

For everything there is a season!

Ecclesiastes uses a lot of superlatives.

All the time.

Everywhere!

The word “all” is used 91 times in the 12 chapters of Ecclesiastes – starting with “everything is vanity.”

Here in chapter 3, it is used twice in verse 1,

“For *everything* there is a season, and a time for *every* matter under heaven.”

And then again

(v11) he has made “everything” beautiful in its time

(v13) and so *everyone* should eat and drink in *all* his toil

(v14) and thus *everything* that God does endures forever

### 1. “For Everything There Is a Season” – the Rhythms of Life Under Heaven (v1-8)

*For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven:*

In verse 1, the Preacher says that there is a time for every matter under heaven.

Notice that he doesn’t just say ‘under the sun.’

Some people say that ‘under the sun’ and ‘under heaven’ really just mean the same thing, but there is a subtle difference.

“Under the sun” emphasizes the natural order.

“Under heaven” reminds you of the one who dwells above the heavens.

And it is in this poem and its commentary in verses 9-15 that we hear the difference.

As I have been reflecting on Ecclesiastes over the last several weeks,

I have become more and more impressed

with how much the language of Ecclesiastes (and wisdom literature generally)

suffuses the language of our Lord Jesus.

So rather than expound verses 2-8 myself,

I would like for you to hear what Jesus said about these verses!

(though I won’t try to follow the order of Ecclesiastes 3).

<sup>8</sup> *a time to love, and a time to hate;*

“You shall love the Lord your God

with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.

This is the great and first commandment.

And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself.

On these two commandments depend all the law and the prophets.” (Matt 22:37-40)

And yet there is a time to hate:

“If anyone comes to me and does hate his own father and mother  
and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life,  
he cannot be my disciple.” (Luke 14:26)

Indeed, immediately after saying that we must hate father and mother, etc.,  
Jesus goes on to reflect on the other half of verse 8:

*a time for war, and a time for peace.*

For Jesus said, “what king, going out to encounter another king in war,  
will not sit down first and deliberate whether he is able with ten thousand  
to meet him who comes against him with twenty thousand?  
And if not, while the other is yet a great way off, he sends a delegation  
and asks for terms of peace.  
So therefore, any one of you who does not renounce all that he has  
cannot be my disciple.” (Luke 14:31-33)

Jesus is the great king who is coming.  
He will eradicate all kings who stand against him.  
If you wish to stand against Jesus with your pathetic little army of one,  
you may do so – but Jesus urges you to ask for terms of peace!  
You must renounce your kingdom in order to have peace with Jesus.

Because right now is the time for peace!  
Today is the day of salvation – of deliverance!  
But the time for war is coming –  
when the Son of Man will come in the glory of his Father.  
And he will come to judge the living and the dead.

<sup>6</sup> *a time to seek, and a time to lose;  
a time to keep, and a time to cast away;*

Jesus said,  
“Whoever seeks to preserve his life will lose it,  
but whoever loses his life will keep it.” (Luke 17:33; Matt 10:39)  
“Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness,  
and all these things will be added to you.” (Matt 6:33)

<sup>7</sup> *a time to tear, and a time to sew;*

Jesus uses the word “to tear” when he says that the new wine  
will “tear” the old wineskins (Matt 9:17) –  
and the wine is spilled and the skins destroyed.  
Such is a time to sew a new wineskin!

<sup>3</sup> *a time to kill, and a time to heal;*

Luke reports this in the juxtaposition between the story of Ananias and Sapphira

with the healing of the multitudes in Jerusalem (Acts 5).

*a time to break down, and a time to build up;*

(This is rooted in Jeremiah 1:10 – the call to Jeremiah,

“I have set you this day over nations and over kingdoms,  
to pluck up and to break down, to destroy and to overthrow,  
to build and to plant.”

But Jesus said, “destroy this temple and I will rebuild it in three days.”

(Jn 2:20; cf. Mt 26:61)

<sup>4</sup> *a time to weep, and a time to laugh;*

*a time to mourn, and a time to dance;*

When asked why his disciples did not fast,

Jesus said,

“Can the wedding guests mourn as long as the bridegroom is with them?

The days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them,  
and then they will fast.” (Mt 9:15)

<sup>5</sup> *a time to cast away stones, and a time to gather stones together;*

Jesus said of the temple in Matthew 24:2, “Truly I say to you,

there will not be left here one stone upon another that will not be thrown down.”

And yet, “the stone the builders rejected has become the cornerstone” (Mk 12:10)

*a time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing;*

If the word “embrace” is used of your wife, then it assumes one meaning.

If it is used of a friend, then it has another meaning!

But Jesus was betrayed by a friend who embraced him...

<sup>2</sup> *a time to be born, and a time to die;*

Jesus said, “Alas for women who are pregnant

and for those who are nursing infants in those days!” (Luke 21:23)

Jesus’ own birth and death, as recorded in Matthew and Luke, demonstrate this.

*a time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is planted;*

Jesus often spoken of planting and plucking.

Consider the parable of the weeds –

when the Son of Man sowed the good seed, the evil one sowed weeds;

but only at the end of the age will the angels come and reap the field (Mt 13).

*a time to keep silence, and a time to speak;*

And when Jesus stood before Pilate, he did not answer the charges (Matt 27:14),

but when Pilate asked, “Are you the King of the Jews,”

Jesus said, “You have said so.” (Matt 27:11)

So, I’ve explained the poem of Ecclesiastes 3 in the teaching of Jesus.

Is that what Ecclesiastes is saying?  
The Preacher reflects on the poem in verses 9-15 –  
and, I think, is getting at the same things that Jesus says!

## 2. “Everything Is Beautiful in Its Time” – the Image of God in Man (v9-11)

<sup>9</sup>What gain has the worker from his toil? <sup>10</sup>I have seen the business that God has given to the children of man to be busy with.

The question of verse 9 is a restatement of the basic question in 1:3 –  
“What does man gain by all the toil at which he toils under the sun?”  
Ten times the Preacher will use this word “gain” to try to get at the question:  
what is the advantage – what is the benefit – of toil under the sun?

Indeed, the Preacher has already described this business in 1:13 as  
“the unhappy business [literally, the “evil” business]  
that God has given to the children of Adam to be busy with.”

All is vanity – and striving after wind.

And yet, the poem of verses 1-8 has shown us that there is a time for everything under heaven.

“Under heaven” is an important phrase.  
It is very similar to “under the sun,”  
but it has a different emphasis.  
“Under the sun” reminds us of the futility and vanity of life –  
as the sun continues its endless cycles around the earth  
(remember 1:5 – “The sun rises and the sun goes down,  
and hastens to the places where it rises.”)  
But “under heaven” reminds us of the God who sits enthroned in the heavens.

And once you remember God, then everything changes:

<sup>11</sup>He has made everything beautiful in its time.

This is a striking contrast to most of what we have seen in chapters 1-2!  
The same things that were pronounced “vanity,” “grievous,” and “futile” in chapters 1-2  
are now declared “beautiful.”  
Indeed, if you compare the end of 1:2 and the beginning of 3:11,  
you can see what the Preacher is doing:

“Everything is vanity.” [the all is *hebel*]  
“Everything [“the all”] he has made beautiful in its time.”

This is exactly the same thing that Paul says in Romans 8:28  
“God works all things together for good for those who love him,  
who are called according to his purpose.”

“Everything he has made beautiful in its time.”

Everything?

If you look at everything from the perspective of life under the sun,  
then you will not see the beauty.  
You will only see the futility and vanity!

That is why:

*Also, he has put eternity into man's heart, yet so that he cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end.*

The structure of the verse is important.

In the first part, “the all” he has made beautiful in its time.  
Here, “the eternity” he has put into man’s heart.”

“The all” and “the eternity” are connected.

But I have to pause here to explain “eternity”!

We’ve encountered this word three times already in Ecclesiastes,  
and this is now the fourth different translation of it!

I’m not complaining – because I don’t know of a single English word  
that captures the range of meanings of the Hebrew *olam*.

In 1:4, it was translated “forever” –

A generation goes, and a generation comes, but the earth remains *forever* (*olam*).

In 1:10, it was translated “ages” –

Is there a thing of which it is said, ‘See, this is new’?

It has been already in the *ages* (*olamim* – plural) before us.

In 2:16, it was translated “enduring” –

For of the wise as of the fool there is no *enduring* [*olam*] remembrance.

(It is also translated “forever” in 3:14).

Some people object to the translation “eternity” – because eternity has to do with timelessness,  
and *olam* has to do with “ages” (something that is characterized by time).

That’s called the word/concept fallacy.

Just because a language has no word for something,  
that does not mean that they have no concept of it!

Hebrew has no word corresponding to the English word “mind” (or the Greek “*nous*”),  
but that does not mean that they did have a concept of the “thinking self.”

They just used the word “heart” to express that.

In Hebrew, the word “heart” does double duty to express the idea of the bodily organ,  
and the “thinking self.”

Likewise, *olam* covers a range of meanings that seem to grow over time.

It can mean an “age” – and in the plural (like in 1:10),

it can refer to “ages” or epochs of history (vast sweeps of time).  
In the singular it certainly carries the idea of “forever” –  
an indefinite and (at least apparently) unending period of time.  
But that sense of “foreverness” begins to take on a special significance  
with respect to God.

And that’s why I think the ESV is exactly right to translate Ecclesiastes 3:11,  
“He has put eternity into man’s heart.”

He has put something into man’s heart that makes us *yearn* for something divine.  
Ginger tells the story of watching a documentary  
where a mother lion walks away from her wounded cub –  
recognizing that there is no chance for that cub to survive.

I’m no expert on animal psychology –  
but it would not surprise me if someday we learn  
that the mother lion grieves in some sense.

But human beings are not content with grieving and walking away.  
We understand that things are not the way they should be!  
We want to change things!  
We want to take things that are “evil” – that are “unhappy” –  
and make them beautiful!

In short, we want to be like God!

That is what it means when it says that he has put “eternity” or “forever” or “the ages”  
into man’s heart.

God created man in his own image and likeness.  
We were made to *be* like him.

*yet so that he cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end.*

God has set eternity in our hearts,  
but we are not God!

We need to recognize both.  
We are *like God* in our desire to make evil things beautiful –  
to make wrong things right, and sad people happy –  
but God is God, and you are not!

We cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end.  
This word “to find out” will become more and more important  
as we go through Ecclesiastes.  
This is the first time it is used – but it will be used another 16 times –  
mostly after chapter 7, as the Preacher seeks to “find” his conclusion.

But even as the Preacher wants to find words of delight –  
even as he seeks to find wisdom and truth –  
he starts by acknowledging that he cannot find out  
what God has done from the beginning to the end!

And so the Preacher concludes this section with two “preliminary conclusions.”  
Notice that in verse 12 and verse 14 he starts, “I perceived...”

He will return in verse 16 to life “under the sun.”  
But before he returns to life under the sun,  
he provides two comments that help us gain perspective,  
and hopefully learn contentment.

God is God, and you are not.  
Until you are okay with that, you will remain frustrated and miserable!

### **3. “Everything God Does Endures Forever” – God’s Perspective and Ours (v12-15)**

He starts with *our perspective* – but no longer an “under the sun” perspective.  
If God is God and we are not,  
then how should we think about our work?

<sup>12</sup> *I perceived that there is nothing better for them than to be joyful and to do good as long as they live;* <sup>13</sup> *also that everyone should eat and drink and take pleasure in all his toil—this is God’s gift to man.*

Be joyful.  
Do good.

No, you cannot avoid death.  
You are going to die.  
But as long as you live,  
be joyful;  
do good.

We saw at the end of chapter 2 that “to the one who pleases him  
God has given wisdom and knowledge and joy” (2:26).  
Since joy is God’s gift to man,  
be joyful – do good!

In verse 13 we have another “all” phrase.  
In verse 11 we saw that “the all” God has made beautiful,  
and now in verse 13 we see that “all the man” (or in better English, “every man”)  
should eat and drink and take pleasure in all his toil.  
This is God’s gift to him.

If you think about the biblical theology of Adam (or *adam* – man),  
then you can see how (since we are created in the image of God)  
this is true for all of humanity –  
and yet you can also see (since we have sinned, and have distorted God’s image),  
this must be true first for *Jesus* – the second and last Adam –  
so that it can become even more true for the new humanity in him!

This phrase “all the man” will come back at the end of the book.  
When it says “this is the whole duty of man” in 12:13,  
the wording is, “this is the duty of *all the man*.” [or “every man”]

Here, the focus is “be joyful and do good.”  
There, the conclusion will be “fear God and keep his commandments.”

Together you can see where the Shorter Catechism gets it:  
“man’s chief end is to glorify God and to enjoy him forever.”

And the Preacher’s second observation helps us see the connection:

*<sup>14</sup> I perceived that whatever God does endures forever; nothing can be added to it, nor anything taken from it. God has done it, so that people fear before him.*

We often start with this emphasis on divine sovereignty  
and then try to talk about human responsibility.

But the Preacher, recognizing the futility of human life under the sun,  
starts with human responsibility (be joyful and do good),  
and then reflects on divine sovereignty.

We have another “all” phrase!  
I perceived that “all that God does” endures “forever” (*olam*).  
You cannot add to it, or subtract from it.  
“God has done it, so that people fear before him.”

God is God – and you are not.  
You have a choice, you can either fear him – and thus be joyful and do good –  
or you can fear him, and thus be bitter and angry and do evil.

Whatever God does endures forever.  
People sometimes object that it’s not fair.  
God gets what he wants, and we just have to “endure.”

Do you see what’s wrong with that way of thinking?  
It’s based on the assumption of a level playing field,  
with neutral rules that both God and I must follow.  
In other words, if I don’t get to be God, then God doesn’t get to be God either!



The Preacher is doing something that you rarely see in the Old Testament.  
He is reflecting on who God *is*.

There are lots of passages that talk about what God *does*.

The whole of redemptive history is filled with reflections on God's power,  
majesty, goodness, love, truth, faithfulness, etc.,  
as seen in his actions.

But here in Ecclesiastes, the Preacher reflects simply on who God *is*.

He still refers to what God *does* – but in a more abstract way.

Any Israelite would remember lots of concrete examples of God's actions,  
but the Preacher is now abstracting out a principle of theology.

“Whatever God does endures forever.”

The final verse sounds rather enigmatic:

<sup>15</sup> *That which is, already has been; that which is to be, already has been; and God seeks what has been driven away.*

In one sense we are back to chapter 1, verse 9 –

“What has been is what will be, and what has been done is what will be done,  
and there is nothing new under the sun.”

But in chapter 1, verse 9, the Preacher was reflecting on life *under the sun*.

The Preacher deliberately excluded God from those opening reflections!

Now, the Preacher comes back to his opening remarks,

and offers a response to his claim that “There is no remembrance of former things,  
nor will there be any remembrance of later things yet to be  
among those who come after.” (1:11)

Yes, it is true – I still affirm –

“That which is, already has been; that which is to be, already has been.”  
There is nothing new under the sun! (1:10)

But *God seeks* what has been driven away!

The Hebrew word “driven away” means “to pursue or persecute” –  
and very rarely has a positive sense!

Job uses it to refer to how God (and others) are pursuing or hounding him.

In the context of the exile, there is great comfort in the reminder

that God seeks that which has been driven away!

That which *man* forgets,

God will remember.

The message that *God is God and you are not*

is a message of comfort to those who are helpless!

God *seeks* – think of the Good Shepherd who goes in search of the wandering sheep –  
who goes in search of what has been driven away!

The Hebrew is indefinite as to whether it is speaking of things in general, or people,  
but however you take it, you cannot exclude people!

God seeks out the one who has been driven away –  
the one who has been pursued and persecuted.

Or, as Jesus said,

“the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost.” (Luke 19:10)

[conclude with “I Saw the Son of Man”]