

Week 4 - I See the Pattern; What's the Purpose? - Ecclesiastes 3:1-15

Scripture Reading: Psalm 111:1-10

Introduction

In our walk through the book of Ecclesiastes this morning, we come to what is likely the most well-known passage in the book - the poem of chapter three, verses 1-8.

Even people who have never opened the Bible for themselves probably heard Qoheleth's words, although in a modified form.

In 1959, folk singer and social activist Pete Seeger wrote a song that was made wildly popular by the rock group The Byrds when they recorded it in 1965.

In fact, it went to number one on the US Billboard Hot 100 list of songs on December 4, 1965.

The song is titled Turn! Turn! Turn!, and it is drawn straight from Ecclesiastes 3:1-8.

Mr. Seeger generously arranged for 45% of the royalties from the song to go to an Israeli charity.

But he kept 50% for his original music and claimed 5% for the lyrics because he said, "I did write six words and one more word repeated three times."

I can't play even a snippet of it for you because the algorithm at Facebook Live will cause our broadcast to be taken down for a copyright violation, but you would recognize it instantly.

I guess we could say that The Byrds' recording of the song can rightly claim the distinction of being the number-one hit with the oldest lyrics.

The words of Qoheleth's poem are striking, and one can't help but feel some way about them.

We readily recognize the beauty they contain in their rhythm, repetition, and the complete portrait of life they paint.

But each person's reaction is largely determined by their perspective.

Clearly, the poem is about time, as the word "time" is used 29 times in the eight verses.

And given what Qoheleth has said about the vanity of human existence and the meaningless nature of human pursuits, we might expect him to opine on the oppressive, repetitive nature of time or the fleeting nature of time.

Many people read the verses and see them as pessimistic in tone.

Whereas others see something completely different and much more positive.

Part of our task today will be to discover which camp we fall into.

Let's begin by reading through the first eight verses together [**Ecclesiastes 3:1-8**],

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

a time to be born, and a time to die; a time to plant, and a time to pluck up 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 together; a time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing;

a time to seek, and a time to lose; a time to keep, and a time to cast 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 for war, and a time for peace.

The first thing we want to consider today is the perpetual pattern of life as it's described by Qoheleth.

I. The perpetual pattern

Straight away, we see Qoheleth use a series of things that are opposites, such as birth and death, love and hate, etc.

This literary device is known as merism, whereby two opposing things are listed together to imply all the activities that lie between them.

We commonly use merism when we say “from soup to nuts,” “A to Z,” or “dusk to dawn.”

Qoheleth lists 14 pairs of opposites, and since seven is typically seen as the number of completion in the Bible, we can deduce that his intention is to show complete completeness.

In beginning his list with birth and death, we see another clue: he intends to include the entire spectrum of what normally occurs in life.

Of course, not every person will experience every activity on the list.

Some of the things he includes can be understood either concretely or metaphorically, and his list may not be exhaustive.

Still, his intention is clear, and any deficiencies we might note fit into the pattern without difficulty.

However, we are left to discern how Qoheleth felt about the nature of time and its constraints on our lives.

After all, verses 1-8 seem quite similar to his look at the cycles of nature in Chapter 1 that caused him discomfort.

Is Qoheleth being fatalistic and bemoaning the reality of being trapped by the tyranny of time?

That’s how many interpret the passage.

And that interpretation is certainly defensible when we consider the relentless repetition of the words “a time for this” and “a time for that.”

There is also something to be said for his inclusion of a negative event to balance out every positive thing he mentions.

Qoheleth might well be expressing his pessimistic outlook as he considers the monotony, inflexibility, and capricious nature of time that, at one moment, moves us forward and drags us back in the next.

I can see how one could conclude that Qoheleth is a “glass-half-empty” kind of guy.

However, I think that interpretation is more negative than is warranted.

First, we need to remember how Chapter 2 ended on a positive note by declaring how one can find enjoyment when we acknowledge what we receive as God’s gift to us.

Then, we see a strong affirmation in verse 11 of our passage [**Ecclesiastes 3:11**] of God’s involvement in making “everything beautiful in its time.”

And there is a significant clue that points to a shift in perspective on Qoheleth’s part in verse 1 [**Ecclesiastes 3:1**].

Notice that Qoheleth has changed from talking about activities that occur “under the sun” to what takes place “under heaven,” which seems to have a much more positive connotation.

He has moved from talking about what he perceived as purely natural phenomena to recognizing and appreciating God’s sovereignty in the world and his control over time.

God is the master of time.

He regulates our days and rules every moment of our lives.

Nothing happens that falls outside of his superintendence and control.

And God’s timing is perfect - he’s never early nor late with anything that happens in this world.

Furthermore, there is a precise orderliness to the way God does things.

God himself created time in the very beginning when he separated the darkness from the light and called the light day and the dark night.

Consider the orderly movement of the heavenly bodies and how we can know their precise positions at any moment.

God also created the march of seasons and, in his covenant with Noah, promised that they would continue as a testimony to him and the order he has ordained.

And today, winter is followed by spring and summer turns to autumn in their perineal march just as they always have. Likewise, God has appointed a fixed season, or appropriate time, for everything that happens.

Whether you view that as restrictive or comforting reveals a great deal about you and how you view God.

We'll talk more about that in a bit.

For now, let's move on to consider verses 9-11, where Qoheleth reveals a longing we all have.

II. Pining for permanence

In verse 9 [**Ecclesiastes 3:9**], Qoheleth once again asks where the profit is as he returns to the subject of working within God's system.

Remember, when he considered toil "under the sun," he concluded that all it netted was vexation and worry.

Now he says, "I've seen how God has ordered things," but he still wonders if there is anything to be gained in such a system.

Again, some people come down on the side of an emphatic "No!" in answer to Qoheleth's query - the worker still gets nothing from all his toil.

But in verse 11 [**Ecclesiastes 3:11**], we see that Qoheleth's eyes have been opened to a new reality.

He recognizes that God "*has made everything beautiful in its time.*"

Qoheleth could see the innate beauty in God's timing.

Of course, we recognize that "beautiful" is a visual term, first and foremost.

But it also refers to something good, proper, pleasing, and right.

And that requires us to properly understand God and our place in the universe.

We have to accept that both halves of each pair are beautiful in their own time - and that's where some people balk.

They find it difficult to associate the negative things with God, let alone attribute them to him, so they wind up with an unbalanced view of God.

But the revealed truth here is that God makes time for everything under heaven, and what we think of as positive *and* negative are beautiful in their own time.

Consider verse 2 [**Ecclesiastes 3:2**], where we read, "*There is a time to be born and a time to die.*"

We have no problem seeing birth as beautiful and acknowledging God's hand in it.

We love to quote **Psalm 139:13**, where the psalmist says that God formed his inward parts and knitted him together in his mother's womb.

But the psalmist also says in verse 16 [**Psalm 139:16**] that God pre-determined the precise timing of our death before we were ever born.

Both ends of life are beautiful.

Perhaps not in precisely the same way, but both are according to God's sovereignty and timing, and that makes them appropriate, pleasant, and right.

Of course, the same applies to all the other pairs, including killing and healing, war and peace, weeping and laughing, embracing and rejecting, loving and hating, and so forth.

That troubles us because we don't see as God sees.

Whereas God has the complete view, all we have is a point of view.

God said as much through the prophet Isaiah when he declared [**Isaiah 55:8-9**]:

"My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are my ways your ways...for as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts higher than your thoughts."

One commentator compared it to being nearsighted and trying to understand the beauty of an immense tapestry.

He talks about how, by examining the limited area we can see, we understand something of its quality.

However, its grand design eludes us because we can't stand back far enough to take it all in the way its creator can.

God stands above and beyond time and space; he sees the end and the beginning and all points in between with perfect clarity in the exact same instant.

And that's a significant reason for Qoheleth's frustration, a frustration we still feel when we look at the world around us.

We know there is something more that we are missing because God has put eternity into our hearts.

When God created us, he made us in his own image with intelligence, rationality, and curiosity.

Therefore, we have a deep, inborn desire to know what God knows - we want to see the tapestry as he sees it.

But we're finite beings living in a time-bound universe, and there's a great gap between what we have and what we yearn for.

We were made for more than this world can possibly give, and Qoheleth's search has led him to the possibility of finding satisfaction in God.

God has put the awareness of eternity into our hearts so that we will seek to fill it and thus find our way to him through his Son because, until we do, that yearning for something more will never be satisfied.

The day will come when we will understand everything that God wants us to know about what he has done in this world.

I don't know how thorough that understanding will be or how much it will even matter when we see Christ, but for now, Qoheleth directs us to two things that his search has revealed to him.

III. God's pleasant purposes

Twice in verses 12-15, Qoheleth says there are things he now perceives.

He's gained two significant insights: the first concerns doing God's business, and the second is about trusting God's sovereignty.

Let's look first at verses 12-13 [**Ecclesiastes 3:12-13**], where he says:

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

In verse 10, Qoheleth has already mentioned the business God has given to the children of man to be busy with.

Now he tells us we should be about doing that work.

Quite simply, he says we should get to it and do it joyfully and energetically with gratitude to God for giving us the privilege and pleasure of serving him.

We don't see the negativity and resignation that were present before, as Qoheleth has turned a corner in his thinking.

He's not saying "there's nothing better to do" as if it were a chore or simply the best of a bad lot.

All the words he uses now are positive, as he points out that there is meaning and joy to be found in everyday life.

We may not be happy every moment of every day.

Let's be honest; life has more than a fair share of hardship, pain, and drudgery.

But in every situation, we can always find a reason to glorify God and find joy in the grace of God - even when the work he has given us to do seems onerous.

I want you to try an experiment.

Put those verses in the first person and say, "There is nothing better for me than to be joyful and to do good as long as I live, and to eat and drink and take pleasure in all my work - God has given me *all* of this as a gift."

Imagine the difference reciting those words and taking them to heart would make in a typical day.

Think of how much good a person could do for the kingdom in their lifetime if that attitude guided their daily practice.

After all, **Ephesians 2:10** tells us that God has prepared good works for each of his children to do and that work is found in all facets of our lives.

We should be busy doing God's work at our jobs, at our homes, in our families, in our neighborhoods, in our society, and at our local church.

And there's one more thing I want to make sure to point out at the end of verse 12 [**Ecclesiastes 3:12**].

What I'm about to say flies in the face of our societal system, where we all long for the day when our labors cease, and we can finally live solely for ourselves.

Are you ready?

There is no retirement from God's work - we are to be active in it "*as long as [we] live.*"

There is a time for each of God's children to die.

Qoheleth stated as much in verse 2, but God expects us to live until we die, and the life he has given us includes working for him.

It's normal for our ministries to change as our energies and abilities change.

God wants us to enjoy life and take pleasure in it, as Qoheleth points out, and there is nothing wrong with enjoying the benefits of reaching our "golden years."

But we must always be on guard against the temptation to live only to please ourselves because the good things in life can become idols.

The way to avoid idolatry, then, is to accept and enjoy all things as gifts from God's gracious hand with thanksgiving while striving to be a productive member of his kingdom as he directs and enables.

It's commendable when we see folks who have served the Lord faithfully for years retire from their careers and use their newfound freedom and flexibility in their schedules to expand their service.

Age may change how we serve, but age is never an excuse for not serving - we are to be joyful and do good as long as we live.

Certainly, there's no requirement to be working all the time - everything has its season and that includes down-time and time spent enjoying oneself - but we need to keep things in balance.

And far too many people in our culture have the tendency to put an outsized focus on themselves and their own pleasure as they age.

The second thing Qoheleth perceives is how we need to let God be God and trust in his sovereignty.

Look with me at verses 14-15 [**Ecclesiastes 3:14-15**]:

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. That which is, already has been; that which is to be, already has been; and God seeks what has been driven away.

Here, Qoheleth was looking back at the list of opposites with which he began the chapter, and he recognized God's hand in all those things.

"Whatever God does" includes everything he does and when he does it.

Again, how we view this reality depends on our perspective.

Some see God's sovereignty as oppressive, restrictive, and perhaps even tyrannical.

They see God driving a giant steamroller over all our desires, plans, and efforts, flattening them to insignificance.

If God's will can't be altered, if nothing can be added or subtracted from it, then there's absolutely nothing we can do about our situation or our life's direction.

However, there is a more positive way to look at Qoheleth's words.

In them, we see the permanence of God's actions so we can find security.

We see God's actions are complete, so there is nowhere else we need to turn.

We see God's actions are totally secure, so nothing can be taken from us.

Then Qoheleth says that all of this leads people to fear God.

Again, some see this as God working to frighten people into submission.

But fear of the Lord in Scripture doesn't mean to tremble with terror.

It means to have a sense of reverence and respectful awe.

And when we consider the power and might of God as he directs the order of the universe, all its happenings and timings, how can we come away with anything less?

Elsewhere in the Bible, we read how the fear of God is the beginning of wisdom [**Proverbs 1:7**].

And when we consider all the intricate details of our lives and how God determines them all to our ultimate benefit [**Romans 8:28-29**], how can we not fear God and willingly place ourselves in his care?

Proper fear of God helps us, too, when we can't understand precisely what he's doing or why, and our trust in him keeps us moving forward.

Verse 15 [**Ecclesiastes 3:15**] is a little hard to understand because Qoheleth phrases it rather oddly.

But what he's saying is that God is consistent and will do as he has always done.

We should rejoice that God knows everything and he never overlooks any detail or behaves unpredictably.

Conclusion

The activities and things of this life were never meant to satisfy us, and our longing for something more tells us that we were made for much more than this world has to give.

C.S. Lewis put it this way in his popular book Mere Christianity:

“If I find in myself a desire which no experience in the world can satisfy, the most probable explanation is that I was made for another world. If none of my earthly pleasures satisfy it, that doesn’t prove that the universe is a fraud. Probably earthly pleasures were never meant to satisfy it, but only to arouse it, to suggest the real thing.”

Still, God has determined to leave us here for a time, so what are we to do with our time?

Let me give you three suggestions:

First, wait for God’s timing.

God sees things far more clearly than you or I and causes everything to happen at the exact right time.

Some of the times Qoheleth mentions are beyond our control - like the time of our birth and death and times of war and peace.

But many of us would much prefer to manage our own agenda and have those things we can control happen according to our timetable - which makes us quick to criticize God’s timing.

It takes discipline and trust to wait on God, but when we do, we find we have renewed strength for the challenges of this world [Isaiah 40:31].

Second, we should live knowing that this life will end one day.

The author of Hebrews wrote that every person who lives has a date with death [Hebrews 9:27], and judgment awaits.

I’ve mentioned previously how Stephen Covey counsels everyone to begin with the end in mind.

And that should be the habit of all Christ-followers.

We all want to hear the Lord say, “Well done,” when we stand before his throne, and for that to happen, we need to actually do well while we’re here.

Everyone must consider the most crucial question of this present life: “Are you ready for eternity?” because God has already determined when he will usher us into eternity, and all our chances to do well on this earth will be gone.

Third, make good use of every moment while you are here.

Time is our most precious commodity because God has given each of us stewardship over a sliver of eternity to use wisely or foolishly.

I once had a friend say we could use time, waste time, or kill time, and he catalogued different activities under each of those headings.

Consider how much of what you do in a day would you have to classify as murdering the precious time that God has allotted to you?

Paul wrote in **Ephesians 5:16** that Christ-followers should use their time wisely, “redeeming” or buying back the time because the days are evil.

Let’s pray alongside Moses as he does in **Psalm 90:12** -

“Teach us to number our days that we may get a heart of wisdom.”

Let’s pray.