

Ecclesiastes And Christian Living (Part Three): Time

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***Forerunner*, "Personal," July-August 2013**

For those with sincere desire to please God by living by faith, Ecclesiastes 3 is one of the truly great, encouraging, and inspiring chapters in the entire Bible. But for us to understand the depth of its teaching more clearly, chapter 3 needs the concept found in the final three verses of chapter 2 to provide a helpful lead-in:

There is nothing better for a man than that he should eat and drink, and that his soul should enjoy good in his labor. This also, I saw, was from the hand of God. For who can eat, or who can have enjoyment, more than I? For God gives wisdom and knowledge and joy to a man who is good in His sight; but to the sinner He gives the work of gathering and collecting, that he may give to him who is good before God. This is also vanity and grasping for the wind. (Ecclesiastes 2:24-26)

Not only are these verses the conclusion to the thoughts in chapter 2, but they also provide a smooth bridge to the instruction in chapter 3. They are the first, positive, solid, clear instruction that Solomon has given about both God and life in this book. They pave the way, as it were, for accepting what is truly thrilling instruction about God in relation to time and a Christian's life of faith. The central themes of this article involves time, the depth of God's involvement with us, and most especially, our overall attitude as we move closer to Christ's return.

A Glimpse Inside That We Might Look Up

Solomon, to this point, describes life as a waste of time and energy, seemingly meaningless, monotonous, repetitious, and difficult to endure. And this occurs even though one's life may be busy, just as Solomon's surely was. To those of this world who have little or no relationship with God, and therefore have no clear knowledge of His purpose, what Solomon has written to this point is a realistic assessment. Recently, while in a supermarket, I saw a young woman wearing a shirt that proclaimed, "Life is divided between miserable and horrible." To many, it seems as though life has no object except to bring difficulty and pain.

Ecclesiastes, however, provides a message directly from our Creator through Solomon as to what our attitude must be if we are going to make the best use of the awesome opportunity He has given us—and especially make the most of the instruction in chapter 3.

In chapters 1 and 2, Solomon's approach to life is completely "under the sun." "Under the sun" implies that his teaching has not positively considered God; it is an entirely earthy view, thoroughly self-centered and carnal. God is mentioned only in Ecclesiastes 1:13, where Solomon calls life "a burdensome task God has given the sons of man." His assessment closely parallels the words on the woman's T-shirt in the supermarket.

In these final verses of Ecclesiastes 2, Solomon takes a sudden, sharp turn to an "above the sun" approach, strongly advising that we should enjoy good in our labor because this is from the hand of

God. His statement, “This also, I saw, was from the hand of God,” is important. He is counseling us that our attitude toward labor should be that it is a gracious gift from our Creator. Laboring is a God-designed and -assigned responsibility of man.

Apart from angels, we are the only created beings who can labor in this manner. We can work using creativity, objectivity, and purpose, but no animal can do such a thing. Solomon is saying that we need to give thanks for such a circumstance because it places mankind in a category that no animal can ever enter. We are still less than God but so far above animals that there is no adequate comparison.

Is there a reason such a disparity exists? He adds two verses later that God gives gifts like wisdom and knowledge to those who are good in His sight, another positive reason for a person to approach life in a different attitude than Solomon showed previously. Can an animal by reason appreciate life? Does a beast have the knowledge and wisdom to add value to its life?

Our attitudes and demeanors, however, are often highly variable. Overall, without directly using the terms at this time, Solomon is saying our attitude should be that we must be thankful and content. Why? Foremost, for the very fact that we even have life. Directly tied to this is that we have been given a mind that can think about God, that can look forward to the future on a basis of truth within His purpose, that can realize that we are the called of God, that can think spatially, and that can read and understand. We should be thankful that we can be given even more gifts because of these factors.

Thus, he is strongly hinting that we can have this outlook because God is already involved in the lives of those whom Solomon is instructing. Paul addresses I Thessalonians 5:16-18 directly to us, and its commands can greatly affect our attitudes during trials so that we make the best use of them without getting down on life, as Solomon seems to be in the first chapters of Ecclesiastes: “Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, in everything give thanks; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.” These are quite challenging! But since God commands them of us, they are things that He will enable us to accomplish. Therefore, they are not impossible tasks.

These are attitudes and actions that we can control. Other scriptures reveal that God permits us to be saddened or disappointed about what is happening. For example, the gospels say that Jesus sorrowed about various things. Here, Paul’s concern is that, in our relationship with God—as the mention of prayer establishes—we will not remain depressed for an extended time because of our contact with God. We should be able to come out of our funks. If we do not, it is because we are too focused on ourselves.

These commands guard against allowing ourselves to sink from an upbeat, positive, and hopeful attitude of a child of God to a discouraged and self-centered one. How? By doing spiritual work directly in relation to God, holding onto God in the midst of all circumstances in life. Peter writes that if God is our hope, He will lift us up (I Peter 5:6-7).

I Timothy 6:6-8 reminds us of an important reality: “Now godliness with contentment is great gain. For we brought nothing into this world, and it is certain we can carry nothing out. And having food and clothing, with these we shall be content.” This passage’s central issue concerns wealth. Great discontentment and discouragement are generated through coveting wealth. However, the attitude of a reasoned, faith-based contentment, regardless of economic circumstances, causes great spiritual gain. Solomon speaks of contentment as a major attitude that we need to prepare for the instruction given in Ecclesiastes 3.

Within a relationship with God, this faith-based attitude greatly assists in enabling a Christian to live an “over the sun” life. In a converted person’s mind, because he is living such a life, God is the Central Figure, and he accepts whatever life throws his way. A Christian with that focus works his way through his trials, overcoming the pulls toward self-centeredness because he knows God is with him.

Without God being the beacon that provides guidance and encouragement, a person can much more easily drift into an easily discouraged, discontented, covetous, “life is down on me,” self-centered existence. When that happens, spiritual progress grinds to a halt.

Time Is Vitally Important

Chapter 3 is among the better-known chapters in the entire Bible, and it is likely the best-known chapter of Ecclesiastes. It holds these distinctions partly because of the poem that begins it. Its subject is of great consequence to us.

A major lesson for us in this chapter is that we live our lives within time, and therefore, we make our choices in life within time. However, to make the best of life, we must recognize that God is sovereign over time—all the time. His rulership, His dominance, His sovereignty, over time is never relaxed. He oversees what happens within time all the time. His relationship with His children is very personal, making His calling personal and individual.

As Creator, He has goals that He set before the foundation of the world. They will be accomplished within an already set time. His goals also include what He desires to accomplish in and through us. A reality we must face is that time is always moving; time is running out for all of us. This fact is not intended to make us feel a sense of desperation, for God is so perfect and dominant over His creation and labors that He always has enough time. We, though, do not—a fact that God always takes into consideration. We can deal with this truth in our relationship with Him. This is where the issue of contentment can be quite helpful.

Solomon writes in Ecclesiastes 3:1, 9-10:

To everything there is a season, a time for every purpose under heaven: . . . What profit has the worker from that in which he labors? I have seen the God-given task with which the sons of men are to be occupied.

An important issue for us in verse 1 is that, because God is sovereign over time all the time, He will be overseeing and working to make the most and best of every situation for us. Time is important to us, but with God, it is not an overriding issue. There is time because He is involved and wants the most and best for us.

In listing the merisms (pairs of contrasting words used to express totality or completeness) in verses 2-8, Solomon is not saying everybody has to go through each of the fourteen pairs he lists, though that would do us no harm. They do, however, give us an overview of major events of virtually every life. Once they are listed, verse 9 asks, “What is to be gained by experiencing these events?” The question is rhetorical at this point. Answers are to be gathered from what Solomon teaches within the larger context of the book.

By way of contrast, understanding verse 10 is quite important to our well-being. Solomon assures us that God is deeply involved in these issues and events of life. In fact, he writes that they are God-given, implying that God has assigned them as disciplines for our development as His children. The dominant fact here is not whether God personally put us in them, since we may have gotten ourselves into them through our choices. The important factor is that we are indeed in them, and God is involved in them with us because at the very least He allowed us to fall into them.

We must not allow ourselves to forget that He is our Creator (II Corinthians 5:17); we are not creating ourselves. Thus, we can be encouraged that He has most assuredly not abandoned us (Hebrews 13:5). Are we accepting and patiently rising to meet these challenges, or are we resisting them in despair and frustration?

The instruction of verse 11 now becomes exceedingly important to our attitudes in meeting the challenges of living by faith. Solomon writes, “He has made everything beautiful in its time.” This should be tied directly to the truth of verse 1: “There is a time for every purpose.” The key word, of course, is “time.” In life’s challenges to our faith, in which God is involved with us, some purpose is being worked out. In verse 11, we learn that both the timing and what is being worked out are “beautiful.” The event might be very challenging, but God, who is involved in the Christian’s life and in this challenge, calls it “beautiful.” With that hopeful knowledge, what should our attitude be?

The root of the Hebrew word translated beautiful literally means “bright.” The Hebrew word can be translated “fair,” “comely,” “beautiful,” “suitable,” “appropriate,” and “timely,” depending on the context. In Job 42:15, the same Hebrew word is translated “beautiful” when describing Job’s daughters. Does the word illustrate something ugly, bad, detrimental, unsuitable, or inappropriate? Absolutely not! The word indicates something good and admirable, a blessing.

Timing and Intensity Considered Together

When that knowledge is applied to this verse, we find an encouraging truth. God’s timing, His oversight of events, and what He wants them to accomplish are something good! They are not merely broadly good but also suitable, fitting, appropriate, and timely.

Consider this question: Was the scattering of Israel and Judah beautiful in its time? If we read Lamentations without considering God’s entire purpose, the situation appears very ugly indeed. However, over the long haul, the answer is undoubtedly, “Yes, it was beautiful and good!” It was suitable for that occasion.

What about the scattering of the church? Was it beautiful? The same is true. Our going through it may have been stressful, requiring painful adjustments while enduring to the end, but in the long term, it will most certainly be beautifully good.

Is correction good? Do we really want to continue doing things wrong? If God had not done what He did when and how He did it, how many serious spiritual character and attitude flaws would have gone uncorrected? How disastrous would they have been to the salvation of perhaps many others?

How many nice people have we fellowshiped with in the past but who have seemingly been swept overboard and appear lost? The reality may be that they were “nice tares.” They indeed may have been fine people with many social graces but completely unconverted. Perhaps they no longer fellowship with us because God delayed their true calling, sparing them from the Lake of Fire.

Peter states clearly that God is “not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance” (II Peter 3:9). There used to be a television program called Father Knows Best. Yes, He does! And because of the way God has acted, many more will enter God’s Kingdom in His image than if He had not intervened. It is even possible to consider that we may all have been lost except for His rough intervention!

It is critical for us to keep in mind always that God knows the end from the beginning (Isaiah 46:10). His overview captures the entire span of events; He sees the entire picture. We, though, live in a time-bound, material universe, and all we have is a mere point of view (I Corinthians 13:12). For the most part, we are restricted to grasping things from our narrow perspective. This is why faith is required of us and why Solomon states in verse 11 that we cannot “find out the work that God does from beginning to end.” So how can we meet life’s challenges in the right spirit?

If we think the scattering of the church has been difficult to accept in a good attitude, we need to be patient because prophecy reveals that things will become much worse as time moves on! I am personally becoming ever more aware that time is moving on for me. My mother, who lived to be almost 93, said to me once, “Getting old is not for sissies.” She was saying in her unconverted way that, regardless of age, the trials of life never do really end. It is almost as if a person’s age is not respected. As one gets older, the trials simply morph into another form.

Trusting God to Work Things Out

To help us through our current spiritual trials as well as the intensifying times ahead, we must come to know God through a personal relationship and trust Him to work things out. We must use our faith, knowing that we do not see the entire picture.

What does God require of us? What pleases Him? What makes Him look upon us with affection and satisfaction as we experience our difficulties? God’s Word provides us answers.

Written during a difficult period in Israel’s history, Micah 6:6-8 gives this simple instruction about what pleases Him:

With what shall I come before the Lord, and bow myself before the High God? Shall I come before Him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old? Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams or ten thousand rivers of oil? Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul? He has shown you, O man, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God?

Isaiah 66:1-2 adds:

Thus says the Lord: “Heaven is My throne, and earth is My footstool. Where is the house that you will build Me? And where is the place of My rest? For all these things My hand

has made, and all those things exist,” says the Lord. “But on this one will I look: On him who is poor and of a contrite spirit, and who trembles at My word.”

What pleases God? Simple humility and obedience to His Word as we follow through, overcoming the challenges God sets before us.

Recall Paul’s instructions in I Thessalonians 5:16-18: “Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, and in everything give thanks; because this is the will of God in Christ Jesus.” This is another simple, clear instruction that brings us right back to the thought in Ecclesiastes 2:24-26.

We will most assuredly not be able to control every circumstance. We could not control the scattering of the church, and we cannot control the way each person responds to the scattering. We cannot control their attitudes, as that is a personal responsibility. We cannot control the horrible political, economic, educational, religious, and moral declines taking place all around us, but we can control our personal attitudes and responses. This is what God will judge in us. We can allow these challenges to become frustrating and depressing, or by using faith, we can trust God, being patient and learning to be content within His purpose.

Witness Jeremiah’s attitudes revealed in his account of his prophetic ministry. He is sometimes called “the crying prophet.” At times, he was not as content as he should have been, and God recorded those episodes for our benefit as examples we should not follow. The lesson for us is that God is always faithful.

Grace to the Rescue

Ecclesiastes 2:26 says that God gives gifts. We need to consider another wonderful gift God has given, not to His children only, but to all mankind. This specific gift is named in Ecclesiastes 3:11: “He has put eternity in their hearts.” This gift is wonderful, but it contains an aspect that can work against us if we are not careful. Unlike animals, we have thoughts of immortality. We normally do not want to die; we want to live forever. Yet, we also know that we are caught between time as it is for us right now and eternity. As God reveals Himself to us, to live eternally with Him and to be like Him become major desires for us.

The filmmaker Woody Allen is an atheist and certainly has no revelation from God. He nonetheless makes an insightful observation about mankind, which he learned at least partly from his occupation as a writer and movie-maker:

The universe is indifferent, so we create a fake world for ourselves, and we exist within that fake world, a world that, in fact means nothing at all, when you step back. It is meaningless. But it’s important that we create some sense of meaning, because no perceptible meaning exists for anybody.

For us, the most meaningful part of his comment is “it’s important that we create some sense of meaning.” Why is this important? Because our thinking is what creates a sense of purpose for our existence and therefore gives direction for our use of life. Will our conclusions be true or false? Our minds can only work with what they already have, which they accrue as we move through life and its events.

Woody Allen observes that the creation, the universe, tells us nothing about the purpose for life. While that is not entirely correct, it is close enough for the unconverted. How much spiritual truth does the unconverted mind really have to work with? Therefore, humanly, we attempt to create our own meaning and purpose, fitting ourselves into what we have imagined. What are the odds that a person will come up with exactly the same purpose and meaning that the Creator has planned for us?

In addition—and this is essential—what are the chances that a person will fit himself into that divine plan on his own? The correct answer is zilch, nada, nothing. Therefore, since the universe tells us nothing, the true purpose of life must be revealed through God's calling.

Of supreme importance to us, then, is whether our thinking creates a sense of meaning and purpose for our lives from what God has revealed in His Word. Ecclesiastes 3:11 reveals that God has given mankind thoughts of eternity, that is, of time both backward and forward endlessly. However, He has not yet given mankind His truth about eternity. Consequently, most of mankind believes that they already have immortality within them! In this way, their false thinking becomes their enemy!

Understanding and fully accepting what He has given to us are not always easy because our former, carnal experiences make us susceptible to the pulls of the world. We become sluggish in living by faith because we allow our former education from the world to lure us into self-centeredness. Our challenge is to focus on the purpose of life that God has revealed to us, not on what we have imagined for ourselves, as Woody Allen suggests.

When we add other truths gleaned from other passages of God's Word, then we realize that verse 11 is implying that we are being created for another world, an entirely different one within the realm of eternity. God's gift of His Holy Spirit has given us an ability to transcend mankind's fixation on the present and the material. We are being created for the spirit world of the Father, the Son, and the angels that They have made to be ministering spirits for our benefit. We are being created for the Kingdom of God.

To find satisfaction and fulfillment, Solomon attempted many different avenues and thought deeply about life as he saw it. However, we must come to understand that God has ordained that we must live by faith while awaiting our change. That time must be spent within a relationship with Him so that we come to know Him and His way ever more fully. Now is the testing time, the time for trials to prepare us. We must learn that our satisfaction in life must come from an "over the sun" spiritual relationship lived by faith.

Those who pursue this relationship with God will be given eternal life because they know Him and He knows them. This is the overall task to which Ecclesiastes 3:10 alludes. God has given us this task to accomplish to be prepared for living in His Kingdom. In order to fulfill it, we must live by faith, trusting His sovereignty in every situation. That means being at peace, content, comforting ourselves with the truth that God is fully aware of what is happening in our lives, as well as being in control of the big picture. Satan could not endure this, so he attempted to throw off these restraints.

Recall that Ecclesiastes 3:1 states, "There is a time for every purpose under heaven." But is the timing right or wrong, bad or good, suitable or unsuitable, ugly or beautiful?

It depends on who chooses the timing. Paul writes in Galatians 4:4, "But when the fullness of the time had come, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the law." God set the time for

this to occur. It was not happenstance; the timing was fitting. Mark 1:15 shows the same principle: “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand.” Jesus means that the time God set to preach the gospel had been reached. Matthew 26:18, 27-29 contain similar thoughts: The timing of His crucifixion and even the timing of when Jesus will drink wine again was set. Mark 8:31 reveals that God set the length of time Jesus spent in the grave too.

Acts 1:6-7 adds an important fact:

Therefore, when they had come together, they asked Him, saying, “Lord, will You at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?” And He said to them, “It is not for you to know the times or seasons which the Father has put in His own authority.”

God has sovereignly set the times, including appointing the times for our trials too. Are not times set by men for school tests? The proctor says, “You have 40 minutes, then the test is over.”

Understanding this principle helps us to grasp Solomon’s conclusions in Ecclesiastes 3:12-14:

I know that there is nothing 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.

Some translations contend that the last phrase is best read as “that men should stand in awe before Him.” When will that take place? It will not truly occur until after the resurrection. Of what will we stand in awe? We will truly admire many things about His glory, but I believe that, after going through these experiences with Him so closely involved in our lives, what will really strike us with mind-numbing awe is what He has been able to create of us.

God’s timing is always good, right, and appropriate. It is up to us to use our faith in Him to remain in a good attitude, using the time that He has set for us to grow, overcome, and meet the responsibilities our trials impose. In all of life, we deal with nothing as continuously as time. Every day, from the moment we wake up until we go back to sleep, we are watching time, setting times, meeting schedules, calculating how much time we have, etc. This highlights that everything matters because we have only so much time.

While our time is limited, we can live in faith and hope because of the overall message of this magnificent chapter: God is in control of time all the time.