

Second Baptist Church of Doylestown

Bible Study Notes: Ecclesiastes 3

"A Time For Everything"

4/10/13

SUMMARY

In the first two chapters, the Preacher described the extent of his search for the purpose of life under the sun. In this chapter, and the three to follow, he shares observations gleaned during the course of his search.

In a well-known passage, we are told that to everything there is a season, a time for every purpose under heaven. The Preacher has seen that God has given man the task to seek out God's purpose by putting eternity in man's heart. But then he also saw that no one is able to find out what God does from beginning to end, and no one can change what He decides to do. Why does God act this way? Why are His purposes often incomprehensible? The Preacher offers that God does this so man might fear before Him, seeing that God will require an account for what is done. This prompts the Preacher to state again (cf. 2:24-26) what he believes is the best one can do: to rejoice, do good, to eat and drink, enjoying the good in their labor. This he concludes is the gift of God (1-15).

Next he describes what he saw "under the sun". In places where there should have been judgment and righteousness, he saw wickedness and iniquity! Why does God allow it? He reasoned in his heart that God will judge the righteous and wicked, and that there must be a time for every purpose and for every work. He told himself that God tests men, to help them see that they are little different from beasts. Both man and beasts die, and both return to the dust. From a purely earthly perspective, there is no advantage of man over beasts, for one cannot see whether the spirit of man goes upward (but cf. 12:7) while the spirit of animals goes downward to the earth. This led him to the perception stated once again (cf. 2:24-26; 3:12-13), that it is best for a man to rejoice in his works. This is man's heritage, for who can bring one (back) to see what will happen (on the earth) after him (16-22)

I. THE INEXPLICABLE PURPOSE OF GOD (3:1-8)

There is a time for everything, and a season for every activity under the heavens: ² a time to be born and a time to die, a time to plant and a time to uproot, ³ a time to kill and a time to heal, a time to tear down and a time to build, ⁴ a time to weep and a time to laugh, a time to mourn and a time to dance, ⁵ a time to scatter stones and a time to gather them, a time to embrace and a time to refrain from embracing, ⁶ a time to search and a time to give up, a time to keep and a time to throw away, ⁷ a time to tear and a time to mend, a time to be silent 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 3:1

Solomon's point in this section is that God has a plan for all people. Thus, he provides cycles of life, each with its work for us to do. Although we may face many problems that seem to contradict God's plan, these should not be barriers to believing in him, but rather opportunities to discover that, without God, life's problems have no lasting solutions!

ECCLESIASTES 3:1-8

Timing is important. All the experiences listed in these verses are appropriate at certain times. The secret to peace with God is to discover, accept, and appreciate God's perfect timing. The danger is to doubt or resent God's timing. This can lead to despair, rebellion, or moving ahead without his advice.

ECCLESIASTES 3:8

When is there a time for hating? We shouldn't hate evil people, but we should hate what they do. We should also hate it when people are mistreated, when children are starving, and when God is being dishonored. In addition, we must hate the sin in our life—this is God's attitude (see Psalm 5:5).

B. MAN'S INABILITY TO FIND OUT GOD'S PURPOSE (9-15): ⁹ *What do workers gain from their toil?* ¹⁰ *I have seen the burden God has laid on the human race.* ¹¹ *He has made everything beautiful in its time. He has also set eternity in the human heart; yet no one can fathom what God has done from beginning to end.* ¹² *I know that there is nothing better for people than to be happy and to do good while they live.* ¹³ *That each of them may eat and drink, and find satisfaction in all their toil—this is the gift of God.* ¹⁴ *I know that everything God does will endure forever; nothing can be added to it and nothing taken from it. God does it so that people will fear him.* ¹⁵ *Whatever is has already been, and what will be has been before; and God will call the past to account.*

1. God has put it in man to seek out what he cannot find
 - a. Again, the Preacher asks what profit there is in one's labor
 - b. He sees that God has:
 - 1) Given man the task with which to be occupied
 - 2) Made everything beautiful in its time
 - 3) Put eternity in man's heart
 - c. Yet no one can find the work that God does from beginning to end
2. What the Preacher concludes is best for people to do
 - a. Rejoice, and do good in their lives
 - b. Eat, drink, and enjoy the good of all their labor
 - c. It is the gift of God (cf. 2:24-26)
3. What the Preacher offers as God's reason for the way He works
 - a. He knows that what God does, man cannot change
 - b. God acts the way He does, that men should fear before Him
 - c. For God requires an account of what is past (done)

ECCLESIASTES 3:9-13

Your ability to find satisfaction in your work depends to a large extent upon your attitude. You will become dissatisfied if you lose the sense of purpose God intended for your work. We can enjoy our work if we (1) remember that God has given us work to do (3:10), and (2) realize that the fruit of our labor is a gift from him (3:13). See your work as a way to serve God.

ECCLESIASTES 3:11

God has "planted eternity in the human heart." This means that we can never be completely satisfied with earthly pleasures and pursuits. Because we are created in God's image, (1) we have a spiritual thirst, (2) we have eternal value, and (3) nothing but the eternal God can truly satisfy us. He has built in us a restless yearning for the kind of perfect world that can only be found in his perfect rule. He has given us a glimpse of the perfection of his creation. But it is only a glimpse; we cannot see into the future or comprehend everything. So we must trust him now and do his work on earth.

ECCLESIASTES 3:12

To be happy and do good are worthy goals for life, but we can pursue them in the wrong way. God wants us to enjoy life. When we have the proper view of God, we discover that real pleasure is found in enjoying whatever we have as gifts from God, not in what we accumulate.

ECCLESIASTES 3:14

What is the purpose of life? It is that we should fear the all-powerful God. To *fear* God means to respect and stand in awe of him because of who he is. Purpose in life starts with *whom* we know, not what we know or how good we are. It is impossible to fulfill your God-given purpose unless you revere God and give him first place in your life.

II. THE INJUSTICE AND WICKEDNESS OF MEN (3:16-22)

¹⁶ And I saw something else under the sun: In the place of judgment—wickedness was there, in the place of justice—wickedness was there. ¹⁷ I said to myself, "God will bring into judgment both the righteous and the wicked, for there will be a time for every activity, a time to judge every deed."¹⁸ I also said to myself, "As for humans, God tests them so that they may see that they are like the animals. ¹⁹ Surely the fate of human beings is like that of the animals; the same fate awaits them both: As one dies, so dies the other. All have the same breath^[c]; humans have no advantage over animals. Everything is meaningless. ²⁰ All go to the same place; all come from dust, and to dust all return. ²¹ Who knows if the human spirit rises upward and if the spirit of the animal goes down into the earth?" ²² So I saw that there is nothing better for a person than to enjoy their work, because that is their lot. For who can bring them to see what will happen after them?

A. WHAT THE PREACHER SAW (16)

1. In the place of judgment, there was wickedness
2. In the place of righteousness, there was iniquity

B. WHAT THE PREACHER REASONED (17-21)

1. God will judge the righteous and the wicked
2. There must be a time for every purpose and for every work
3. God evidently allows injustice to test the hearts of men
 - a. That they may see that they are like beasts
 - b. That what happens to beasts will happen to them
 - 1) As one dies, so dies the other
 - 2) Man has no advantage over beasts
 - 3) All return to the dust
 - c. Who knows that the spirit of man goes upward, and the spirit of the beast goes downward?

C. WHAT THE PREACHER CONCLUDED (22)

1. There is nothing better than rejoicing in one's own works, which is his heritage
2. For who can bring man to see what will happen after him?

ECCLESIASTES 3:16

There is evil and corruption in the place where there should be justice. It even affects the legal system. Solomon asked how God's plan can be perfect when there is so much injustice and oppression in the world (4:1). He concluded that God does not ignore injustice but will bring it to an end at his appointed time (12:13, 14).

ECCLESIASTES 3:16

Solomon reflects on several apparent contradictions in God's control of the world: (1) There is evil and corruption where there should be justice (3:16, 17); (2) people created in God's image die just like the animals (3:18-21); (3) no one comforts the oppressed (4:1-3); (4) many people are motivated by envy (4:4-6); (5) people are lonely (4:7-12); (6) recognition for accomplishments is temporary (4:13-16). It is easy to use such contradictions as excuses to not believe in God. But Solomon used them to show how we can honestly look at life's problems and still keep our faith. This life is not all there is, yet even in this life we should not pass judgment on God because we don't know everything. God's plan is for us to live forever with him. So live with eternal values in view, realizing that all contradictions will one day be cleared up by the Creator himself (12:14).

ECCLESIASTES 3:19-22

Our bodies can't live forever in their present state. In that sense, humans and animals are alike. But Solomon acknowledged that God has given people the hope of eternity (see the note on 3:11), and that we will undergo judgment in the next life (3:17; 12:7, 14)—making us different from animals. Because we have eternity planted in our heart, we have a unique purpose in God's overall plan. Yet we cannot discover God's purpose for our life by our own efforts—only through building a relationship with him and seeking his guidance. Are you now living as God wants? Do you see life as a gift from him?