

Ecclesiastes 3

Ecclesiastes chapters 3 (ESV)

Keep the poem in verses 3:1-8 in context with the rest of the following verses 3:9-15.

In 3:9 of this chapter the opening theme found in Ecclesiastes 1:3 – “What does man gain by all the toil at which he toils under the sun?” (Which in chapter one is followed by an expression of the temporal, meaninglessness of the cycles of nature, man and life.)

3:1 – “For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven:”

- A. Topic is: The Proper Time
- B. Proverbs 15:23 – “To make an apt answer is a joy to a man, and a word in season, how good it is!”
- C. Proverbs 26:4 do not answer a fool is contrasted with Proverbs 26:5 to answer the fool. The key to this wisdom is knowing the right time.
- D. There is no real difference between the words “season” and “time”. Both words indicate specific points in time.
- E. “Time” appears 28 times in seven verses.
- F. “Event” or “every matter” refers to human activity that results as a choice made by man.
- G. The student of these verses has to decide which is the focus:
 - a. Is Qohelet saying that the extreme of every action and decision a man makes is appropriate, and even necessary, at the right time.
 - b. OR, is Qohelet saying that all events are in the hands of God either causes or judges with approval every action in its appropriate time.
- H. It is possible that Qohelet is saying that although there is a right time for all these things, the challenge comes in knowing WHEN that time is. In some cases it is impossible to know for certain that it is time to kill, or time to throw something a way, etc. Everything is appropriate at the right time, but when is the right time?

3:2 – “a time to be born, and a time to die; a time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is planted;”

- A. Between 3:2-8 there are 14 opposites listed.
 - a. The contrasting opposites are a figure of speech called “merism” in Hebrew poetry.
 - b. The intention of poets who use “merism” is to express completeness.
- B. g

3:3 – “a time to kill, and a time to heal;”

- A. KILL and HEAL
- B. “killing” can refer to capital punishment or killing in war.

“a time to break down, and a time to build up;”

- A. TEAR DOWN (break down) or BUILD
- B. The word “build” usually refers to construction
- C. These words are used to refer to a wide variety of activities.
- D. “tear down” could refer to the results of warfare. This would then mean that after the military conflict it is time to “build”

3:4 – “a time to weep, and a time to laugh;”

- A. WEEP and LAUGH
- B. 3:4 moves to the area of emotions and the actions that follow: weeping, laughing, mourning and dancing.
- C.

“a time to mourn, and a time to dance;”

- A. MOURN and DANCE
- B. Mourning and dancing could refer to the public expression of the inner personal emotions of weeping and laughing.

3:5 – “a time to cast away stones, and a time to gather stones together;”

- A. CASTING STONES and GATHERING STONES
- B. The meaning of this is debated.
- C. It is often suggested this refers to destroying an enemies agricultural property or fields by throwing stones on it as is seen in 2 Kings 3:19 and 3:25.
- D. Gathering stones was necessary to prepare a field for preparation for planting. This is seen in Isaiah 5:2.

“a time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing;”

- A. EMBRACE and NOT EMBRACE
- B. The Hebrew word is *hbq* and it refers to an action of affection.
 - a. In Proverbs 5:20 *hbq* is used to refer to sexual intercourse
 - b. In Genesis 29:13 and 2 Kings 4:16 *hbq* is used to refer to a form of greeting. This is likely the intention here.

3:6 – “a time to seek, and a time to lose;”

- A. SEEK and LOSE
- B. sss

“a time to keep, and a time to cast away;”

- A. KEEP and CAST AWAY
- B. sss

3:7 – “a time to tear, and a time to sew;”

- A. TEAR and SEW
- B. It is possible that “tear” refers to a time of “mourning” where clothes would be “torn” and the mourned would be silent. If that is the case then the “time of sewing” would be the time to end the mourning, to resume speaking and to sew the torn clothes from the period of mourning. But, this may just be an coincidental connection these words make.

“a time to keep silence, and a time to speak;”

- A. SILENCE and SPEAK
- B. The book of Proverbs is filled with

3:8 – “a time to love, and a time to hate;”

- A. LOVE and HATE

“a time for war, and a time for peace.”

- A. WAR and PEACE

- B. Notice these are not written as parallels such as:
 - a. Love and Hate/Peace and War
 - b. Love/Peace contrasts with Hate/War
- C. This lack of parallel may be an indication that Hate and War are not equals, nor a moral evil.

3:9 – “What gain has the worker from his toil?”

- A. The poem has ended
- B. Qohelet summaries with a negative, rhetorical question that seems to be saying these things:
 - a. There are many activities, events and emotions that occur
 - b. All these things are appropriate at some time
 - c. All these things are designed, approved and appointed by God
 - d. Yet, all these things are conflicting and ultimately undo the other.
 - e. Conclusion: “What is gained?”
 - f. Point: God has designed these things and appointed the times, but we do not know the why. Sometimes we don’t even know the right time or the right response. The ultimate understanding is hidden.

3:10 – “I have seen the business that God has given to the children of man to be busy with.”

- A. The poem identifies the business that God has assigned to man
- B. Compare this to chapter one verses 13-14.

3:11 – “He has made everything beautiful in its time. 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.”

- A. This verse could try to be read with a note of hope and the sound of praise if all it said was the first two points:
 - a. God made everything beautiful in its time
 - b. God put eternity into man’s heart
- B. But, this verse is in fact negative since the verse ends with, “yet so that he cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end.”
- C. This point again seems to support the idea that Qohelet is frustrated with his inability to appreciate all things in time since only God knows and understands the details of personal and human history.
- D. An animal is not frustrated with their existence because they do not have the burden of desiring to understand the eternal element of existence that God has set in men’s hearts.
- E. Qohelet explains that man lives in frustration because God has designed man for something that man cannot understand while living in time.

3:12 – “I perceived that there is nothing better for them than to be joyful and to do good as long as they live;”

- A. This is Qohelet’s application statement based on his conclusion of the poem’s intent.
- B. There is nothing better for man than:
 - a. Live in joy
 - b. Do good
- C. The highest level of satisfaction man can attain while alive on the earth is personal joy and doing good for others.

3:13 – “also that everyone should eat and drink and take pleasure in all his toil—this is God’s gift to man.”

- A. Qohelet two more things to joy and good deeds:
 - a. Eating and drinking
 - b. Pleasure in work

- B. Man's best condition in life is less than Qohelet had hoped. Instead of reaching the extent of wisdom man is trapped below a divine ceiling that leaves man's best experience and insight at:
 - a. Joy
 - b. Good deeds
 - c. Eating and drinking
 - d. Enjoy toil
- C. And, even with that discovery, Qohelet admits that the only ones who can receive these temporal satisfactions are those to whom God decides to give them.
- D. This would include the concept that those who receive this gift of satisfaction have faith in God.
 - a. 1 Timothy 6:8 – "If we have food and clothing, we will be content with that."
 - b. 1 Timothy 6:6 – "Godliness with contentment is great gain."
 - c. 1 Timothy 4:3 – "They forbid people to marry and order them to abstain from certain foods, which God created to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and who know the truth. For everything God created is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving, because it is consecrated by the word of God and prayer."

3:14 – "I perceived that whatever God does endures forever; nothing can be added to it, nor anything taken from it. God has done it, so that people fear before him."

- A. Another conclusion from the poem above:
 - a. God's work is eternal
 - b. You cannot alter God's work by adding or taking from it
 - c. God's purpose hiding the details is intentional: To cause people to realize there is something greater than themselves in the universe.
 - i. Acts 17:26-28, "He determined the times set for them and the exact places where they should live. God did this so that men would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from each one of us."

B. ..

3:15 – "That which is, already has been; that which is to be, already has been; and God seeks what has been driven away."

- A. The concept of the cycle is mentioned again
- B. Restatement of there is nothing new, but adds the concept that God is involved with this monotonous cycle.
- C. God seeks what he has driven away.
- D. There is a cycle in history, but with God it is spiraling to an ultimate purpose.

3:16 – "Moreover, I saw under the sun that in the place of justice, even there was wickedness, and in the place of righteousness, even there was wickedness."

3:17 – "I said in my heart, God will judge the righteous and the wicked, for there is a time for every matter and for every work."

3:18 – "I said in my heart with regard to the children of man that God is testing them that they may see that they themselves are but beasts."

3:19 – "For what happens to the children of man and what happens to the beasts is the same; as one dies, so dies the other. They all have the same breath, and man has no advantage over the beasts, for all is vanity."

3:20 – "All go to one place. All are from the dust, and to dust all return."

3:21 – "Who knows whether the spirit of man goes upward and the spirit of the beast goes down into the earth?"

3:22 – “So I saw that there is nothing better than that a man should rejoice in his work, for that is his lot. Who can bring him to see what will be after him?”