
ECCLESIASTES 3: 1 For everything there is a season, and a time for every purpose under heaven:

Every thing has its time and season, Ecc 3:1-8. Men are exercised with labor, Ecc 3:9, Ecc 3:10. Every thing is beautiful in its season, Ecc 3:11. Men should enjoy thankfully the gifts of God, Ecc 3:12, Ecc 3:13. What God does is for ever, Ecc 3:14. There is nothing new, Ecc 3:15. The corruption of judgment; but the judgments of God are right, Ecc 3:16, Ecc 3:17. Man is brutish, and men and brutes die in like manner, Ecc 3:18-21. Man may enjoy the fruit of his own labors, Ecc 3:22.

Verse 1

To every thing there is a season, and a time to every purpose - Two general remarks may be made on the first eight verses of this chapter.

1. God by his providence governs the world, and has determined particular things and operations to particular times. In those times such things may be done with propriety and success; but if we neglect the appointed seasons, we sin against this providence, and become the authors of our own distresses.

2. God has given to man that portion of duration called Time; the space in which all the operations of nature, of animals, and intellectual beings, are carried on; but while nature is steady in its course, and animals faithful to their instincts, man devotes it to a great variety of purposes; but very frequently to that for which God never made time, space, or opportunity. And all we can say, when an evil deed is done, is, there was a time in which it was done, though God never made it for that purpose.

To say any farther on this subject is needless, as the words themselves give in general their own meaning. The Jews, it is true, see in these times and seasons all the events of their own nation, from the birth of Abraham to the present times; and as to fathers and their followers, they see all the events and states of the Christian Church in them!

It is worthy of remark, that in all this list there are but two things which may be said to be done generally by the disposal of God, and in which men can have but little influence: the time of birth, and the time of death. But all the others are left to the option of man, though God continues to overrule them by his providence. The following paraphrase will explain all that is necessary to be generally understood: -

ECCLESIASTES 3: 2 a time to be born, and a time to die; a time to plant, and a time to pluck up that which is planted;

Verse 2

A time to be born, and a time to die - plant - "As in its mother's womb the embryo lies

A space determined; to full growth arrived,

From its dark prison bursts, and sees the light;

So is the period fix'd when man shall drop
Into the grave - A time there is to plant,
And sow; another time to pluck and reap.
Even nations have their destined rise and fall:
Awhile they thrive; and for destruction ripe,
When grown, are rooted up like wither'd plants."

ECCLESIASTES 3: 3 a time to kill, and a time to heal; a time to break down, and a time to build up;

Verse 3

A time to kill, - heal, - break down, - build up - "The healing art, when out of season used,
Pernicious proves, and serves to hasten death.
But timely medicines drooping nature raise,
And health restore - Now, Justice wields her sword
With wholesome rigour, nor the offender spares:
But Mercy now is more expedient found.
On crazy fabrics ill-timed cost bestow'd
No purpose answers, when discretion bids
To pull them down, and wait a season fit
To build anew."

ECCLESIASTES 3: 4 a time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance;

Verse 4

A time to weep, - laugh, - mourn, - dance - - "When private griefs affect
The heart, our tears with decent sorrow flow;
Nor less becoming, when the public mourns,
To vent the deepest sighs. But all around
When things a smiling aspect bear, our souls
May well exult; 'tis then a time for joy."

ECCLESIASTES 3: 5 a time to cast away stones, and a time to gather stones together;
a time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing;

Verse 5

A time to cast away stones, - to gather stones, - to embrace, - to refrain - "One while domestic cares
abortive prove,

And then successful. Nature now invites

Connubial pleasures: but, when languid grown,

No less rejects."

ECCLESIASTES 3: 6 a time to seek, and a time to lose; a time to keep, and a time to cast away;

Verse 6

A time to get, - to lose, - to keep, - to cast away - - "Commerce produces wealth,

Whilst time of gaining lasts; from every point

Blow prosperous gales. Now heaven begins to lower,

And all our hopes are blasted. Prudence bids,

One while, our treasure to reserve, and then

With liberal hand to scatter wide. How oft

In raging storms, the owner wisely casts

Into the deep his precious merchandise,

To save the foundering bark!

ECCLESIASTES 3: 7 a time to tear, and a time to sew; a time to keep silence, and a time to speak;

Verse 7

A time to rend, - sew, - keep silence, - speak - - "Intestine broils

And factions rend a state: at length the breach

Is heal'd, and rest ensues. Wisdom restrains

The tongue, when words are vain: but now, 'Tis time to speak, and silence would be criminal."

ECCLESIASTES 3: 8 a time to love, and a time to hate; a time for war, and a time for peace.

Verse 8

A time to love, - hate, - of war, - of peace - "Love turns to hatred; interest or caprice

Dissolves the firmest knot by friendship tied.

O'er rival nations, with revenge inflamed,

Or lust of power, fell Discord shakes awhile

Her baleful torch: now smiling Peace returns."

The above paraphrase on the verses cited contains a general view of the principal occurrences of time, in reference to the human being, from his cradle to his grave, through all the operations of life.

ECCLESIASTES 3: 9 What profit has he who works in that in which he labours?

Verse 9

What profit hath he - What real good, what solid pleasure, is derived from all the labors of man? Necessity drives him to the principal part of his cares and toils; he labors that he may eat and drink; and he eats and drinks that he may be preserved alive, and kept from sickness and pain. Love of money, the basest of all passions, and restless ambition, drive men to many labors and expedients, which perplex and often destroy them. He, then, who lives without God, travails in pain all his days.

ECCLESIASTES 3: 10 I have seen the burden which God has given to the sons of men to be afflicted with.

Verse 10

I have seen the travail - Man is a sinner; and, because he is such, he suffers.

ECCLESIASTES 3: 11 He has made everything beautiful in its time. He has also set eternity in their hearts, yet so that man can't find out the work that God has done from the beginning even to the end.

Verse 11

Beautiful in his time - God's works are well done; there are order, harmony, and beauty in them all. Even the caterpillar is a finished beauty in all the changes through which it passes, when its structure is properly examined, and the ends kept in view in which each change is to issue. Nothing of this kind

can be said of the works of man. The most finished works of art are bungling jobs, when compared with the meanest operation of nature.

He hath set the world in their heart - העולם haolam, that hidden time - the period beyond the present, - Eternity. The proper translation of this clause is the following: "Also that eternity hath he placed in their heart, without which man could not find out the work which God hath made from the commencement to the end." God has deeply rooted the idea of eternity in every human heart; and every considerate man sees, that all the operations of God refer to that endless duration. See Ecc 3:14. And it is only in eternity that man will be able to discover what God has designed by the various works he has formed.

ECCLESIASTES 3: 12 I know that there is nothing better for them than to rejoice, and to do good as long as they live.

Verse 12

I know that there is no good in them, but, etc. - Since God has so disposed the affairs of this world, that the great events of providence cannot be accelerated or retarded by human cares and anxieties, submit to God; make a proper use of what he has given: do thyself no harm, and endeavor as much as possible to do others good.

Enjoy, and bless thyself; let others share

The transient blessing: 'tis the gift of God.

ECCLESIASTES 3: 13 Also that every man should eat and drink, and enjoy good in all his labour, is the gift of God.

ECCLESIASTES 3: 14 I know that whatever God does, it shall be forever. Nothing can be added to it, nor anything taken from it; and God has done it, that men should fear before him.

Verse 14

I know that whatsoever God doeth, it shall be for ever - לעולם leolam, for eternity; in reference to that grand consummation of men and things intimated in Ecc 3:11. God has produced no being that he intends ultimately to destroy. He made every thing in reference to eternity; and, however matter may be changed and refined, animal and intellectual beings shall not be deprived of their existence. The brute creation shall be restored, and all human spirits shall live for ever; the pure in a state of supreme and endless blessedness, the impure in a state of indestructible misery.

Nothing can be put to it - No new order of beings, whether animate or inanimate, can be produced. God will not create more; man cannot add.

Nor any thing taken from it - Nothing can be annihilated; no power but that which can create can destroy. And whatever he has done, he intended to be a means of impressing a just sense of his being, providence, mercy, and judgments, upon the souls of men. A proper consideration of God's works has a tendency to make man a religious creature; that is, to impress his mind with a sense of

the existence of the Supreme Being, and the reverence that is due to him. In this sense the fear of God is frequently taken in Scripture. The Hebrew of this clause is strongly emphatic: והאלהים עשה שייראו מלפניו vehaelohim asah sheiyireu millephanaiv; "And the gods he hath done, that they might fear from before his faces." Even the doctrine of the eternal Trinity in Unity may be collected from numberless appearances in nature. A consideration of the herb trefoil is said to have been the means of fully convincing the learned Erasmus of the truth of the assertion, These Three are One: and yet three distinct. He saw the same root, the same fibres, the same pulpy substance, the same membraneous covering, the same color, the same taste, the same smell, in every part; and yet the three leaves distinct: but each and all a continuation of the stem, and proceeding from the same root. Such a fact as this may at least illustrate the doctrine. An intelligent shepherd, whom he met upon the mountains, is said to have exhibited the herb, and the illustration while discoursing on certain difficulties in the Christian faith. When a child, I heard a learned man relate this fact.

ECCLESIASTES 3: 15 That which is has been long ago, and that which is to be has been long ago: and God seeks again that which is passed away.

Verse 15

That which hath been is now - God governs the world now, as he has governed it from the beginning; and the revolutions and operations of nature are the same now, that they have been from the beginning. What we see now, is the same as has been seen by those before us.

And God requireth that which is past - i.e., That it may return again in its proper order. The heavens themselves, taking in their great revolutions, show the same phenomena. Even comets are supposed to have their revolutions, though some of them are hundreds of years in going round their orbits.

But in the economy of grace, does not God require that which is past? Whatever blessing or influence God gives to the soul of man, he intends shall remain and increase; and it will, if man be faithful. Reader, canst thou produce all the secret inspirations of his Spirit, all the drawings of his love, his pardoning mercy, his sanctifying grace, the heavenly-mindedness produced in thee, thy holy zeal, thy spirit of prayer, thy tender conscience, the witness of the Spirit, which thou didst once receive and enjoy? Where are they? God requireth that which is past.

ECCLESIASTES 3: 16 Moreover I saw under the sun, in the place of justice, that wickedness was there; and in the place of righteousness, that wickedness was there.

Verse 16

The plate of judgment, that wickedness was there - The abuse of power, and the perversion of judgment, have been justly complained of in every age of the world. The following paraphrase is good: - "But what enjoyment can our labors yield,

When e'en the remedy prescribed by heaven

To cure disorders proves our deadliest bane?

When God's vicegerents, destined to protect
The weak from insolence of power, to guard
Their lives and fortunes, impious robbers turn?
And, or by force or fraud, deprive of both? -
To what asylum shall the injured fly
From her tribunal, where perverted law
Acquits the guilty, the innocent condemns?"
C.

ECCLESIASTES 3: 17 I said in my heart, "God will judge the righteous and the wicked; for there is a time there for every purpose and for every work."

Verse 17

For there is a time there for every purpose - Man has his time here below, and God shall have his time above. At his throne the judged shall be rejudged, and iniquity for ever close her mouth.

ECCLESIASTES 3: 18 I said in my heart, "As for the sons of men, God tests them, so that they may see that they themselves are like animals.

Verse 18

That they might see that they themselves are beasts - The author of Choheleth has given a correct view of this difficult verse, by a proper translation: "I said in my heart, reflecting on the state of the sons of men, O that God would enlighten them, and make them see that even they themselves are like beasts." These words are to be referred to those in authority who abused their power; particularly to the corrupt magistrates mentioned above.

ECCLESIASTES 3: 19 For that which happens to the sons of men happens to animals. Even one thing happens to them. As the one dies, so the other dies. Yes, they have all one breath; and man has no advantage over the animals: for all is vanity.

Verse 19

For that which befalleth the sons of men befalleth beasts - From the present comparison of great men to beasts, the author takes occasion to enforce the subject by mentioning the state of mankind in general, with respect to the mortality of their bodies; and then, by an easy transition, touches in the next verse on the point which is of such infinite consequence to religion.

As the one dieth, so dieth the other - Animal life is the same both in the man and in the beast.

They have all one breath - They respire in the same way; and when they cease to respire, animal life becomes extinct.

Befalleth beasts - This is wanting in six of Kennicott's and De Rossi's MSS.

ECCLESIASTES 3: 20 All go to one place. All are from the dust, and all turn to dust again.

Verse 20

All go unto one place - "Man was born
To die, nor aught exceeds in this respect
The vilest brute. Both transient, frail, and vain,
Draw the same breath; alike grow old, decay,
And then expire: both to one grave descend;
There blended lie, to native dust return'd." - C.

ECCLESIASTES 3: 21 Who knows the spirit of man, whether it goes upward, and the spirit of the animal, whether it goes downward to the earth?"

Verse 21

Who knoweth the spirit of man - I think the meaning of this important verse is well taken by the above able writer: -

The nobler part of man, 'tis true, survives
The frail corporeal frame: but who regards
The difference? Those who live like beasts, as such
Would die, and be no more, if their own fate
Depended on themselves. Who once reflects,
Amidst his revels, that the human soul,
Of origin celestial, mounts aloft,
While that of brutes to earth shall downward go?"

The word רוּחַ ruach, which is used in this and the nineteenth verse, has two significations, breath and spirit. It signifies spirit, or an incorporeal substance, as distinguished from flesh, or a corporeal one, 1Kgs 22:21, 1Kgs 22:22, and Isa 31:3. And it signifies the spirit or soul of man, Psa 31:6; Isa 57:16, and in this book, Ecc 12:7, and in many other places. In this book it is used also to signify the

breath, spirit, or soul of a beast. While it was said in verse 19, they have all one breath, i.e., the man and the beast live the same kind of animal life; in this verse, a proper distinction is made between the רוּחַ ruach, or soul of man, and the רוּחַ ruach, or soul of the beast: the one goeth upwards, the other goeth downwards. The literal translation of these important words is this: "Who considereth the רוּחַ ruach) immortal spirit of the sons of Adam, which ascendeth? it is from above; (הוּא הַיָּא לְמַעְלָהּ hi lemalah); and the spirit or breath of the cattle which descendeth? it is downwards unto the earth," i.e., it tends to the earth only. This place gives no countenance to the materiality of the soul; and yet it is the strongest hold to which the cold and fruitless materialist can resort.

Solomon most evidently makes an essential difference between the human soul and that of brutes. Both have souls, but of different natures: the soul of man was made for God, and to God it shall return: God is its portion, and when a holy soul leaves the body, it goes to paradise. The soul of the beast was made to derive its happiness from this lower world. Brutes shall have a resurrection, and have an endless enjoyment in a new earth. The body of man shall arise, and join his soul that is already above; and both enjoy final blessedness in the fruition of God. That Solomon did not believe they had the same kind of spirit, and the same final lot, as some materialists and infidels say, is evident from Ecc 12:7 : "The spirit shall return unto God who gave it."

ECCLESIASTES 3: 22 Therefore I saw that there is nothing better, than that a man should rejoice in his works; for that is his portion: for who can bring him to see what will be after him?

Verse 22

A man should rejoice in his own works - Do not turn God's blessings into sin by perverseness and complaining; make the best of life. God will sweeten its bitters to you, if you be faithful. Remember this is the state to prepare for glory; and the evils of life may be so sanctified to you as to work for your good. Though even wretched without, you may be happy within; for God can make all grace to abound towards you. You may be happy if you please; cry to God, who never rejects the prayer of the humble, and gives his Holy Spirit to all them that ask him.