

Ecclesiastes

Chapter 3

A Time for Everything

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; 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.

3:1-9 *there is a season and time* – In human affairs there is, by God’s appointment, a constant alternation of opposite events, lying beyond the control of men. For the purposes of probation, this is a wise and good arrangement. But for the enjoyment of this world, which is what the Preacher has in view, it is an evil; for it makes all present good uncertain and transient. (CB)

3:1 Solomon introduces the following poem (vv 2–8) and connects it with what has appeared previously by describing changing human affairs and God’s unchanging will. Throughout Ec, he frequently changes his tone, describing both the frustrations of life and the firmness of God’s Word and blessing. Luther: “All human works and efforts have a certain and definite time of acting, of beginning, and of ending, beyond human control. Thus this is spoken in opposition to free will. It is not up to us to prescribe the time, the manner, or the effect of the things that are to be done; and so it is obvious that here our strivings and efforts are unreliable. Everything comes and goes at the time that God has appointed. He proves this on the basis of examples of human works whose times lie outside the choice of man” (AE 15:49). (TLSB)

Since it is God’s plan that men should be subjected to constant changes in this world, and should have no permanent and sure possession of earthly good, we ought to bear with cheerful resignation the vicissitudes of life, while we look to the future world for “a city which hath foundations whose builder and maker is God.” (CB)

3:2-8 These verses consist of fourteen pairs of opposite words. The use of seven or multiples thereof is common in the OT. We encounter it elsewhere in Ecclesiastes and the Song of Songs. Seven signifies completeness. Here Solomon uses it to include every human activity. (PBC)

Note the chiasmic sequence. The wise grasp the rhythms of life and live in agreement with them. Gr Naz: “Who was so pleasant when you met him ... [Basil]? Who was more kindly in his stories, more refined in his wit, more tender in his rebukes? His reproofs gave rise to no arrogance, his relaxation to no dissipation, but avoiding excess in either, he made use of both in reason and season, according to the rules of Solomon, who assigns to every business a season” (NPNF 2 7:417). *a time*. We are subject to times and changes over which we have little control. This contrasts with God’s eternity. (LXX has *kairos*, “a proper season. (TLSB)

3:2 *a time*. Divinely appointed (see Ps 31:15; Pr 16:1–9). (CSB)

born...die – The appointed time is painfully short. (TLSB)

plant...pluck up – Human lives are as fleeting as the agricultural season—planted and cut off. (TLSB)

3:2-3 The references to uprooting, healing and building in these verses are seen by some as allusions to God’s dealings with His chosen people. Psalm 80:8,9, for instance, states, “You brought a vine out of Egypt; You drove out the nations and planted it. You cleared the ground for it, and it took root and filled the land.” Perhaps building on Solomon’s words, the Prophet Jeremiah uses similar language with reference to God’s people: “I will build them up and not tear down: I will plant them and not uproot them” (Jeremiah 24:6). But even if Solomon is thinking of specific Israelite history, he is also speaking of general human experiences. This is his tendency throughout Ecclesiastes. (PBC)

3:3 *kill* – God gives rulers the authority to engage in just wars, to dispel chaos, to punish evildoers, and to protect citizens from harm (cf Rm 13:4). (TLSB)

3:4 Contrasts wailing at a funeral with fancy-free activity. In Egypt, dancing was part of funeral ceremonies. This does not seem to be the case in Israel, where dancing expressed joy (Ps 30:11). (TLSB)

3:5 *cast away stones* – This either to mar a field by casting abroad stones upon it, 2 Kings 3:19, 25, or to cast away stones in demolishing a building. (CB)

Destruction of fortifications in war, disaster, etc., and their rebuilding. (TLSB)

Certain commentators see this verse as having sexual significance. Jewish scholars took the term “scatter stones” as referring to sexual relations and “gather” as referring to abstinence. In view of the parallelism in the second part of the verse – “a time to embrace...refrain” – this suggestion is not without merit. (PBC)

There is another way to understand this. When Jesus spoke of the destruction of the temple, He described this casting down of stones: “Not one stone will be left on another; every one will be thrown down” (Mark 13:2). If we understand the verse before us in this manner, Solomon is describing the time for building (prosperity) verses the time for destruction. The second half of the verse would fit in an indirect way: the time for embracing is the time of prosperity and the time for refraining is a time of need. (PBC)

To embrace one’s neighbor in friendship; to distance oneself from a person suspected of a crime. (TLSB)

3:7 *time to tear* – This brings to mind the Hebrew practice of tearing a garment in time of anger or sorrow. For example, when Jesus was on trial “the high priest tore his clothes” in anger (Matthew 26:65). (PBC)

A time to undo what we have done and to repair what we have undone. Cf Gn 3:7. (TLSB)

silence...speak – Slow to speak—quick to listen. A time to be silent when words violate the Eighth Commandment, and a time to speak the healing balm of God’s Word. Greg: “The times for changes should be discreetly weighed, lest either, when the tongue ought to be restrained, it

run loose to no profit in words, or when it might speak with profit, it slothfully restrain itself” (NPNF 2 12:38). (TLSB)

3:8 *hate...war* – Christians are to hate the emptiness of this world; they are to hate evil (Proverbs 8:13). We are constantly at war with “the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil” (Ephesians 6:12); and, if called upon we should serve out country in time of war. Moreover, God Himself exhibits both hatred (Psalm 5:5) and love (John 3:16) for this sinful world. (PBC)

War does not last forever, nor does peace. True peace is found only in the Lord, our peacemaker. Hatred and death are found everywhere. (TLSB)

3:1–8 God’s will is unsearchable. He will judge the living and the dead on the Last Day. Temporal things cannot satisfy God’s people. Eternity and the consummation of salvation are in Christ alone (cf Rm 8:18). • Dear heavenly Father, give us our daily bread, good seasons, and health. Protect us from war, famine, disease, and drought, through Jesus Christ. Amen. (TLSB)

The God-Given Task

9 What gain has the worker from his toil? **10** I have seen the business that God has given to the children of man to be busy with. **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. **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—this is God's gift to man. **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. **15** That which is, already has been; that which is to be, already has been; and God seeks what has been driven away.

3:9-10 Work diverts our attention from the heartaches and struggles in life (cf Php 4:11–13). The fall required Adam and Eve to labor outside the Garden of Eden by the sweat of their brows. We produce in order to consume. (TLSB)

3:9 *what gain has the worker?* – The answer is found in the coming verses. (PBC)

3:11 *beautiful* – Hbr *yapheh*, here used as “right” or “fitting.” All living things have their proper development and beauty. (TLSB)

in its time – They mature, yet time takes their beauty away too. (TLSB)

put eternity – The Law (written on the heart of all people [Rm 2:15] and given to Israel through Moses) confesses the enduring truth that there is one true God. (TLSB)

cannot find out – Human reason cannot comprehend God and His purposes. E.g., when a house is being built, one can only anticipate the beauty of the finished product or its eventual collapse. (TLSB)

The chapter summarized: God’s beautiful but tantalizing world is too big for us, yet its satisfactions are too small. Since we were made for eternity, the things of time cannot fully and permanently satisfy.

In spite of the apparent futility of human endeavor, man senses that what he does has lasting repercussions. Yet without the gospel of Christ man has no way of knowing how to reach God and eternal life. (PBC)

3:12–13 A pointer to the book’s conclusion. God’s people find meaning in life when they cheerfully accept it from the hand of God. (CSB)

3:12 *be joyful and do good* – Comfort one another, cheerfully receive God’s gifts, and further benefit your neighbor by generosity. Joy and purpose come by self-giving, a lifestyle that mimics God’s ways. (TLSB)

3:13 *this is God’s gift to man* – Every good gift is from God. And what an awesome God He is! Everything He does “will endure forever.” No one can take away what God decides to give. If He gives us the greatest gift of all, His love and forgiveness in Christ, then “who shall separate us from the love of Christ?” (Romans 8:35).

Rejoice in the good of your labor as a gift of God and an expression of His love toward His children. Return thanks; He is the source of joy. (TLSB)

3:14 *forever*. In this word the “eternity” of v. 11 becomes clearer. (CSB)

In ordering the course of human affairs, His arrangements are unchangeable, and above human control. (CB)

nothing can be added to it, nor anything taken from it – It is foolish to try to add to God’s plans. For example, there is nothing any man can add to God’s plan of salvation. Good works add nothing to what Christ has won for mankind. “It is the gift of God – not by works, so that no one can boast” (Ephesians 2:8-9). “If anyone adds anything to them [God’s words], God will add to him the plagues described in this book. And if anyone takes words away...God will take away from him his share in the tree of life and in the holy city [heaven]” (Revelation 22:18-19) (PBC)

Like God’s Word, His works are perfect, and no human effort can add or detract from that perfection. We are not equal partners. This sums up the message of Ec (cf 12:13). (TLSB)

3:15 *God seeks what has been driven away* – Looks it up, as it were, for the purpose of causing it to exist again. This includes both the natural succession of creatures, fruits, and seasons, and the general course of human events. (CB)

God’s Word and His renewal of creation will always remain constant in a changing world. (TLSB)

From Dust to Dust

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. **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. **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. **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. **20** All go to one place. All are from the dust, and to dust all return. **21** Who knows whether the spirit of man goes upward and the spirit of the beast goes down into the earth? **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?

3:16 *in the place justice, even there was wickedness* – Often it seems that good, honest labor doesn't pay. Under the sun the opposite frequently appears to be the case. Sin has such a grip on mankind, and the world so teems with wickedness, that evildoers get away with an awful lot. Even where we would expect to find justice, there is none. In Solomon's day, as in ours, courts of justice weren't everything they should have been. When one looks at this it's easy to become cynical like the famous lawyer Clarence Darrow who remarked, "There is no such thing as justice – in or out of court." At times one might even get the notion that crime does pay. (PBC)

Many OT kings and priests were wicked and idolatrous. Those who were to serve as advocates for the people oppressed them. Those who judge in iniquity will be judged righteously (e.g., the Sanhedrin Council's mock trials of Christ; Mt 26:57–68). (TLSB)

3:17 *judge*. God's true judgments are the answer to human cynicism about man's injustices. "The past" (v. 15) is not meaningless (as people dismiss it as being, 1:11), and God will override the perverse judgments (v. 16) of men (see 12:14). (CSB)

Both in this temporal world and on the Last Day before human beings and angels (cf 12:14). The past is not meaningless to God as it often is to people, nor will sin go unnoticed. (TLSB)

3:18 *God is testing them* – God's Word allows the believer to judge character and learn where, by God's grace, amendment of life should be made. (TLSB)

are but beasts. Man "under the sun" (man on his own) is as mortal as any animal; but, unlike them, he must be made to see this condition and, through his dim awareness of eternity (v. 11), be distressed. (CSB)

The unbeliever, on the other hand, is as mortal as any animal. (TLSB)

3:19 *same breath*. See Ps 104:27–30. (CSB)

God breathes life into His creatures and withdraws it according to His divine will (cf Ps 104:27–30). (TLSB)

no advantage – People and animals die in much the same way. (TLSB)

Sin has brought death upon our bodies and placed them on a level with the bodies of beasts. But from this deep humiliation Christ will deliver all His people, for He will raise them up at the last day, and present them before His Father's throne, made perfect in soul and body, with everlasting joy. (CB)

3:20 *to the same place*. Not heaven or hell but man's observable destination, which is a return to dust, just like the animals. Death is the great leveler of all living things (see Ge 3:19; Ps 103:14). (CSB)

are from dust – To our eyes, people die just like animals. (TLSB)

to dust all return – All were created from the dust of the earth and shall return to dust. This is not a reference to heaven and hell but to bodily death and the grave as equalizers (cf Gn 3:19;

Ps 103:14). Luth: “God, he says, permits both men and cattle to go about and live in the same manner and form. But God permits this in order to test men, whether they look only at these external things, and whether they are persuaded by these arguments, to which the wicked pay attention without believing otherwise. But the godly are exercised in this way so that they may acquire more faith. They go in the same way as the wicked and the beasts do, but inwardly, in the spirit, they receive comfort and peace” (AE 15:60). (TLSB)

3:21 *Who knows ... ?* Man on his own cannot know; he can only guess. The answer, revealed at first in glimpses (e.g., Ps 16:9–11; 49:15; 73:23–26; Isa 26:19; Da 12:2–3), was brought fully “to light through the gospel” (2Ti 1:10). (CSB)

Or “Who knows the spirit?” The Lord knows who. He redeems sinful humankind. Everlasting life is considered in 12:7 and fully realized in Christ. (TLSB)

Who can discern by his outward senses? At death the spirit of a man goes upward to God who gave it, chap 12:7, while the spirit of a beast goes downward to the earth. But this something beyond the sphere of human observation. So far as this world is concerned, “as the one dieth so dieth the other.” (CB)

3:22 *nothing better.* As an end in itself, work too is meaningless (see 4:4; 9:9). Only receiving it as a gift from God (v. 13) gives it enduring worth (v. 14). (CSB)

what will after him – Since no man can foresee what shall be after him, he should with a cheerful spirit enjoy the present gifts of God’s providence. The Preacher does not mean a dissolute enjoyment of this world, without the fear of God, but an enjoyment which is in his fear. (CB)

Independent of God’s revelation, we cannot know the future. Even when we are called into the majesty of heaven, it is unlikely that we shall see what is after us (cf Jb 14:21), but in the midst of eternal blessedness, would we really care? Only when toil and labor are received as God’s gifts can they be of enduring worth. (TLSB)

3:9–22 We, as human beings, are hard pressed to answer eternal questions. “God will judge the righteous and the wicked, for there is a time for every matter and for every work” (3:17). The faithful in Christ will be in His glorious and immediate presence in the majesty of heaven. • Dear Lord, we have never kept Your Law. We continually sin and fear death. We know through Your Holy Gospel by faith that all Your merits are ours freely through Christ. Death cannot harm us, for it will be swallowed up in victory. Praise be to You, O Lord! Amen. (TLSB)