

For Everything There Is a Season

Ecclesiastes 3: 1 – 15ⁱ

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One author has written:

A common illustration of the ways of God and the understanding of man is that of a tapestry on a loom. From the vantage underneath, little is visible but snarls and knots. But above, the beautiful pattern of the work on the loom can be seen. As Solomon has shown, we live out our lives under the loom, and everything we see is vanity. So how can we see the pattern above? The only possible answer is through faith in the sovereign God.ⁱⁱ

This is a beautiful understanding of the text that we have before us this morning. Solomon wrote:

¹ For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven... Ecclesiastes 3:1-3 (ESV)

So, right off the bat we understand that we are not just talking about the good things. We are talking about **everything**. If we were talking about only the good things (at least, as we perceive “things”); if the Holy Spirit had inspired Solomon to write, “For everything there is a season: a time to be born, and a time to grow strong; a time to make money and a time to make more money; a time to hunt and a time to play golf...” if that’s the way it read, then no one would have any problem. Christians, and even unbelievers, will often express gratitude and a sense of being blessed when everything’s going our way. In the case of the unbeliever, it’s not clear who they think might be blessing them, but regardless, when we are on top of the world it’s not hard to imagine that some higher power or even blind fate has taken us in hand to give us an abundance and to make life wonderful, but Solomon wrote:

¹ For **everything** there is a season, and a time **for every matter under heaven**: ² a time to be born, and a time to die; a time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is planted; ³ a time to kill, and a time to heal; a time to break down, and a time to build up... iii Ecclesiastes 3:1-3 (ESV)

We might even say, “A time for snarls and a time for knots.” In fact, the rhythm of this ancient Hebrew wisdom might remind some of us of something a little closer to home. Lord’s Day 10 in the Heidelberg Catechism:

Providence is the almighty and ever present power of God by which he upholds, as with His hand, heaven and earth and all creatures, and so rules them that leaf and blade, rain **and** drought, fruitful **and** lean years, food and drink, health **and** sickness, prosperity **and** poverty —**all things**, in fact, come to us not by chance but from His Fatherly hand.^{iv}

All things. So, there is

² a time to be born, and a time to die; a time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is planted; ³ a time to kill, and a time to heal; a time to break down, and a time to build up; ⁴ a time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance; ⁵ a time to cast away stones, and a time to gather stones together; a time to embrace, and a time to refrain from

embracing; ⁶ a time to seek, and a time to lose; a time to keep, and a time to cast away; ⁷ a time to tear, and a time to sew; a time to keep silence, and a time to speak; ⁸ a time to love, and a time to hate; a time for war, and a time for peace. Ecclesiastes 3:2–8 (ESV)

¹ ...a time to every purpose under the heaven... Ecclesiastes 3:1 (KJV 1900)

as verse 1 read in the King James (and also in the folk song by The Byrds). The Hebrew doesn't require this translation, but I like it, because it gets at what is sometimes missed here; that Solomon is not merely repeating the thought from chapter 1 that

Time like an ever-rolling stream soon bears us all away; we fly forgotten, as a dream dies at the opening day...^v

to borrow a line from the hymn-writer. That too is true, but it's not the point here.

What God Has Given

Verse 9 appears to lean that way,

⁹ What gain has the worker from his toil? Ecclesiastes 3:9 (ESV)

This is a pretty common theme in Ecclesiastes, but consider verse 10.

¹⁰ I have seen the business that God has given to the children of man to be busy with. Ecclesiastes 3:10 (ESV)

So, the question of verse 9 is not rhetorical, or simply another expression of the futility of labor under the sun. Instead, Solomon is being slowly but inexorably led by the Spirit of God to a different conclusion. Toil, under the sun seems bitter, and sometimes pointless, but in reality this is

¹⁰ ...the business that God has given to the children of man to be busy with. Ecclesiastes 3:10 (ESV)

And why? Why has God imposed toil, and trial, and struggle on the children of men? Why didn't He just ordain that we be "carried to the skies on flowery beds of ease"^{vi}? Well, verse 11:

¹¹ He has made everything beautiful in its time. Ecclesiastes 3:11 (ESV)

Even toil, trial, and struggle under the sun. We can understand this to a point because,

Also, he has put eternity...

(or possibly, darkness)^{vii}

...into man's heart, yet so that he cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end. Ecclesiastes 3:11 (ESV)

So, we can't arrive at an understanding of the purpose of God by looking inside ourselves, getting in touch with our feelings, or by reasoning from our own heart. God has put eternity there, so that we will hunger for more than this life has to offer, and know that fulfillment and personal identity cannot be found in the human heart. Paul said something akin to this when

he was speaking to the philosophers at Athens. Acts 17, verses 26 and 27:

²⁶ And he made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their dwelling place, ²⁷ **that they should seek God**, and perhaps feel their way toward him and find him... Acts 17:26–27 (ESV)

This is the purpose for all that we encounter “under the sun” in all

¹⁰ ...the business that God has given to the children of man to be busy with. Ecclesiastes 3:10 (ESV)

—in all that God has given. And when we understand that this is what God has given, and why, then verse 12 makes sense.

¹² I perceived that there is nothing better for them than to be joyful and to do good as long as they live; ¹³ also that everyone should eat and drink **and take pleasure in all his toil**... Ecclesiastes 3:12–13 (ESV)

Which seems counterintuitive, to say the least, but still,

¹² ...this is God’s gift to man. Ecclesiastes 3:12–13 (ESV)

The eternity (or darkness), the hunger that God has put into our hearts—the recognition that we are more than atoms and impulses who will one day disappear forever into the dust gives us the ability to enjoy the things of this world without making them into idols, and even to

² Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, ³ for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. James 1:2–3 (ESV)

In other words, the “trials of various kinds”—the testing of our faith—is God at work drawing His children to Himself. If you belong to Him then trial and struggle is not a sign that He has forgotten or abandoned you—just the opposite. It is the “under construction” sign at the side of the road, except it’s not the road that’s being constructed; it’s you. It’s me. It’s everyone who ever came to God through faith in Jesus Christ, together with those who will come to Him when the trials and the struggles and the toil of this life under the sun finally brings them to the point where they cry out to God for mercy and grace.

For Every Purpose Under Heaven

Even so,

¹ For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven... Ecclesiastes 3:1 (ESV)

A time for the blessing that we sometimes find in all the good things that God has given, and a time for the blessing that we almost always overlook in the snarls and knots that God uses to weave the tapestry of our lives according to His holy and sovereign plan, working all things together for good for those who love Him, and

²⁸ ...are called according to his purpose. Romans 8:28 (ESV)

I was struck by this again a little more than a month ago when Lynda and I attended the

memorial service of a good friend. She was only 56 years old, a minister's wife, the mother of 8 children, and several grandchildren too. For the last several years she lived with cancer and the pain and weakness that came with it, and when I say that she was the mother of 8 children, I should also add that she "lost" 2 of those children quite early in their lives. There were other things too. Her life was good, but certainly no "flowery bed of ease".

But sometime, early this fall, when she spoke with her pastor about the memorial service that she knew was coming, she very specifically asked for Lord's Day 10 to be part of that service. She wanted her surviving children and grandchildren, family and friends to remember that none of the snarls and knots that could be observed from the underside of the tapestry were accidents or the work of blind, uncaring fate. She wanted them to remember that she belonged to God in life and in death, and that because she belonged to Him, **everything that had happened** (everything!) came from His Fatherly hand. In fact everything that had happened had worked together for her salvation. She knew that, and she wanted everyone who attended the service to be reminded of it in no uncertain terms.

¹ For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven: ² a time to be born, and [even] a time to die... Ecclesiastes 3:1-2 (ESV)

This too, is God's gift. Solomon went on to write:

¹⁴ I perceived that whatever God does endures forever; nothing can be added to it, nor anything taken from it. God has done it...

(and here's why)

...so that people fear before him. Ecclesiastes 3:14 (ESV)

So that, as the Apostle Paul wrote,

²⁷ ...they should seek God, and perhaps feel their way toward him and find him. Yet he is actually not far from each one of us, ²⁸ for "In him we live and move and have our being"... Acts 17:27-28 (ESV)

This is what we were created for: to know the Lord our God and Jesus Christ, His son, and to love Him with all of our heart, soul, mind, and strength. This is His purpose for the world that He made: that His children should glorify Him, and enjoy all that He has done, and

¹⁴ ...whatever God does endures forever; nothing can be added to it, nor anything taken from it. God has done it... Ecclesiastes 3:14 (ESV)

So, look to Him in faith. The answers that you need to the biggest questions in your life won't be found in yourself. God has put eternity there to draw you to Him, and the answers that you seek will be found in Christ alone. Paul wrote,

³⁰ The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent, ³¹ because he has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed; and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead." Acts 17:30-31 (ESV)

Everything that has happened (everything!) is drawing us to this. What God ordains is always right, so embrace the providence of God, trust in Christ for all that you need in body and soul, and He will be your life, and peace, and righteousness.

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- i All Scripture citations, unless otherwise noted, are from *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016).
 - ii Douglas Wilson, *Joy at the End of the Tether: The Inscrutable Wisdom of Ecclesiastes* (Moscow, ID: Canon Press, 1999), 41.
 - iii Emphasis mine.
 - iv The Heidelberg Catechism, *The Psalter Hymnal* (Grand Rapids, MI: CRC Publications, 1987, 1988), 871. Emphasis mine.
 - v Isaac Watts, "O God, Our Help in Ages Past", *The Psalter Hymnal* (Grand Rapids, MI: CRC Publications, 1987, 1988), 170.
 - vi Isaac Watts, "Am I a Soldier of the Cross", *Trinity Hymnal* (Philadelphia, PA: Great Commission Publications, 1979), 481.
 - vii Sidney Greidanus, *Preaching Christ from Ecclesiastes: Foundations for Expository Sermons* (Grand Rapids, MI; Cambridge, U.K.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2010), 69.