

Ecclesiastes: The Philippians of the Old Testament

**Bereans Adult Bible Fellowship
Placerita Baptist Church
2010**

by William D. Barrick, Th.D.
Professor of OT, The Master's Seminary

Chapter 3: The Hours, Days, and Years of Our Lives

From **observation**,
the Preacher **learned that God has a design for all things** (3:1–5:20).

In our Christian faith we often focus on Heaven—the sweet by and by and how what we have in Christ prepares us for that future. However, our faith also equips us for living in what someone once called “the nasty now and now.” Life provides opportunities for living out our faith in our service for God. Life experience itself reminds each person that God designed it all. Every area of life contains the imprint of divine care and provision. The Creator is the Controller.

Although some commentators insist that verses 1–8 speak only to “the brevity and impermanence of human activity,”¹ the text focuses on God’s perspective. In Ecclesiastes, the most common expression for limiting the view point to man’s perspective is “under the sun.” Another phrase, “under heaven,” occurs only three times in the book (1:13; 2:3; 3:1). In all three occurrences it appears that Solomon speaks indirectly of God’s involvement. In 3:1 Solomon looks at God’s appointed times, because time is in heaven’s control, not mankind’s control.

What is the point of this description of time-oriented events? Nothing happens haphazardly. No chance, no fate governs the things that happen in the lives of God’s people. He controls all events. This text challenges unbelievers, because people without a relationship to God seek to be gods themselves. Unregenerate mankind engages in a crusade to control time in order to gain an escape from individual responsibility and to obtain what they think will provide peace and security. Just as the cycles of terrestrial climate (sun, wind, clouds, rain) continue their incessant recurrences, so time inexorably moves along, oscillating from one event to another—even its opposite event. Each event, however, plays its own role in God’s design.

A Poem on Time (3:1–8)

In his day, Solomon was the wisest man on planet Earth. His accomplishments include proverbs and love songs, wisdom and poetry. Being skilled in the employment of language, he could take one concept and develop it in amazing ways. Therefore, he

¹ Duane A. Garrett, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*, New American Commentary 14 (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1993), 297 fn. 64.

certainly could have composed this poetic masterpiece. However, even Solomon could not write such a poem on his own. The eternal and omniscient God, the Creator of heavens and earth, had granted him the wisdom that he applied to this task.

Verse 1 forms a chiasm:

A	for everything	B	an appointed time
		B'	a time
A'	for every event		

This is just the opening statement focusing on time and introducing the remainder of the poem, which contains a far more intricate chiasmic structure.

<i>verse 2</i>	+ giving birth	>	– dying
	+ planting	>	– uprooting
<i>verse 3</i>	– killing	<	+ healing
	– tearing down	<	+ building up
<i>verse 4</i>	– weeping	<	+ laughing
	– mourning	<	+ dancing
<i>verse 5</i>	+ throwing stones	>	– gathering stones
	+ embracing	>	– refraining from embracing
<i>verse 6</i>	+ searching	>	– giving up searching
	+ keeping	>	– throwing away
<i>verse 7</i>	– tearing apart	<	+ sewing together
	– being silent	<	+ speaking
<i>verse 8</i>	+ loving	>	– hating
	– making war	<	+ making peace

Each half of verse 2 starts with the positive (favorable) element, while each half of verse 7 begins with the negative (unfavorable) element. Those first two initial positives (v. 2) are followed by four initial negatives (vv. 3–4) and then four initial positives (vv. 5–6). In verses 3–4, the outer pairs are more intense (killing/healing and mourning/dancing) than the inner pairs (tearing down/building up and weeping/laughing). Verses 5–6 begin and end (the outer pairs) with throwing paralleled by gathering/keeping. The inner pairs both involve giving up or refraining from something.

The pattern of verses 2–7 is 2/4/4/2. The final verse displays a mirror image arrangement: + / – / – / +. The first negative element in verse 2 (dying) parallels the final negative element of the concluding verse (v. 8, making war). Verse 8 acts as a summary.

Verse 1 employs two different words for time. In its six other occurrences, Scripture employs the first word with the idea of appointed time (cf. Ezra 10:14; Neh 2:6; 10:35; 13:31; Esther 9:27, 31). The second word occurs 296 times in the Hebrew Bible (including 29 times in this poem and 11 more times in Ecclesiastes).

Time operates under God's creative fiat. He ordained the sun, moon, and stars in their courses for the purpose of measuring off seasons, month, days, and years (Gen 1:14). The orderliness of time reflects the Creator's orderliness. He created all things and

deemed them “good” (Gen 1:18, 31). His order extends beyond the universe, the solar system, our planet, plants, animals, and mankind. It even applies to that which is normally invisible: gravity, the speed of light, photosynthesis, meiosis, emotions, thought processes, blood clotting, etc. Some commentators argue against the poem being a reflection of divine sovereignty and control. Instead, they argue that all except birth and death represent activities under human control and dependent upon human choice.² Verse 11, however, responds effectively to that viewpoint, since Solomon specifically declares that God “has made everything appropriate in its time.”³

Of all the verses, verse 5 provides the most difficult situations to understand. This difficulty has led to a number of interpretations or explanations. A traditional Jewish interpretation identifies the actions as sexual intercourse and sexual restraint. The pattern seems to indicate that “throwing stones” should be a positive, while “gathering stones” should be the negative. That favors a reference for the former as removing stones from a field (cp. Isa 5:2) to prepare it for cultivation and the latter as gathering stones for ruining a field. Or, the casting of stones might refer to the destruction of a field in a time of war by strewing it with stones (cp. 2 Kgs 3:19, 25). Some even take these references to stones as the accumulation of wealth (e.g., valuable gems) and the distribution of that wealth.⁴

Verse 7 might represent activities associated with mourning.⁵ The tearing of garments illustrates the grief (cp. Gen 37:29) while the sewing up of the torn garments might indicate an end to a period of grief. As illustrated in the account of Job’s suffering and the visit of his three friends, silence can represent grief and speaking the ending of grief.

The Poem’s Message (3:9–22)

Though quite well-known, verse 11 presents another interpretive problem. Does “eternity” correctly translate the Hebrew word *‘olam*? Options proposed by various interpreters include “world,” “eternity,” and “ignorance.”⁶ Contextual factors argue for the meaning “eternity.” First, the poem is about time. Secondly, verse 14 repeats the same term with the obvious meaning of “forever” or “eternity.” In addition, the Creator made human beings and placed eternity within them. As Estes notes, “**humans are bound by time, but they are wired for eternity.** They intuitively know that there must be meaning somewhere, and that they were made for more than vain toil.”⁷

Human beings in and of themselves cannot satisfy their desire to know the divine design for life and its events. Our Creator made us with an innate inquisitiveness and need to observe, research, and contemplate His creation and our own existence. He has even placed us within His created universe on the most conducive observation platform

² Craig G. Bartholomew, *Ecclesiastes*, Baker Commentary on the Old Testament Wisdom and Psalms (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009), 162.

³ Cf. H. C. Leupold, *Exposition of Ecclesiastes* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1971), 81.

⁴ Iain Provan, *Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*, NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 2001), 88.

⁵ Garrett, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*, 298.

⁶ Tremper Longman III, *The Book of Ecclesiastes*, New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1998), 120.

⁷ Daniel J. Estes, *Handbook on the Wisdom Books and Psalms* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005), 313.

from which to see our celestial neighbors, our solar system, our galaxy, and our corner of the universe.⁸

Solomon's double "**I know**" (vv. 12, 14) appears to contrast with the three occurrences of "**I have seen**" (vv. 10, 16, 22). Whereas the seeing comes from observation and experience, the knowing might represent intuitive knowledge or prior theological presuppositions.

The enigmas of existence can make people frustrated and fretful. Instead of fretting, however, we need to accept our limitations and enjoy those things which God has so graciously provided for us—those good things that He intends that we enjoy (vv. 12–13). "The key to this enjoyment is that God himself has given these activities as gifts."⁹ More than the need to enjoy the gifts of God, we need to develop a correct relationship to our Creator. Brown writes that "For Qoheleth, an awareness of the systemic limitations of human existence is fundamental to cultivating awe of God."¹⁰ The fact that a man or woman cannot change what God has purposed, designed, or brought about generates a proper fear of God (v. 14).

Fearing God is the beginning of knowledge (Prov 1:7). Solomon's spiritual journey of discovery produces the fear of God that had been absent during the time of his apostasy. **The wisest man of his day finally wises up.**

Ecclesiastes 3:15, like 1:9, announces the conclusion of Solomon's reflections: **nothing changes.** The final clause of the verse ("for God seeks what has passed by") might refer to God's control over past events. God not only controls those events, He repeats them over and over again until we finally understand what God desires to teach us through those events. Charles Swindoll explains it in the following fashion:

We are the ones to pass it by. We are the ones who walk away, so God brings us back to the same lesson to learn it again. And he doesn't give up when we pass it by. He brings us back again and again to learn our lesson well. We get weary of learning the lesson and we run from it. We turn it off. Yet He repeats the same lesson. He repeats it and repeats it and repeats it until finally the light comes on and we learn it. Why? Because God seeks what you and I try to escape. God pursues what you and I turn off. God makes a permanent lesson out of what you think is a temporary and passing experience.¹¹

Solomon had attempted to escape, but God would not let him go. His Creator kept bombarding him with reality—God's created reality. Solomon, in his old age, is running out of his God-appointed time. Thinking of his own death, Solomon realizes that his desire to know more about what happens following death is a desire God had implanted in the soul of every man and woman. His search for happiness must switch from pursuing wisdom and pleasure "under the sun" to "looking for the city which has foundations, whose architect and builder is God" (Heb 11:10). *Like Abraham before him, He must look for a heavenly city (Heb 11:16) beyond the sun.*

It might seem strange to move from the topic of time to the topic of **injustice and oppression (v. 16)**. However, the point that Solomon makes involves his observation that

⁸ "As we learn more about the seemingly accidental features of our atmosphere and Solar System, we begin to recognize a trend. The Earth system offers not only a habitat but also a great viewing platform for its inhabitants."—Guillermo Gonzalez and Jay W. Richards, *The Privileged Planet: How Our Place in the Cosmos Is Designed for Discovery* (Washington, DC: Regnery Publishing, 79).

⁹ Estes, *Handbook on the Wisdom Books and Psalms*, 315.

¹⁰ William P. Brown, *Ecclesiastes, Interpretation* (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 2000), 45.

¹¹ Charles R. Swindoll, *Living on the Ragged Edge: Coming to Terms with Reality* (New York: Bantam Books, 1988), 90.

a person often spends his time on earth suffering in one way or another. Since God controls all things and everything is in His time, He must also have a time to set right the wrongs, to bring justice where there is injustice. **Knowing that God has a time for judging injustice, provides hope for human beings (v. 17).** “A time for every matter and for every deed” includes the righting of wrongs and the establishment of divine justice. The “there” at the end of verse 17 might carry an eschatological sense—referring to either the time and place of future judgment, the grave, or heaven (cp. Ps 14:5).¹² On the other hand, it might refer to the circumstances of life (even in the perverted courts of the land) in which God is at work to bring about His will.¹³ The reference of “there” remains a problem, but the difficulty does not disrupt the general concept that God controls all matters of timing in the past, the present, and the future.

Some commentators contend that the speaker’s complaint about injustice argues against Solomonic authorship of the book. After all, Solomon was king and kings acted as judges. If he saw injustice, would it not be in his own court over which he has jurisdiction?¹⁴ However, kings did appoint judges. Jehoshaphat, king of Judah, for example, appointed judges and instructed them to judge righteously and with impartiality in the fear of the Lord (2 Chron 19:6–7). Solomon speaks generically—he refers to injustice performed in many courts in many lands. He understands that it is characteristic of mankind—even that he himself might commit an injustice in any given case that might be set before him for his decision.

Solomon introduces the next set of verses (vv. 17–21) with the words **“I said to myself”** (literally, “I said in my heart”). He accurately and honestly records his own thinking. That does not mean that his thought equates with divine truth. Just because Scripture reports the human statement, does not indicate that God approves of that statement. When a person gets as far away from the Lord as Solomon did, he or she will turn their back on the clear truths of Scripture and ignore God’s revelation. The creation account in Genesis 1–3 plainly explains key differences between animals and human beings. Solomon was not ignorant of that text—he refers back to it again and again in *Ecclesiastes*. God created human beings in His image (Gen 1:26–27). Adam named the animals—the animals did not name Adam. God gave Adam and Eve dominion over the animals. Due to his spiritual crisis and lack of discernment, however, Solomon experiences temporary Scripture amnesia and concludes that human beings are no better off than animals. **Cynicism confuses Solomon**—and it can do so to any believer whose sins have broken their fellowship with the Father. Cynicism “angers us emotionally. It numbs us spiritually. It leaves us scarred, bitter, disillusioned, and, for sure, feeling distant from God. That aptly describes Solomon at this phase of his journey.”¹⁵

Normal observation without taking into account biblical revelation leads to the impression that mankind and animals both die the same way and go to the same grave. Solomon later reveals that he does recognize a difference between the death of a human being and the death of an animal. In 12:7 he mentions that the spirit returns to God, its Creator. Of course, in the Old Testament the examples of Enoch, Elijah, and Moses all

¹² Garrett, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*, 302–3.

¹³ Michael A. Eaton, *Ecclesiastes: An Introduction and Commentary*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 1983), 85.

¹⁴ E.g., Longman, *The Book of Ecclesiastes*, 127.

¹⁵ Swindoll, *Living on the Ragged Edge*, 103.

predate Ecclesiastes and provide unimpeachable evidence for life after death and for the human soul's return to God, the Creator.

The focus on death reflects a consistency with the manner in which the poem in verses 1–8 had begun (“A time to give birth and a time to die,” v. 2). Verse 20 indicates that Solomon was aware of the truth of Genesis 3:19—that mankind returns to the dust out of which God had created Adam. Ecclesiastes 3:18–21 does not deny the existence of an afterlife, but does “force the reader to take death seriously”¹⁶ (cp. v. 18, “God has surely tested them in order for them to see that they are but beasts”—i.e., destined to die).

Verse 21 offers yet another interpretive problem. Some commentaries treat it as a question¹⁷ while others treat it as a declaration.¹⁸ The introductory phrase (“Who knows”) commonly occurs to introduce a statement regarding potentiality. For example, in 2 Samuel 12:22 (“Who knows, the LORD may be gracious to me, that the child may live”). In other words, it almost has the force of “it is possible that.” The same usage appears again in Ecclesiastes 3:21 on virtually the identical matter. In other words, the reader can conclude that Solomon indicates that it is possible that man's spirit ascends to God at death while the spirit of the animal somehow returns to the earth. *His uncertainty is more about the animal's spirit than about the man's.*

Verse 22 echoes 2:24 and 3:12 by expression once again the need for satisfaction with what God has given. **Why fret over our lack of control over the timing of events, our failure to eradicate injustice, and our inability to avoid death?** God has better things for us to do than to spend our time fretting over things that we cannot control. Ecclesiastes 3 states that God's intervention and personal attention to mankind in the world is not random or disorganized or aimless, regardless of appearances. Our Creator is in control and makes known His will for His people. *We are not to pour more effort into understanding our frustrating and uncontrollable circumstances. Nor ought we to spend our time comparing our lot in life with another's. We ought not indulge in retaliation, resentment, bitterness, or disappear into a fantasy world.* Reject these reactions to life's difficult circumstances and intrinsic injustices. Abandon self-pity and despair. **Identify the advantage to your disadvantage.** Thank God that He uses such circumstances to humble you, make you more dependent upon Him, and be thankful for what He has given you to enjoy. Your joy of God's gifts grows greater in the light of your trials while you live “under the sun.”¹⁹

Questions:

- What should be the Christian's view of time?
- How do people demonstrate the “eternity” that God has set in their hearts?
- What does it mean to fear God?
- Why does Solomon use injustice and death to deal with the issue of time?
- What is the purpose of the final question in Ecclesiastes 3:22?
- What advantage(s) have you gained from your chief disadvantage?

¹⁶ Garrett, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs* 305.

¹⁷ Eaton, Hengstenberg, Leupold, and Kaiser.

¹⁸ Longman, Garrett, and Murphy.

¹⁹ My thoughts in this paragraph have been shaped by the wonderful insights of Swindoll, *Living on the Ragged Edge*, 103–9.