

# WHAT MAKES SENSE WHEN LIFE DOESN'T?

## 3. THE SEASONS OF LIFE. ECCLESIASTES 3.

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.

What gain has the worker from his toil? I have seen the business that God has given to the children of man to be busy with. He has made everything beautiful in its time. 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. 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.

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.

Moreover, I saw under the sun that in the place of justice, even there was wickedness, and in the place of righteousness, even there was wickedness. I said in my heart, God will judge the righteous and the wicked, for there is a time for every matter and for every work. I said in my heart with regard to the children of man that God is testing them that they may see that they themselves are but beasts. For what happens to the children of man and what happens to the beasts is the same; as one dies, so dies the other. They all have the same breath, and man has no advantage over the beasts, for all is vanity. All go to one place. All are from the dust, and to dust all return. Who knows whether the spirit of man goes upward and the spirit of the beast goes down into the earth? So I saw that there is nothing better than that a man should rejoice in his work, for that is his lot. Who can bring him to see what will be after him?

### The variety of time.

The first eight verses make up one of the best known parts of the book. In 1950 its words were turned into a folk song which has been recorded by quite a few musicians including Judy Collins, Larry Norman and The Seekers.

It's a lost of fourteen sets of contrasting events that work together to make up the variety of the tapestry of life. The meaning of most of them is fairly obvious, though one or two of them are a little

more obscure, particularly the first part of verse 5 that talks about stones. Some people think that it may be referring to times when you clear stones away from a field in order to cultivate it and times when someone might want to sabotage the field of an enemy - have a look at 2 Kings 3:19 for an example of this. It's one possibility.

But even if that case is not clear, the overall picture is clear. Life is made up of contrasting events. It is true of human life generally and it is true of an individual's life. Life contains positive, happy and hopeful times; it also contains negative times, sad times, times of despair.

For everything there is a season. You and I need to realise that this is how life is.

Birth and death are obvious contrasts. They are the bookends of life. Take a walk along the corridors of a hospital. In one room you have a young mother who has just given birth to her first child. In another room, just along the corridor, you have an elderly man whose heart has just about given up and whose life is ebbing away.

Weeping and laughter can be so different. In a room like this there are likely people who have wept bitter tears this weekend; there are others who are at a phase in life where everything is such a delight and such fun. Both are part of life.

The pairs that are listed in verse 6 may have practical applications. Seeking and losing. I can't help thinking of a golfer whose ball has disappeared into the rough. There is a time to look for it, but there is also a time to give up on it and move on! Keeping and casting away might be a good contrast for families where some members are hoarders!

It is a brilliant poetic observation, but what are we to make of it?

1. Don't forget that life is made up of contrasts. I think this should bring a touch of realism to how we view life. If you are on a positive track, particularly if you are younger and your experience has been that everything goes your way, don't be surprised when difficulty comes in. There may be some people who get to sail through life with hardly any trouble, but that is not a realistic observation. You might wish it happens to you, but you cannot set your heart on it. In contrast to that, if you are in a sad phase of life, don't close your heart to the possibility of renewed hope. Don't say that you will never be able to smile again. The pattern of life is such that you may well experience something very different from where you are today.
2. If this is how time operates, there is probably wisdom in trying to be aware of what time it is. There is a story of an unemployed actor who eventually got a small part in a theatre production. He had one line. "Hark, how the cannons roar!" That was it. All he had to do was wait for his cue (presumably the roar of cannons) and speak his line. "Hark, how the cannons roar!" He was so glad to have got this part. Over and over he practiced his line in preparation for the opening evening. Eventually it came. He stood on the edge of the stage. The cannon roared. "What on earth was that bang?" We do well to discern what time it actually is. If there is a time to speak and a time to be quiet, it is good for us to know which is which. Too often we say nothing when we should speak; and too often we speak when we would be best to be quiet.
3. The problem with what I have just said though is that it is not always easy to manage time. What is clear about this poem is that there are aspects of time that are far beyond our control. We have no control over our birth. We don't ask to be born. We don't get to choose the day or the year, or even the century. It is out of our control. As are the circumstances of our death. You don't choose when that will happen. And the sad reality of these seasons is that there is always the negative side. There is dying, there is weeping, there is killing, there is fighting. Things that we would prefer were not part of life come around. They have their time. When you think of these things and remember the tone of the book so far - this is a commentary on the brokenness of a fallen world - this fascinating poem can suddenly take on a dark and threatening atmosphere. That is why some of the commentators will talk about the burden of time or even the tyranny of time. Because there is a time and a season for everything, and because we are not in control, it feels as though we are just the helpless victims of the turning of the earth.

#### 4. It is that negativity that seeps through in verses 9 and 10

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

What do we gain from it all? So much of what we see is just a puff of wind; it is empty, it is meaningless, it is gone before we know it. And we seem to be locked in the tyranny of time.

5. But there is a glimmer of hope in verse 11. God has made everything beautiful in its time. If the seasons and events of life are beyond our control, they are not beyond his control. What to our eyes might sometimes appear like chaos is actually the stage upon which God is working out his purpose. Notice that verse 11 repeats the idea that everything has its time. God makes everything beautiful, or appropriate, in its time.

Despite the apparent tyranny of time, despite the emptiness and meaningless of so much of life and the difficulty of being able to make sense of what is going on under the sun, God is still at work. He made the world in the first place and he will bring about its redemption. In the meantime it is a broken world. But it is not so badly broken that you cannot trace the signs of God's work. He is the Ruler of time.

What I am going to say here is probably far from the mind of Ecclesiastes, but we need to remember God's promise in the New Testament. In Romans 8 he promises that he works in everything for the good of those who love him. In his time, he makes everything beautiful.

#### The perplexity of eternity.

There is another new dimension that emerges in verse 11. Eternity. God - who makes everything beautiful in its time - has also put eternity in the hearts of men. Notice two things about eternity.

1. God is eternal but he is at work in time.

That is what we have just seen. God works in time. You and I can see evidence of what he does. We can see him turning a time of conflict into a time of peace. We can see him turning a time of weeping into a time of joy. We get these glimpses, but we cannot fully understand the whole story.

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.

And if you look down to verses 14 and 15, you read this:

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.

There is something about eternity and about God that is beyond our understanding. We certainly cannot work it all out by observation. It is impossible to look around you, or read a book on world history, and decide that you know everything about God and his purpose.

So there is a sense of encouragement, but there is also a sense of limitation.

2. People are finite but are aware of eternity.

If you have ever wondered whether there is something beyond the tapestry of time before which you live your life, it is because God has put eternity in your heart. If there is a dissatisfaction at life on earth; if there is a sense of questioning, of hoping that there is more, it is evidence that God has put eternity in your heart. If eternity is in your heart, you cannot be completely satisfied in time. But the problem is that since you are finite you cannot fully understand the purposes of God in eternity.

So what are we meant to do? We need to live life as a gift and we need to live life in reverence.

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.

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.

If you persevere with this book, you will realise that there is a theme that keeps recurring. It's the fact that best thing we can do is enjoy the gifts of common grace which God gives us. If you ever watched Robin Williams in *Dead Poets Society*, you might think of these as *carpe diem* passages. Seize the day. Make the most of what you get. Be joyful; do good; eat, drink and take pleasure in your work..

There are two ways you can think of these passages, depending on how cynical you think Ecclesiastes is trying to be. If you think he is an almost total cynic, then what he is saying is “make the most of it, for this is as good as it gets.”

He is telling us that life is meaningless, it is uncertain, it is out of control, there are all kinds of things wrong with it. If you are fortunate enough to be able to enjoy a nice meal, to have some good days at work, then enjoy them because that is all you will get. Eternity? You will never work it out so just content yourself with a good meal!

There is no doubt that he is often very cynical. He does not have the complete picture. He is trying to find meaning under the sun, and if that is all there is to it, then this is as good as it gets.

I believe that the fuller picture of the Bible actually says that the best is yet to come. The reason NT believers were able to endure so much was because of the reward that they knew was waiting for them. Even if life on earth does not add up, there is hope beyond it. But that does not change the fact that God gives gifts of everyday grace to us. And if we are perplexed, or if the whole business seems to be beyond us, one of the encouragements for us is to take the opportunity to enjoy the things which God scatters on our path.

## The certainty of judgment and the finality of death

Verse 16 is pessimistic. The Preacher sees a lack of justice in places where he should be able to find it. There was wickedness in the place of justice and wickedness in the place of righteousness.

You see it in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. God puts rulers in place to uphold justice in their countries and it does not always happen.

I am sure that the Preacher was deeply frustrated at what he saw, but he knew in his heart that God would see to it that there would be judgment. Notice his reason:

For there is a time for every matter and every work.

But living in a world like this is a reminder of our limitations. It is a shocking thought that whenever you see a lack of justice it is a reminder that we are no better than animals. And it is even more shocking that the Preacher goes on to say that in death we are no better than animals.

For what happens to the children of man and what happens to the beasts is the same; as one dies, so dies the other. They all have the same breath, and man has no advantage over the beasts, for all is vanity. All go to one place. All are from the dust, and to dust all return. Who knows whether the spirit of man goes upward and the spirit of the beast goes down into the earth?

In one sense he is correct, but only in terms of what you can actually observe about life. Animals don't live forever; their breath leaves them and they return to dust. In terms of mere observation, we are no better. Our breath leaves us and we return to dust. As far as he is concerned, we cannot be sure of much more than that.

So he concludes:

So I saw that there is nothing better than that a man should rejoice in his work, for that is his lot. Who can bring him to see what will be after him?

## Conclusion.

I cannot leave us here. In the end neither will the book of Ecclesiastes, but I have to point you to a wider horizon.

WH Auden wrote like this:

Thoughts of his own death,  
like the distant roll  
of thunder at a picnic.

The man is enjoying a picnic. No doubt it is a pleasant, relaxing experience. But there is a storm in the distance. He can hear its thunder. The thought of his own death is the distant roll of thunder. Perhaps life is pleasant, successful; but there is a storm brewing on the horizon. We are not here forever. The picnickers realise that they are going to have to gather everything together and leave. So will we. Our breath will leave and our body will return to the dust.

But here is where Christianity sits apart from this. Our bodies will be redeemed. Jesus' resurrection has guaranteed that.

It is John Ortberg who tells the story of the lady who discussed her funeral arrangements with her pastor. One odd element was her desire to be buried with a fork in her hand. She explained that it was a reference to all the church potlucks where the instruction, "Keep your fork," at the end of the main course, was a sure sign that something better (chocolate cake) was still to come. She wanted the people at her funeral to know that she was being buried with the assurance that the best was yet to come.

That is the hope, but I need to ask all of us if we are sure we belong to Jesus. We will one day leave behind the changing tapestry of time. Do we know where we are going?