

Time and Toil

Ecclesiastes Chapter 3

Question 1: What is the chief and highest end of man?

Answer: Man's chief and highest end is to glorify God, and fully to enjoy him forever.

The Westminster Catechism

After showing that true enjoyment comes by acknowledging God's place in one's life, Solomon goes on in chapter three to show how God is administering all aspects of life. God has set a time for all the affairs of life. All events (3:1-8), labor (3:9-15), judgment (3:16-17) and death (3:18-21) are ordained and ordered by the providence of God. Since this is the case, the best thing for man to do is to enjoy his life.

TIME (3:1-8)

The author employs fourteen sets of opposites in a poetic structure designed to illustrate God's control of all events. Note them below.

1. *A time to be born, and a time to die;*
2. *a time to plant, and a time to pluck up that which is planted;*
3. *A time to kill, and a time to heal;*
4. *a time to break down, and a time to build up;*
5. *A time to weep, and a time to laugh*
6. *a time to mourn, and a time to dance;*
7. *A time to cast away stones, and a time to gather stones together;*
8. *a time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing;*
9. *A time to get, and a time to lose;*
10. *a time to keep, and a time to cast away;*
11. *A time to rend, and a time to sew*
12. *a time to keep silence, and a time to speak;*
13. *A time to love, and a time to hate;*
14. *a time of war, and a time of peace.*

Solomon's point seems to be that events are not random, chance occurrences, but divinely ordered appointments. He presents life as orderly and meaningful, not chaotic or haphazard.

Some of these subjects seem out of place.

- Why would there ever be a time to kill? *Capital punishment and war*
- When would be a time to break down? *renovation*
- When would be a time to hate? *OK to hate sin and ungodliness*
- Is God in control of *all* events, or just *some* events? Read Eph 1:11. *All.*
- Why is God's sovereignty a comforting idea? *Because we know that God is working out his plan in our lives. He cares and is active.*
- Why is God's sovereignty sometimes hard to deal with? *Because it seems like things are often chaotic and random, meaningless, senseless and even mean. E.g., hurricane Mitch's destruction of Central America.*

What is the Providence of God?

The providence of God is that normal control that God exerts over all things at all times so that the universe behaves according to God's will. God's providence operates behind the scenes, ordering all events, even seemingly minor ones. Theologians usually recognize two aspects of providence—God's work of preserving, maintaining, and sustaining His creation; and God's work in guiding and governing the course of events to fulfill His purposes. Chance, fate and luck have no power in a universe controlled by God's providential oversight.

LABOR (3:9-15)

Verse 9 returns to the question of chapter one: *What profit does the worker gain from his labor?* The answer seems to be that since God is in charge of all things, man is not in control and cannot change God's plan.

What is the burden ("travail" KJV) that Solomon saw?

1. God's administration of all things is beautiful. *That is, there is beauty in God's ordering and design of all things. Lots of beauty in nature.*
2. God has set eternity ("the world" KJV) in man's heart. That is, because God has made man in His own image, man has a deep-seated desire to understand the created order, to discern how things work, and to appreciate the beauty of creation.
3. Man cannot understand the workings of God or of the universe (.11 end).

Since man cannot fathom the workings of God, what should he do? (.12-13) *rejoice, and to do good in his life. And also that every man should eat and drink, and enjoy the good of all his labour, it is the gift of God. There's no use worrying about it.*

Why is it futile for people to try to change what God has done or is doing? (.14) *Man can't add to or take anything from God's plan.*

JUDGMENT (3:16-17)

Solomon next brings up several points that seem to argue that God is not doing a very good job at administrating the world, and that evil men *do* seem to upset God's plan. But we will find that such arguments are invalid.

- What did Solomon find in the place of judgment? *Wickedness*
- What did he find in the place of righteousness? *Iniquity*
- Why did this not discourage him? *Because he knew that God would eventually repay both the righteous and the wicked.*

A good cross reference: Psalm 73:2-5, 16-20

DEATH (3:18-21)

In verse 18, we read a statement that make Ecclesiastes a puzzling book. What is so puzzling about this verse? *It declares that men are just animals.*

What evidence does Solomon give for this assertion?

1. *The fate of humans and the fate of animals is the same; as one dies, so dies the other.*
2. *They all have the same breath,*
3. *humans have no advantage over the animals;*
4. *All go to one place (the grave—Sheol); all are from the dust, and all turn to dust again.*
5. *Who knows whether the human spirit/breath goes upward and the spirit/breath of animals goes downward to the earth?*

Is it true that humans are just animals? Is that really Solomon's point? *No, people are not animals. People bear the image of God; animals don't. Animals have no soul—when they die, they have no eternal nature that goes on. Solomon's point seems to be that people are **like** animals in how they live and die.*

How one interprets verse 21 is very important. On the surface, Solomon seems to be saying that he is not sure what the destiny of the human soul is. Yet in 12:7, he distinctly asserts that "[man's] spirit returns to God who gave it." What is the solution?

The issue revolves around whether or not the verse is a statement or a question. Most likely, the verse should be translated something like this: "There are not many who take to heart as they ought to the fact that the spirit of man goes upward, and that the spirit of the beast goes downward to the earth." It's not a question at all, but a statement of fact.¹

How does Solomon conclude his discussion in this chapter? (.22)

*So I saw that there is nothing better than that **all should enjoy their work**, for that is their lot; who can bring them to see what will be after them?*

¹ Walter Kaiser, Quality Living, pp. 85-87 and H. C. Leupold, Exposition of Ecclesiastes, pp. 97-100.

The Fear of the Lord

These words appear several times in the book. This fear is not an attitude of terror, but rather a commitment of the total being to trust and believe the living God. The one who fears God dreads nothing more than God's disfavor. Such a worshiper wants nothing more than to know the living God intimately and submit to his will.

Kaiser, p. 82.

Excellent Truths from Ecclesiastes 3:

1. God is *sovereignly* carrying out His plan.
2. God intends man to enjoy his *labor*.
3. God will *repay* the unrighteous and unjust.
4. It's no use *worrying* about death or what will happen on earth after you die.

For Further Discussion:

1. **Why does it at times appear to us that the world is chaotic and disorderly?** *Because we are viewing things from a human point of view. We don't know God's plan or how the events of life are furthering God's plan.*
2. **Does it seem unlikely that one will enjoy labor?**
Labor is often not seen as something enjoyable. Most people work any job that will pay the bills. But you should strive to be employed in an area that is enjoyable to you.
3. **Solomon asserts that man can't add to or take anything from God's plan. How do we know God's plan?**
Part of it is revealed in the Bible. But we don't know God's secret plan—it is not revealed to us. All we can do is try to go where God is going—get with God's program.