand design that God is working out escapes their fuller comprehension, making the answer about who we are elusive.

The instruction in Ecclesiastes 3:10-15 encourages us to be content and patient. It is a reflection on and a reminder of the importance of what He already said about gifts in Ecclesiastes 2:24-26. We should be thankful and rejoice in what we already have because what we have is wonderful. Without directly stating a clear “why,” Solomon gently implies that God will add understanding as we are able to make good use of it.

Accepting That God Sets the Times

Verse 14 adds helpful encouragement to the point he is making: “I know that whatever God does it shall be forever. Nothing can be added to it, and nothing taken from it. God does it, that men should fear before Him.” What God is doing will add to our awe of Him, and the fear of God is a great gift. There can be nothing negative about adding to our respect of God. Recall that Proverbs 1:7 states, “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge.” However, the fear of God is also the beginning of wisdom, understanding, joy, peace, and much more because these all flow from God as gifts to us because of our contact with Him after being called.

An earlier article covered contexts showing that God set the times for many significant events, for example, when Jesus was born, when the gospel began to be preached, when He would be crucified, how long He was in the grave, and when the Kingdom will be restored. A secondary reason for this is that we must learn that the operations and times that God sets are thoroughly reasoned, permanent, and unchangeable. Whatever God does endures forever. He schedules and performs everything at exactly the right time. Thus we must grow in trusting God’s timing on everything in our lives. It is that important to our spiritual well-being.

Despite what events working out in our lives might *seem* like to us from our position as very limited and impatient mortals, God is running a tight ship. We can expand this concept of running a tight ship to envelop the entire period of the past—to all His sovereign operations beginning with Adam and Eve, the calling of Abraham, Jacob having twelve sons, the formation of Israel, and so forth. Everything was done at the right time, and in a way, doing so emphasizes His sovereignty and well-organized purpose.

God wants to impress on those living by faith that He truly wants us to know what He has done and what He is now doing to the degree we can understand. For our good, though, He does not want us second-guessing Him because doing so is not beneficial to living by faith. When we do that, we tend to do foolish things.

Regarding timing within God’s purposes as He works with us, we cannot add to or take anything away from the past. The past cannot be changed; it is over. By the same token, we cannot add to or take anything from the future either, as it has not yet occurred and because God has His purposes to work out. What God wants to do *when* He wants to do it will invariably be done.

No human by his sheer effort can hope to alter the course of things. To seek to do that is evidence of pride. This is a major reason God sets the times even of our trials. He desires to remove every aspect

of any argument we might have that might lead us to choose some other way of doing things than His. Resisting Him produces no good fruit.

This leads to the most helpful conclusion, which is also the secondary reason why we have covered the fact of God setting the timing of events. With God in control of time, we, through our experiences, gradually become aware of our sheer helplessness; we cannot manipulate time nor manage the times we live and operate in. This intense understanding of our helplessness helps us grasp more deeply how totally dependent we are on Him to work out His purposes in our lives. The humility produced by this awareness is of tremendous value.

We are involved in the ongoing spiritual creation, and the Creator God is the Potter, fashioning us into His desire. Humility before Him is an absolute necessity. Recall what Jesus says to His disciples in John 15:5, “For without Me you can do nothing.” That is, we can do nothing toward *His* purpose. Our responsibility is to yield to His purpose. The sovereign God can exercise control of all things in the lives of His children, not just time. Notice how Jesus illustrates an aspect of this in Matthew 10: 29-31:

Are not two sparrows sold for a copper coin? And not one of them falls to the ground apart from your Father’s will. But the very hairs of your head are all numbered. Do not fear therefore; you are of more value than many sparrows.

His two illustrations show how penetrating and complete is God’s awareness of what is happening in His creation. Here is the practical point for us: If He is aware of a sparrow falling, and we are exceedingly more important than a mere bird, how can He not be aware of all that is occurring in our lives?

With this understanding, we can appreciate that we can move forward toward God’s Kingdom only at the speed He deems is correct for us. This gives us far more reason to learn to be content because the speed that He moves us is perfectly good for us. God does nothing that is not in our best interests.

Has God Tossed Us a Crumb?

Some commentators describe Ecclesiastes 3:12 as negative because they understand the phrase, “there is nothing better,” as implying something “second-best.” They almost seem insulted that God has “tossed them a crumb.” But look again at what God has counseled that we should do! In verse 12, He advises us to rejoice and do good in our lives, and in verse 13, to eat, drink, and enjoy the good of our labor because these things—the food, the drink, and the ability to labor—are gifts of God.

If we reword these verses into the first-person voice, it reads, “There is nothing better than that I should be joyful and do good as long as I live, and to eat and drink and take pleasure in all my work—this is God’s gift to me.” How much good can be accomplished in a life lived with the attitude that He counsels us to live with? What does God more specifically mean by “do good”? What He means should be taken in a moral and ethical sense. To do good is to do good works, and that is our assignment all the time! God is most certainly not tossing us a crumb.

Ephesians 2:10 tells us that doing good is the very reason for our calling! “For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we

should walk in them.” Regardless of a trial God may have specifically assigned us, doing good works is always our assignment, whether within that specific trial or free from whatever particular discipline the trial might normally impose.

Thus, in Ecclesiastes 3:10-14, God is telling us to take joy in His employment of us before the world in doing good at home for those we live with, doing good work on the job, doing good in serving the brethren, and doing good within our community as we have occasion, using our spiritual gifts to the best of our abilities. How can representing God in all aspects of life possibly be a crumb?

Time’s Continuous Stream

Ecclesiastes 3:15 is another illustration, showing from a different point of view the breadth and depth of God’s sovereignty over time and the events of life: “That which is has already been, and what is to be has already been; and God requires an account of what is past.” 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 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, we have seen in Ecclesiastes 3 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.

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, however, we learned that the work of God endures forever. 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.

Our Lives Matter to God

Considering the inspiring revelations given in this chapter, how can we ever consider our lives monotonous and vain? We have had revealed to us, not merely that we are made part of God’s eternal plan, but we have also been given some important particulars of operations within that plan. We are not a mere insect crawling from one annihilation to another. God personally knows us, and He is in control, shaping our lives and characters through our experiences with a glorious purpose at its end!

Our overall responsibility begins with a firm foundation of fearing Him, which provides us with solid footing for submission to Him. If we have given our lives to Jesus Christ, these truths should provide virtually every incentive to do everything in our power to submit to whatever responsibilities He lays out for us. Even so, life must be lived, and the road may be quite bumpy at times. But if we firmly believe our Creator controls both time and events, we can endure the bumpy parts with hope and confidence, knowing He is ever with us.

The term “moreover” beginning verse 16 signals a subject change away from God’s control of time and its events to earthier, more immediately serious, day-to-day subjects that have frequent, negative effects on life. Solomon makes sure that we understand that the events he is about to describe are happening in an under-the-sun manner. His description begins with a brief mention of corruption, especially in government.

Before tackling Ecclesiastes 3:16-17, we can get a brief overview of where he is headed from Ecclesiastes 4:6: “Better a handful with quietness than both hands full, together with toil and grasping for the wind.” In this, he summarizes how to avoid the influence of the corruption. The answer lies in rightly facing sinful drives that urge us to follow the world in its evil quests. Those living by faith will face the pulls of the corruption and endeavor to resist them as they strive to live above-the-sun lives by faith. They will value contentment over grasping for more.

Solomon writes in Ecclesiastes 3:16-17:

Moreover I saw under the sun: In the place of judgment, wickedness was there; and in the place of righteousness, iniquity was there. I said in my heart, “God shall judge the righteous and the wicked, for there is a time for every purpose and for every work.”

How can God be in control when the world contains so much evil? How can God be in control with the evil prospering in their sins and the righteous suffering in their obedience? Does that not seem backward from the way that we would think of God operating things? How should a Christian react to this?

Certainly, Solomon was not the first to ask this question. As much as we might dislike having to deal with this, it is nonetheless a reality. In His wisdom, God chose to deal with humanity in this way, and perhaps most especially, to allow His own children to face these same circumstances.

Solomon was comforted by two godly realities that we also should understand and use. First, he assures us that God will judge. The timing of His judgment is in God’s capable hands. Therefore, we must remember that nobody among humanity will get away with the evil that he does. The wages of sin—death—is a reality (Romans 6:23). We cannot allow ourselves to forget that God is judging. It is a continuous process, and in many cases, we simply are not aware of present, unseen penalties that the evil person may already be paying.

Second, human nature naturally thinks that the way God handles things is unfair, a judgment that is the work of the spirit of this world (Ephesians 2:2-3). However, God’s perception of timing and judgment is a much broader and more specific picture regarding each person than we can see. We are not walking in others’ shoes, nor are we aware of what God is planning for them to experience. Therefore, the thing that we must know and properly utilize is the fact that, in a major way, other people are none of our business. That is God’s concern, and He will take care of things in His time.

Are Men Like Beasts?

Ecclesiastes 3:18-22 expresses a conclusion when comparing God's wondrous instruction to this point with the realities lived in the world around us:

I said in my heart, "Concerning the condition of the sons of men, God tests them, that they may see that they themselves are like animals." For what happens to the sons of men also happens to animals; one thing befalls them; as one dies, so dies the other. Surely, they all have one breath; man has no advantage over animals, for all is vanity. All go to one place; all are from the dust, and all return to dust. Who knows the spirit of the sons of men, which goes upward, and the spirit of the animal, which goes down to the earth? So I perceived that nothing is better than that a man should rejoice in his own works, for that is his heritage. For who can bring him to see what will happen after him?

Solomon certainly does not mean that men are beasts in terms of potential. He limits this expression to the fact that sinners will die in their sins, and without being called at this time, it appears that they have gained nothing truly valuable. Therefore, at least on the surface, they live and die on the same level as animals.

However, he also says that God tests men that they may see that they are like animals. The most likely time that they will grasp this is after they are resurrected, when their minds will be open to God and His truth. Only then will they be able to see that, morally and ethically, they had lived no better than animals. Therefore, he is suggesting that what is truly valuable in the lives of many people lies beyond the grave. In addition, if a person is not living a life that is glorifying to God or preparing himself for living in God's Kingdom, then he has gained nothing despite all the wealth and power he might possess.

Thus, his conclusion is that our image of life must be more penetrating and broader than that. The life of a wealthy and powerful sinner, though it may seem attractive on the surface, may be as vain, meaningless, and profitless as a beast's life.

Ecclesiastes 3:22 is penetrating advice because we all tend to let our minds wander from God's purpose into envy of those of this world who do not seem to have the difficulties we face: "So I perceived that there is nothing better than that a man should rejoice in his own works, for that is his heritage. For who can bring him to see what will happen after him?"

We must learn to live each day by faith, contentedly accepting it as it comes. This is possible because a foundation of faith and understanding enables us to know that we have been greatly blessed with knowledge far more valuable than money. God has revealed Himself to us; He knows us personally. He is overseeing our lives, and we are growing in knowledge of Him and His purpose.