

God's Time and Our Limitation

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Ecclesiastes 3:1-22

If you ever hear a message preached from the book of Ecclesiastes, it will probably be one based on chapter 3, specifically, the first part where it talks about everything having its time. Of course with us, I've started a series based on this book starting with the first chapters, so if you've heard either of the first two messages, you've already been introduced to a lot of the main themes in Ecclesiastes. Now, in chapter three, at first glance, the Evangelist seems to be saying that we need to look at the things in life and make wise decisions, discerning the appropriate times to do various things. For example, in verse 4 he says there is, "...a time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance... Sure, there are appropriate times to weep, and times when it's appropriate to laugh. There are appropriate times to mourn, and at other times dancing would be a more appropriate response. Although this is true, it is not the main point of what the Evangelist is saying in the context of the entire chapter. Starting in verse 9 he says, "What gain have the workers from their toil? I have seen the business that God has given to everyone to be busy with..." The main point is not that we're to work harder to do well. The focus is not on our need to make wise choices. The focus is on what God has done, and the contrast between God and us. God has given a season or time for everything. The context is all of life "under heaven" which gives the sense that God has allowed these things to be a part of life.

I'll just say a few more things about this initial poem, things that may not be obvious after the first reading. In verse 2 we have "a time to be born, and a time to die...", an appropriate way to begin, setting the context of life, from birth to death. The second part of verse two talks about planting and plucking up. One way to understand the second part is that it could be related to the first. Planting could be an image of being born. And, the original word meaning "pluck up" has a sense of "pulling out" like with weeds, rather than a sense of harvest. So, to "pluck up" could be an image of death.

Looking at verse 5, it says there's "a time to throw away stones, and a time to gather stones together...". This could easily be an image of clearing a field of stones so that something could be planted. A very different possible understanding, though, is described in an ancient Jewish commentary, where "casting away stones" might also be understood as an image for sex. "Gathering stones together" could be an image of refraining from sex. Understood in this way, it could connect to the next part talking about appropriate times to embrace or refrain from embracing.

With this list of contrasts, some may think that these are all things that we are supposed to do in life. Instead, these are a description of what the Evangelist sees happening in life, whether or not we're supposed to do all of them. We can't be followers of Jesus, the Prince of Peace and advocate for killing and war, yet these still happen because of the influence of sin in people's lives. Rather than use violence to show his power over his enemies, Jesus allowed them to execute him on a cross. God showed us the power of love by raising Jesus to life as Lord of all.

The poem ends with "a time for war, and a time for peace" (verse 8). It seems that no matter how far civilization has progressed, there are still countries that go to war. Many think that if we educated people enough, there would be no more war, and the world could live in peace. The problem is the influence of sin in our lives. It usually starts small, but it's then easy to understand how things can escalate. Just looking at how two children act when one starts bragging about winning a game. The other one may get angry and call him a name. Suddenly, there is an argument, and as things escalate, one punches the other and now it's a fight. When we become adults the same sort of thing happens, only we are better at hiding our anger and controlling our emotions. The influence of sin in our lives tempts us to want to fight rather than show love to our enemies. It's only by the grace of God that we are able to move in more positive directions...

The "peace" mentioned at the end of this section means much more than the absence of war. It is the Hebrew word, "Shalom," which includes a sense of well-being, everything working together, prosperity, and success. Shalom is a fitting ending to this poem which describes all of life. As

described in the book of Revelation, we look forward to a time when Jesus will return to earth and God will establish a new “kingdom” where death, mourning and crying and pain will be no more.” It will begin a time of perfect Shalom.

Back to our reading in Ecclesiastes, verse 11 is considered by many to be the key verse in chapter 3. “He has made everything suitable for its time; moreover he has put a sense of past and future into their minds, yet they cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end.” God has created the world with beauty, order and balance. God is responsible for time and eternity, and humans are caught between the two, with limited understanding. God is in control, not us.

Starting in verse 12, we read, “...there is nothing better for them than to be happy and enjoy themselves as long as they live; moreover, it is God’s gift that all should eat and drink and take pleasure in all their toil.” The Evangelist has already said this once in chapter 2, and it is repeated here. In fact, he says something similar again, near the end, in verse 22, “...there is nothing better than that all should enjoy their work...”. Our greatest joy is not found in accomplishing all kinds of great things. Instead, it is found in accepting our lives as gifts from God. It’s also important to understand our limitations in contrast to God’s greatness. Verse 14 says, “...whatever God does endures forever; nothing can be added to it, nor anything taken from it. God has done this, so that all should stand in awe before him.”

When we realise just how much we don’t know, and how far beyond us is God’s wisdom and power, we are moved to fear and reverence for God. No one can understand everything about God, God is a mystery. But, through Jesus, God has shown us how to live the way we were created.

The next part of the chapter talks about how God will judge the wicked, and how the future belongs to God. The Evangelist also talks about how both humans and animals die and return to dust. It’s a humble description of our limitations. We are dust! In Psalm 103 the writer says that the Lord, “knows how we were made; he remembers that we are dust. As for mortals, their days are like grass; they flourish like a flower of the field; for the wind passes over it, and it is gone...”. We are weak, but the Lord is strong. God is able to equip people for God’s purposes. Just think about some of the famous people of the Bible, people like Moses, who led the Israelites out of Egyptian slavery, Gideon, who trusted God and led an army of 300 to win a battle against thousands, and Jeremiah who was one of the greatest prophets. They were powerful leaders who had to rely on God’s power in their lives. The Apostle Paul talks about how God’s strength is seen in our weakness. It’s hard to see what God is doing when our focus is on ourselves and everything we can do. But, when we are weak and struggling, we can finally see just what God can do when we look to God for help.

Deep down, we realise that we are dust. We are vulnerable. But, we can’t use that as an excuse for doing whatever we want. In our human limitations, we fall short of living with love and justice. In our limitations we often hurt people around us without realising it. In a devotional reading I read one morning, the writer explained how we call our own ignorance innocence. And then we move to thinking our innocence is now purity. Just because we don’t always realise when we hurt others around us doesn’t mean we are innocent or pure. Our ignorance doesn’t make it right. This is an area where I’ve often struggled. If I did my best and still ended up doing something that upset someone, I can’t just say, “Oh don’t blame me, I was doing my best! I’m good!” Yet, that is often my feeling deep down. I’m learning that my own human limitations are not an excuse to ignore times I’ve failed to love others as Christ has taught. God’s judgement is not just for those we see as the “wicked” people, it includes us! Verse 17 of our Ecclesiastes passage says that God will judge the righteous and the wicked. We know that all people sin and fall short of God’s perfect will, so we are all deserving of the consequences. The good news is that in Jesus we have forgiveness of our sin. Jesus took care of the problem of sin, and we are now purified in him. May we continue to learn just how far beyond us God is. God rules over all time. Let’s continue to put our trust in the Lord. Let’s pray.

O Lord, thank-you for creating our world with order. Thank-you that although you allow difficult times in our lives, you also transform them. Trusting that a time of laughter can follow a time of weeping, we can put our hope in you, trusting that in the end you are in control, giving us the strength to continue on. Help us to remember that we are always in need of your grace, that we are limited. We confess times when we've placed too much emphasis on ourselves rather than on you and your unlimited power. Forgive us, Lord . Help us to accept life as a gift from you, through Christ, our Lord, Amen.