

Ecclesiastes Chapter Three

The Quest for Meaning Continues (3:1-6:9)

A Time for Everything (vv. 1-8)

VERSE 1 There is an appointed time for everything (לְכֹל זְמַן) [d.a.w/prep lamed

w/noun m.s.abs. kol all + noun m.s.abs. zeman appointed time; transl.: “For everything an appointed time.”)].

And there is a time for every event under heaven (לְכֹל-חֶפְזֵי תַחַת הַשָּׁמַיִם) [prep

lamed w/noun m.s.constr. kol “every” + noun m.s.abs. chaphats delight; vb. chatets to be pleased with; “event” + part. thachath under + d.a.w/noun m.p.abs. shamayim heaven]--

VERSE 2 A time to give birth and a time to die (עֵת לְלֵדָת וְעֵת לְמוֹת) [noun both

s.abs. eth time + prep lamed w/Qal infin.constr. yaladh be born + waw w/noun both s.abs. eth time + prep lamed w/Qal infin.constr. muth to die];

A time to plant and a time to uproot what is planted (עֵת לְטַעַת וְעֵת לְעַקֹּר נְטוּעִים) [noun both

s.abs. eth time + prep lamed w/Qal infin.constr. nata plant + waw w/noun s.abs. eth + prep lamed w/Qal infin.constr. aqar uproot + Qal pass.part.m.s.abs. nata plant)].

VERSE 3 A time to kill and a time to heal (עֵת לְהַרוֹג וְעֵת לְרַפּוֹא) [noun both s.abs.

eth + prep lamed w/Qal infin.constr. charag kill + waw w/noun s.abs. eth + lamed w/Qal infin.constr. rapha heal)];

A time to tear down and a time to build up (עֵת לְפָרוֹץ וְעֵת לְבַנוֹת) [noun s.abs. eth +

prep lamed w/Qal infin.constr. parats tear down + waw w/noun m.s. eth + prep lamed w/Qal infin.constr. banah build)].

VERSE 4 A time to weep and a time to laugh (עַת לְבָכּוֹת וְעַת לְשִׂחּוֹק) [noun s.abs.

eth + prep lamed w/Qal infin.constr. bakah weep + waw w/noun s.abs. eth + lamed w/Qal infin.constr. tsachaq laugh]);

A time to mourn and a time to dance (עַת סִפּוֹר וְעַת רִקּוֹד) [noun s.abs. eth + Qal infin.constr. saphad mourn + waw w/noun m.s. eth+ Qal infin.constr. raqad dance]).

VERSE 5 A time to throw stones and a time to gather stones (וְעַת כְּנוּס אֲבָנִים)

וְעַת לְהַשְׁלִיךְ אֲבָנִים [noun s.abs. eth + prep lamed w/Qal infin.constr. shalak throw + noun f.p.abs. eben stone + waw w/noun s. eth + Qal infin.constr. kamas gather, collect + noun f.p.constr. eben stone]);

A time to embrace and a time to shun embracing (עַת לְחַבּוֹק וְעַת לְרַחֵק מִחַבֵּק)

[nou .s. eth + prep lamed w/Qal infin.constr. chabaq embrace + waw w/noun s. eth + prep lamed w/Qal infin.constr. rashaq refrain + prep min w/Piel infin.constr. chabaq embrace]).

VERSE 6 A time to search and a time to give up as lost (עַת לְבַקֵּשׁ וְעַת לְאַבֵּד)

[noun s. eth + prep lamed w/Piel infin.constr. baqash seek + waw w/noun s. eth + prep lamed w/Piel infin.constr. abad be destroyed; “give up as lost”]);

A time to keep and a time to throw away (עַת לְשָׁמֹר וְעַת לְהַשְׁלִיךְ) [noun s. eth +

lamed w/Qal infin.constr. shamar keep + waw w/noun s. eth + lamed w/Hiphil infin.constr. shalak throw]).

VERSE 7 A time to tear apart and a time to sew together (עַת לְקַרְוֵעַ וְעַת לְתַפּוֹר)

[noun s. eth + prep lamed w/Qal infin.constr. qara tear + waw w/noun s. eth + prep lamed w/Qal infin.constr. thapaar sew]);

A time to be silent and a time to speak (עַת לְחַשׁוֹת וְעַת לְדַבֵּר) [*noun s. eth + prep*

lamed w/Qal infin.constr. chashah be silent + waw w/noun s. eth + prep lamed w/Piel

infin.constr. dabar speak]).

VERSE 8 A time to love and a time to hate (עַת לְאַהֵב וְעַת לְשׂוֹאֵ) [*noun s. eth +*

lamed w/Qal infin.constr. aheb love + waw w/noun s. eth + lamed w/Qal infin.constr. shane

hate]);

A time for war and a time for peace (עַת מִלְחָמָה וְעַת שְׁלוֹמ) [*noun s. eth + noun f.s.abs.*

milbamah war + waw w/noun s. eth + noun m.s.abs. shalom peace]).

ANALYSIS: VERSES 1-8

1. In these verses Solomon expresses the subject of a proper time for everything.
2. He expresses the subject in a poem.
3. Two opposite actions expresses the theme that a set, or appointed time, exists for everything that transpires under heaven.
4. The constant repetition of the word “time” (*eth*) and the near constant use of the infinitive construct (see exceptions in the exegesis above) captivate the reader with its rhythm.
5. The poetic lines pit one action against its opposite.
6. The lesson herein is that everything is ultimately out of the control of humans.
7. To those who are not in sync with God’s plan this proves frustrating, but to those who are wise, there is great encouragement knowing that God oversees all things for the good of those who love Him.
8. The poem begins with the statement that everything and every activity on earth has its time (v. 1).
9. Verses 2-8 illustrate the opening declaration.
10. V. 1a covers everything, leaving no exceptions, and v. 1b is more specific in that it refers to “every event/activity.”
11. The term “event/activity” (*hepes*) in some contexts refers to “pleasure”, and that sense occurs in Ecclesiastes (5:4; 12:10), but in other contexts it clearly means “event” (here and in 3:17; 5:8; 8:6).
12. There are two words for “time” in this opening verse.
13. “Season” (*zeman*) occurs here and in Ez. 10:14; Neh. 2:6; 10:35; 13:31; Est. 9:27, 31.
14. In some versions it is translated “season” in v. 1a.
15. The more common Hebrew term for time (*eth*) occurs in v. 1b.
16. What follows is a list of events that are descriptive of things that actually happen “under heaven.”
17. Vv. 2-8 feature fourteen pairs of contrasting opposites.
18. The citing of opposites is common figure of speech in Hebrew poetry.

19. The first two pairs encompass the life cycle, first of the human (“be born...die”) and the of a plant (“plant...uproot”) in v. 2.
20. No person or plant controls the start or finish of its existence.
21. In v. 2 the desirable is contrasted with the undesirable, but in v. 3 the order is switched with the undesirable followed by the desirable.
22. On the negative side the verse speaks of killing and tearing down, while on the positive it acknowledges that there are occasions when healing and building occur.
23. Killing is an intentional act to take life and healing is effort to preserve life.
24. The poet is not making moral judgments here, but is simply describing what takes place.
25. Buildings (and the like) have a death and life cycle.
26. Here the old gives way to the new.
27. V. 4 moves to the realm of human emotions.
28. This verse presents two closely pairs of contrasting emotions.
29. On the negative side the verses states that there are occasions that elicit unpleasant emotions, crying, and mourning.
30. On the positive side stand laughter and dancing.
31. Crying is contrasted with laughter.
32. The second line (v. 4b) makes the contrast more specific contrasting mourning with dancing.
33. The second pair evokes a public event such as a funeral and a party, whereas the first pair allows for a wide variety of situations.
34. The fourth pair of contrasting opposites contrasts physical actions on the part of humans.
35. The meaning of the first pair (v. 5a) is obscure and debated, whereas the second pair is simple and clear.
36. The view adopted here is that the throwing of stones is a deliberate ruining of an enemy’s field by throwing stones into it (cf. 2 Kgs. 3:19, 25); while the gathering of stones is the clearing of a field in order to make it suitable for agricultural use (cf. Isa. 5:2).
37. In the second pair in v. 5b, instead of using antonyms to express opposites, the contrast is stated by using the verb “embrace” (*chabaq*) positively ,and then negating it by the use of infinitive with the prefixed “from” (*min*).
38. The verb refers to gesture that denotes affection for another.
39. It is used of all levels and types of affection from sexual relations (Prov. 5:20), to greetings and welcomes, particularly for the first time or after separation (Gen. 29:13; 2 Kgs. 4:16).
40. The fifth pair (v. 6) has to do with possession.
41. On the one hand there is an occasion when we need to look for something or keep something, but on the other hand there are occasions when we give up the search or throw something away.
42. Just as it is impossible for people to know the day of their death, control their weeping or laughing or mourning or rejoicing, so it is hard sometimes impossible to know when something is irrevocably lost..
43. Up to this point (v. 7) the two pairs of contrasting opposites in each verse has been closely related to one another.
44. The author first contrasts tearing and sowing.
45. Then in the second line he moves to the realm of speech and contrasts silence and speech.
46. The tearing/rending of clothes was an ancient biblical ritual (Gen. 37:29; 2 Sam. 13:31).
47. It is difficult to connect the first line of v. 7 with the second line as far as the cultural context of mourning is concerned.

48. Knowing the time to speak and not to speak is an important theme of the wisdom literature (see Prov. 10:19; 13:3; 16:24; 17:27; 21:23; 25:11; esp. 15:23).
49. The last example (v. 8) of the poem presents two contrasting pairs with a definite connection.
50. The first pair (“love...hate”) cites strong personal emotions of attraction and repulsion.
51. These emotions on a corporate level manifest themselves as states of “peace” and “war.”
52. In what is called chiasm the author arranges the verse with “love” corresponding to “peace” and “hate” corresponding to “war.”
53. The poem does not moralize these emotions/states/actions, but simply describes them as parts of the full spectrum of human experience.

Initial Implication of the Poem (vv. 9-11)

VERSE 9 What profit is there to the worker from that in which he toils (הוא עִמֵּל)

מַה־יִּתְרוֹן הָעוֹשֶׂה בְּאִשֶּׁר
 [interrog. mah what? + noun m.s.abs. yitron profit + d.a.w/Qal
 part.m.s.abs. ashah “the worker” + prep beth w/rel.pro. asher “from that” + pro.3m.s. hi he, his
 + noun m.s.abs. amal labor]?)

VERSE 10 I have seen the task which God has given the sons of men with which
 to occupy themselves (רָאִיתִי אֶת־הָעֵנָן אֲשֶׁר נָתַן אֱלֹהִים לְבְנֵי הָאָדָם לְעִנּוֹת בּוֹ)

[Qal perf.1s. ra-ah see + d.o. + d.a.w/noun m.s.abs. inyan task + rel.pro. asher which + Qal
 perf.3m.s. nathan give + noun m.s.abs. Elohim + prep lamed w/noun m.p.constr. ben son +
 d.a.w/noun m.s.abs. adam man + prep lamed w/Qal infin.constr. ana afflict, humble; “to
 occupy” + prep beth w/3m.s.suff.].

VERSE 11 He has made everything appropriate in its time (הִכֵּל עָשָׂה יָפֶה בְּעֵתוֹ)

אֵת [d.o. + d.a.w/noun m.s.abs. kol all; everything + Qal perf.3m.s. ashah do + adj.m.s.abs.
 yapheh beautiful; “appropriate” + prep beth w/noun f.s.constr.w/3m.s.suff. eth time].

He has also set eternity in their heart [גַּם אֶת־הָעֹלָם נָתַן בְּלִבָּם] [*conj. gam also + d.o. + d.a.w/noun m.s.abs. olam forever, eternity + Qal perf.3m.s. nathan give; “set” + prep beth w/noun m.s.constr.w/3m.suff. leb*], **yet so that man will not find out the work which God has done from the beginning even to the end** (אֲשֶׁר־עָשָׂה הָאֱלֹהִים מֵרֵאשִׁית וְעַד־סוֹף) אֲשֶׁר לֹא־יִמְצָא הָאָדָם אֶת־הַמְעֵשָׂה מִבְּלִי אֲשֶׁר לֹא־יִמְצָא הָאָדָם אֶת־הַמְעֵשָׂה [prep min + part. beleth except; without; for lack of + rel.pro. asher that + neg lo + Qal impf.3m.s. matsa find + d.a.w/noun m.s.abs. adam man + d.o. + d.a.w/noun m.s.abs. ma-asheh work + rel.pro. asher + Qal perf.3m.s. ashah do + d.a.w/noun m.p.abs. Elohim + prep min from + noun m.s.abs. rosh beginning + waw w/part. adh until; “even” + noun m.s.abs. soph end]).

ANALYSIS: VERSES 9-11

1. The main point of the poem is that God has established periods, or moments, or times for a wide variety of emotions and activities.
2. In the resumption of the prose narrative the author describes his reaction to the cycle of human experience.
3. Once again Solomon poses the rhetorical question concerning human toil in the world (cf. 1:3).
4. “What profit/advantage” does “the worker” achieve in this life has the expected answer “None.”
5. Death renders the “toil” of humans meaningless as all efforts fail to secure anything that transcends the temporal life.
6. Verse 10 develops the thought of v. 9.
7. He affirms that he has been observant of “the task which God has given the sons of men” to keep them active and busy.
8. It all adds up to the same thing as there is no one who is an exception to the rule that all is vanity (cf. 1:14).
9. Human labor by itself secures no eternal advantages.
10. The ironic part is that God has set in motion the scheme of things that requires human labor and toil to survive.
11. Solomon expands upon this thought in v. 11.
12. The opening line echoes the thrust of the poem (v. 11a “He has made everything appropriate in its time.”)
13. The theology behind this verse is that God is the author and director of human events.
14. The second line in v. 11 “He has also set eternity “ in the hearts of men refers to that which is innate to humans versus the lower animal kingdom.

15. Man was created in the image of God which is a reference to the living soul with its divine attributes.
16. The concept of eternity resides in the hearts/souls of all people.
17. It, along with God-consciousness, surfaces fairly early in human development.
18. 'Forever' is a universal concept that God "set" in human consciousness.
19. Yet this advantage alone cannot resolve the meaning to human existence as per line 3.
20. "So man will/can not find out the work that God has done from the beginning even to the end" (e.g., human history).
21. The presence of the direct object marker with the definite article occurs three times in this verse.
22. It occurs with "everything" and with "eternity" and with "the work."
23. In the fallen state man cannot come to knowledge and understanding of the past or the future (e.g., "from the beginning to the end.").
24. The placement of "eternity" (*olam*) in the hearts of men leads only to frustration (line 3).
25. The Creator has made man a thinking being, and he wants to understand the sum of things, but cannot rise above the limitations imposed on him.
26. Solomon's compulsive desire to learn led to only frustration.
27. Knowledge of the sum of things (what is doing) is inscrutable (cf. Job 9:10 "Who does great things, unfathomable. And wondrous works without number.").
28. Humanity is caught in a trap of wanting to know, but limited, due to the scope of it all.
29. To make sense of it requires positive volition and divine enlightenment via GAP.
30. The solution to all this dilemma comes at the end of the book.

Advice for the Working Man (vv. 12-13)

VERSE 12 I know that there is nothing better for them than to rejoice and to do

good in one's lifetime יָדַעְתִּי כִּי אֵין טוֹב בָּם כִּי אִם-לְשִׂמּוּחַ וְלַעֲשׂוֹת טוֹב בְּחַיָּיו

[*Qal perf.1s. yada know + part. ki that + part. ayin nothing + adj.m.s.abs. tobh good; "better"*
+ prep w/3m.p.suff. + part ki than + adv. im + prep lamed w/Qal infin.constr. shamach rejoice,
celebrate + waw w/prep lamed w/Qal infin.constr. ashah do + noun m.s.abs. tobh good + prep
beth w/noun m.p.constr.w/3m.s. chayyim lifetime)];

VERSE 13 moreover, that every man who eats and drinks sees good in all his

labor -- it is the gift of God (שִׂיאֵכֶל וְשָׂתָה וְרָאָה טוֹב בְּכָל-עֲמָלוֹ מִתַּת אֱלֹהִים הִיא)

וְגַם כָּל-הָאָדָם [waw w/part. gam “moreover” + noun m.s.constr. kol every + d.a.w/noun

m.s.abs. adam + rel.prefix asher w/Qal impf.3m.s. akal eat + waw w/Qal perf.3m.s. shatah drink

+ waw w/Qal perf.3m.s. ra-ah sees; experiences + noun m.s.abs. tob good + prep beth w/noun

m.s.constr. kol all + noun m.s.constr.w/3m.s.suff. amal labor + noun f.s.constr. mattan gift;

cognate nathan to give + noun m.p.abs. Elohim + pro.3m.s. hi his]).

ANALYSIS: VERSES 12-13

1. These verses constitute a conclusion of sorts in light of the bigger picture that human existence is inscrutable.
2. It is on Solomon’s part a concession that people are confined to lesser goals.
3. Once the quest for a complete understanding of all things in life is abandoned the best course is to seek the little pleasures of life.
4. The context here is one of resignation rather than enthusiasm.
5. The conclusion here is for all men, especially those who are not seekers of divine wisdom.
6. The words “there is nothing better” are also found in 2:24 as well as 3:22 and 8:15.
7. Solomon advocates the *carpe diem* [“seize the day”] approach to life that is open to the masses.
8. This approach to life is expressed as “to rejoice/celebrate and to do good.”
9. To achieve this requires that people experience at least the simple sensual pleasures of life.
10. To “do good” requires that the individual lives a relatively normal life in his relationship to others; and that includes making an honest living.
11. To enjoy life as well as humans can, includes the most basic human pleasures—eating and drinking (v. 13)
12. As in 2:24, eating and drinking and enjoying work references the little things that makes life enjoyable from day to day.
13. “Sees good” is the benefits of labor.
14. Solomon links God with enjoyment in the temporal realm (2:24-26; 3:13, 22; 8:15).
15. These things are “the gift of God” (“and He did not leave Himself without witness, in that He did good and gave you rains from heaven and fruitful seasons, satisfying your hearts with food and gladness.”).