

# A REFLECTION ON TIME AND ETERNITY

## ECCLESIASTES 3:1-15 AFEKOLU, CHRIS (BISHOP)

### PREAMBLE

The “Preacher”, King Solomon, the author of Ecclesiastes declared that seeking to discover life’s purpose through virtue and intelligence is a waste of time – “vanity”. Time and chance seem to reign supreme, leaving men powerless and confused (Eccl. 9:11).

Today we shall be looking at Ecclesiastes 3:1-15. Chapter 3 begins with some of the most powerful, concise statements about life. Twenty-eight actions are described in 3:1-8, frequently in polarities {a relation between two opposite attributes or Tendencies, +.. -}. These verses speak of the providential working of God. Some practical implications of verses 1 through 8 are discussed in Verses 9 through 11 while verses 12 through 15 usher in The God factor in the discussion which changes the viewpoint of the text.

### THE HUMAN EVENTS (3:1-8)

“To everything there is a season, A time for every purpose under heaven: A time to be born, And a time to die; A time to plant, And a time to pluck what is planted; A time to kill, And a time to heal; A time to break down, And a time

to build up; A time to weep, And a time to laugh; A time to mourn, And a time to dance; A time to cast away stones, And a time to gather stones; A time to embrace, And a time to refrain from embracing; A time to gain, And a time to lose; A time to keep, And a time to throw away; A time to tear, And a time to sew; A time to keep silence, And a time to speak; A time to love, And a time to hate; A time of war, And a time of peace”.

### (Ecclesiastes 3:1-8 NKJV)

The key to understanding the actions in these verses is to see them as proper behaviours in given situations, considering the rule and guidance of God. Solomon’s words are now describing the quality of life with God as well as the life impacted by the will of God.

Solomon began this section by noting that “there is an appointed time for everything” (3:1). This is not intended to reflect on or expect the worst possible outcome in our viewpoint. The writer did not want us to despair because there is nothing we can do about anything in life, as if all were preordained (appointed). This was not at all Solomon’s point. If it were, his suggestion of choices would not make

sense. Besides, we are free moral agents – free to do as we like.

**In as much as we are free to do as we like, the wise person considers the will of God in every decision he makes.** He can live life optimistically, not pessimistically, since God is in control and since God provides guidance for His people. We recognize that we are frequently ill-equipped to make the tough decision of life. Consulting God through His word is always the wisest course of action.

**Mankind is not self-sufficient. Man is within the control of God, and he will have to answer to Him someday (see 12:13, 14). The activities in verses 1 through 8 reflect the many pursuits of man. Whether they are creative or destructive, good or evil, they are done by someone who is not self-sufficient. Therefore, man ought to ask, “According to God’s will, is this event the time to do this action?”**

This section may portray that there is God-appointed time for almost everything. However, one must consider what God has determined about particular events. One who decides to do somethings outside the scope of God’s will is likely to suffer the consequences for his rebellion. For example, if one should decide to plant when the appointed season to plant, he will suffer the consequences of ignoring God’s appointed laws of planting and reaping.

Solomon first mentioned the two most important human events: birth and death. Scholars have debated the exact meaning of the first two phrases

because they stand out as the only two not under human control. Some have said that the first phrase, **“a time to give birth”** (3:2), would be more accurately translated **“a time to bring a child into the world.”** {Joseph Blenkinsopp noted, “While obviously no one can be certain that insemination and pregnancy will eventuate in the birth of a live child, it still makes sense to speak of deciding to have a child and choosing the best time to do it”}. This interpretation (a time to bring a child into the world) makes the phrase a caution to parents to think about the timing of having children. Should we ask, “Is now a good time to have a child?”; Can we afford it?”...even with the rising cost of living; “Are we ready to be the role models that we should be?” “Can we rear healthy, happy children in a world or society where warfare, poverty, and oppression exist?”

Solomon also noted that there is “a time to die.” This phrase like the previous one has been re-interpreted in order to make it an event under human control. It has been rendered “a time to put an end to one’s life” (meaning suicide) [ibid. 57. Blenkinsopp’s interpretation] such an interpretation requires some uncharacteristic application of the Hebrew words and must be rejected. In addition, suicide has not been an acceptable option for God’s people in any age (see Job’s attitude; Job 6:9). Instead, the thought seems to be that one must leave to God the time that life will end. He may want to die, but he does not have the right or authority to make that decision. In Philippians 1:23 Paul indicated his desire to die “and be

with Christ, “but he recognized that it is God’s decision. He determined to serve God until his time came to leave this life and enter eternity.

Verse 3 talks of “a time to kill and a time to heal”. A good time to kill an animal is when one is hungry (3:3), but killing humans has also been part of God’s moral universe. Such action is seen in Old Testament warfare (Deut. 20:16-18; 1 Samuel 15:3), in self-defence (Exodus 22:2), and in capital punishment (Genesis 9:5, 6; Deut. 13:9) **these were acts done with divine authority. Governments are still granted power over the lives of the wicked (Romans 13:1-5).**

“A time to heal” is not an exact opposite to the idea of killing, but rather it does refer to the mending of a relationship as opposed to ending it permanently in death. **A child of God that respect and fear Him will ask questions on whether it is time to make peace, to repair damaged relationship, or to bring a relationship to an end.**

“A time to tear down” was a frequent occurrence for ancient people who had to break down existing structures in order to build new ones. Important questions must be asked to guide your decision; example, “is this structure salvageable?”; “Is it worth keeping?” It would be a foolish waste of money and energy to tear down a house or building that is still strong and functional. However, sometimes a structure is no longer worth keeping and must be dismantled. Equally there is “a time to build up.”

The statement in verse 4 relates to emotions. In every life, there will be “a time to weep.” People must accept this as a fact of human existence and expressed appropriate emotions at times. Example; we should weep because of sin, and we should weep when others weep; but we should also rejoice with our brethren who are rejoicing (Roman 12:15). Superficiality has no place at a funeral; however, life also offers “a time to laugh.” God does not expect us always to have a sad, mournful disposition. When people are laughing, they do not want someone to ruin their happiness. There is a place for joy in the lives of God’s people (Philippians 4:4; Psalm 126:2).

When tragedy has come into someone’s life, it is **“a time to mourn.”** A sensitive person mourns with the one who is mourning; such experience could be loss of a dear one, or some precious possession. Jesus taught that those who mourn are “blessed” (Matthew 5:4). They mourn over their own failings as well as the evil which dominates the world (see Joel 12:12, 13). Still there is **“a time to dance.”** When people are enjoying good fortune, we should rejoice and laugh with them. This couplet encourages relationships based on sensitivity to the feelings and emotions of others.

We read in 3:5 of “a time to throw stones and a time to gather stones.” This phraseology has been interpreted a number of ways. For want of time, I will use the one that applies to us. Severing a relationship with some might be demonstrated by the symbolic act of

casting rocks. In the context of human lives, gathering stones probably refers metaphorically to establishing relationships.

“A time to embrace” suggests a proper situation for expressing non sensual affection, as well as certain circumstances when one ought to refrain from showing affection.

**Example, brethren need to learn that the worship period is not the proper place to display affection. The physical love between husband and wife is not for the public eye.** It can also refer to the embrace of friends or that of parents with children.

Verse 6 has to do with possessions. Lost items bring about “a time to search.” In the parable of the lost coin, the woman searched diligently for that which was lost and was rewarded for her effort (Luke 15:8-10). In the same context, we read that a Shepherd will spend time searching for a lost sheep (Luke 15:4-6). Equally, there is “a time to give up as lost.” In 1 Samuel 9:5 Saul was searching for some lost donkeys but came to realise that the search needed to be given up before his father began to worry more about him than the missing animals. Instead of creating tremendous anxieties and worries looking for something beyond your control, one should realise that there comes a time, when one must admit that something is gone forever and move on with his/her life.

“A time to keep” may relate to possessions that are kept because of their inherent value. Also possessions that have emotional or sentimental

value should be kept. Christian virtues are valuable and should be practiced faithfully. However, there is “a time to throw away.” An item that has lost its usefulness and is only taking up space should be thrown away. Ungodly characteristics should be eliminated from one’s life.

Verse 7 deals with other human relations.” **Some scholars see the phrase “a time to tear apart” as a reference to mourning (Genesis 37:29; 2 Samuel 13:31) and the words “to sew together” as ceasing the period of mourning.** The imagery is that of mending the clothes torn by the mourner. **Some people mourn so long that they fail to move on with their lives.** When David was grieving over his ill son and hoping for his recovery, he prayed and fasted. However, once his son had died, he recognized that it was time to get back to his life (2 Samuel 12:20-23). See also David mourning greatly because of the death of his son Absalom. His excessive grieving created resentment in the hearts of his faithful supporters until the commander of the armed force Joab drew the attention of David to his action. David immediately arose from his mourning and returned to his duties as king (2 Samuel 19:5-8). **Some of the Scholars see it as personal relationships between the livings.** There are times when relationships need to be severed (the tearing apart) and other times when relationships are worth mending (the sewing together). We should always try to be at peace with all men (Roman 12:18).

King Solomon went to speak of “a time to be silent” (see Habakkuk 2:20). Later in Ecclesiastes, Solomon dealt with the topic of the fool who is unable to control his tongue (10:12-14). Both the power and danger of the tongue are mentioned in Proverbs 10:19, 12:13, 13:3, 15:23...and warnings about our words were issued by Amos 5:13, Jesus Christ (Matthew 12:36,37, and James (1:199; 3:1-8). However, there is also “a time to speak”. **When truth is being challenged or error is being taught, the child of God is compelled to speak up** (Matt. 10:32, 33; Ephesians 6:20; 2 Timothy 4:2-5). When we have an opportunity to offer encouragement (Hebrew 3:13) or words of restoration (Galatians 6:1), we must do so.

Verse 8 talks of “a time to love” and “a time to hate.” We are commanded to love people the way God loves them (Matthew 3:43-48). The children of God ought to love one another (1 John 4:7-21). When is “a time to hate”? We are to hate evil (Romans 12:9, Psalms 97:10, 101:4), divorce (Malachi 2:16 "For I hate divorce, says the LORD the God of Israel,...) and a host of sinful practices related to the world (**1 John 2: 15-17**).

Equally, there is “a time for war.” In ancient time God called upon His people to go to war. Modern government are authorized to “bear the sword” (Romans 13:1-7), **Christians are called upon to wage spiritual war on behalf of the gospel (1 Timothy 1:18, 6:12; 2 Timothy 2:3-5)**. **In addition, there is “a time for peace.”** We are to attempt to be at peace with all men (**Romans 12:18; 14:19**). Our Saviour said that

peacemakers are blessed (Matthew 5:9). **It is noteworthy that “peace” is listed the final activity. It provides an appropriate goal for one’s life: to be at peace with God, man, and self.**

### THE ULTIMATE TRUTH (3:9-11)

*“What profit has the worker from that in which he labors? I have seen the God-given task with which the sons of men are to be occupied. He has made everything beautiful in its time. Also He has put eternity in their hearts, except that no one can find out the work that God does from beginning to end”. (Ecclesiastes 3:9-11 NKJV)*

The wise man uses the plan of God to his advantage. He accepts what God has decreed and sets in motion, and he conducts his life so as to be in harmony with that plan. He is not stubborn or rebellious in trying to do things at improper times.

Continuing the previous thought from verse 9, Solomon attempted to answer the question in verse 10. The benefit to the worker is that he, rather than becoming idle and lazy, has a “task” that God has given him to occupy himself. ***It has never been God’s intention for man not to work. Rather, work is a beneficial activity that enables a person to discover the ways of God. The ultimate purpose of work as identified here: to keep men occupied with an activity that is worthwhile and constructive.*** After all, that is what God Himself did in creation. **Now is not the time to rest. That will be the reward for the faithful (Hebrew 4:1, 9).**

Verse 11 says, “God has made everything appropriate, “beautiful”; in its time and its place”(see Genesis 1:31). **All He did are appropriate in order to sustain life. God makes no mistakes. He had made everything suitable for His purpose.** The challenge of mankind is to discover those things which God has determined to be appropriate. The clause “He has also set eternity in their heart” is one of the most powerful statements in this book, but also one that has caused interpretive challenge. Two basic interpretations can be found: one negative and the other positive.

**The negative interpretation has Solomon disgusted with the work of God. The incorrect inference is that God put eternity in man’s heart but then left him alone.** According to this point of view, man has the frustrating task of trying to figure out that which he will never be able to figure out (man will not find out the work which God has done”). “It is as if God is baiting or toying with his human creatures, giving them a desire for something that is well beyond their reach” – Tremper Longman III.

**The positive interpretation has Solomon stating that God has put a longing in each person’s heart that helps him prioritize the matters of this life.** Rather than foolishly believing that earthly life is all there is, he wants something beyond this world. Such a desire comes from God Himself. Almost every ancient culture has buried with their dead certain objects that they thought might be beneficial in the afterlife. There is that consciousness in

man’s heart of life hereafter. Ancient peoples were entombed with food, tools, boats, and chariots. Some of the wealthy ones, including kings, even had slaves buried with them. The longing for something that lasts is present with all men, even the atheists. In verse 14, we know that what God build lasts forever, but what man builds will be temporary. It’s wiser to seek the works of God rather than the works of man. {**Matthew 15:13; 1 Peter 1:23-25**}. The positive interpretation is the better choice.

Solomon concluded verse 11 by saying that man will not be able to discover God’s work “even to the end.” No one in this life can completely understand God’s plan. **Man will never fully comprehend the mysteries of God. While Solomon was able to research all that was “under heaven”(1:13), some truths were still beyond his capacity to research.**

### **LIFE IS GOOD (3:12-15)**

After illustrating the beautiful way God has set a time for everything in life, Solomon pointed out that God continues to provide for mankind even beyond the limitations of time.

*“I know that nothing is better for them than to rejoice, and to do good in their lives, and also that every man should eat and drink and enjoy the good of all his labor-it is the gift of God. I know that whatever God does, It shall be forever. Nothing can be added to it, And nothing taken from it. God does it, that men should fear before Him. That which is has already been, And what is to be has already been; And God requires an*

account of what is past”. (*Ecclesiastes 3:12-15 NKJV*)

Solomon here indicates that he had learned that the good things in this life are from God Himself. They are His gifts (*James 1:17*). The best we can do in this short life is to be happy (“rejoice”) and to “do good” (*Galatians 6:10; Ephesians 2:10*). **We should know we were not born for ourselves alone. It is our business to do good; it is in doing good that there is the truest pleasure, and what is so laid out is best laid up and will turn to the best account. Part of redeeming the time in this short and uncertain life is to be doing good.**

**In 2:17 Solomon said, “I hate life”. However, that was the perspective he was offering without God. Now that he had brought God into the discussion, Solomon set forth these ideas;**

***Life is good and is to be enjoyed (3:12, 13; 5:20)***

***Life is given by God (5:18) and is full of pleasures from Him (9:9)***

Eating and drinking (3:13) are presented as tokens of the good life. Solomon understood that sustenance is a gift from God. The Lord gives and the Lord takes away. Job, even in His suffering, realised that the Lord should be thanked.

Solomon demonstrated that the good life mentioned in verse 12 and 13 is secured by God Himself. Four features of God’s work were listed in verse 14:

1. It is permanent. It “will remain forever” (see *1 Peter 1:25*). God does not fail. Man is incapable of making God’s creation void.
2. It is effective. “There is nothing to add to it”. When God considered all of His creation, He noted that it was “very good” (*Genesis 1:31*). No deficiency in God. God’s work is perfect as is.
3. It is complete. “There is nothing to take away from it”. That is why it is so foolish for men to add to or take away from God’s word, it is complete in every respect and will never need revision {*Revelation 22:18, 19; Galatians 1:8, 9; 2 Peter 1:3; Jude 3*}
4. It is purposeful. His works cause men to “fear Him”. Any thoughtful person can see the power of God in His creation. (*Romans 1:20*)

The word fear used here, means to be in awe (reverence) of Him. We tremble before Him (*Matthew 10:28; Hebrew 10:31; 12:28*). God wants us to fear Him. “Fear God” is the conclusion to the whole book (*Ecclesiastes 12:13*).

Verse 15 presents a contrast to 1:8-11. **With man alone, all is hopeless. With God, there is security and hope.** God keeps the cycles going. God’s watchfulness represents security and hope, especially for His people. Solomon concludes verse 15 by reminding us that God seeks justice for the oppressed. Next week teacher will build on this.

## CONCLUSION

The Book of Ecclesiastes might be a wearisome book if there were no gospel of grace to reveal the way of true satisfaction, happiness and peace with God. It is only through acceptance of God's way of salvation can a person discover the true purpose of life. "so if the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed" (**John 8:36**). In true submission to the claims of Jesus Christ, every individual can find purpose in the perfect will of God.

When one has heard the gospel, he can accept the great truth that Jesus Christ is the Son of God "And he 'himself carried our sins' in his own body to the cross, so that we might die to our sins, and live for righteousness. 'His bruising was your healing.'" (**1 Peter 2:24** TCNT)

After baptism to wash away one's sins (**Acts 22:16**), one can start a new life filled with joy and purpose. "Consequently, through sharing his death in our baptism, we were buried with him; that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by a manifestation of the Father's power, so we also may live a new Life". (**Romans 6:4** TCNT)