

Why is life the way it is?

When animals come into the world, sometimes within a day they are able to stand and eat. For us it takes years.

Then when you are young and strong, life seems filled with worries, financial stress, and so very busy.

Then when you are old and have more time, you don't feel so good and kinda want to stay home.

Every now and then, I'd like to have one of those days back when I was 20 and could hike up mountains.

Or a day when I was young and married and had a house full of babies. I suppose I recall the best parts.

Each day comes to us without God consulting us about how we want it to go.

And then we live that day and can never get it back again.

There are often days that I'd have liked to do a better job of it... being more loving, more thankful, less whiney.

King Solomon is here guiding us along in this look at life called Ecclesiastes.

He is making observations that describe how life really is, no matter how we want it to be.

And he gives us some instructions, insights, along the way. Here is one in chapter 3.

Enjoy all that God has given for there is something eternal in what God is doing.

There is something eternal in you!

Even people who do not believe in God think this way.

They will say things like, “When I die, I will be looking down on you all.” People think that way. Why?

There is no objective or scientific evidence for anyone thinking that when I die, I go to heaven.

And yet, people think this. True or false, people have thought this way for thousands of years.

Now, these are exactly the sort of things that Solomon is trying to figure out about life “under the sun.”

Solomon is trying to figure out life like most people do, but with brutal honesty and the wisdom of an old king.

What lasts?

He begins his book with the thesis of the book. **Ecclesiastes 1:2**

Next, he asks the salient question of the book. **Ecclesiastes 1:3**

A young lady yesterday said to me, about life, “Why would you want to live it if you don't get anything?”

Exactly. This is what Solomon is asking.

He then shows us that, in this world, nothing is ever really new and no progress is made.

No one really makes a significant difference, and no one remembers you. **Ecclesiastes 1:13-14**

Solomon shows us this next by explaining that he had applied his wisdom to life and sought success.

He was more successful than nearly any person who has ever lived.

And yet we read his assessment after it all in **Ecclesiastes 2:11**.

He looks at wisdom and hard work and finds that in these also there is no profit, no gain. **Ecclesiastes 2:22-23**

You see, life in God's world, under the sun, is not about getting more, making a profit, being remembered.

It is about receiving gifts from God. **Ecclesiastes 2:24-26**

Our food, our labor, our success, our enjoyment, everything in life comes to us as a gift from God.

And God's gifts come, each in their appropriate time, as determined by God. We don't decide this. God does.

Consider what comes next.

I. For everything under heaven there is a time.

Ecclesiastes 3:1-8

Now I have made connections thus far in Ecclesiastes to modern music.

In the past three sermons I have pointed to Elton John and Pink Floyd.

Why? It is because our songwriters and musicians are the bards and poets of our modern society.

They reflect the moods, longings, searchings, struggles, and values of the world we live in.

For better or for worse they sing the thoughts of the hearts of people in America.

What is remarkable is how many of them sing thoughts that could come right out of this book, Ecclesiastes.

Why? It's because they are struggling with the same questions that Solomon is investigating.

And sometimes, in their struggling, they actually stumble upon this book and read it.

In 1959 Pete Seeger received a letter from his publisher.

“Pete,” it read, “can't you write another song like ‘Goodnight, Irene’?”

I can't sell or promote these protest songs.”

Seeger wrote back, “You better find another songwriter, This is the only kind of song I know how to write.”

*Then he opened his pocket notebook, where he had jotted down pieces of text for recycling.
 He found parts of the Bible he copied, Seeger recalled seeing, “verses by a bearded fellow with sandals,
 a tough-minded fellow called Ecclesiastes.” Seeger didn’t even know who was the author.
 He wrote a song, published in 1962, made famous by the Byrds a few years later, “Turn, Turn, Turn.”*
*To everything (Turn, turn, turn)
 There is a season (Turn, turn, turn)
 And a time to every purpose under Heaven
 A time to be born, a time to die
 A time to plant, a time to reap
 A time to kill, a time to heal
 A time to laugh, a time to weep
 To everything (Turn, turn, turn)
 There is a season (Turn, turn, turn)
 And a time to every purpose under Heaven
 A time to build up, a time to break down
 A time to dance, a time to mourn
 A time to cast away stones
 A time to gather stones together
 To everything (Turn, turn, turn)
 There is a season (Turn, turn, turn)
 And a time to every purpose under Heaven
 A time of love, a time of hate
 A time of war, a time of peace
 A time you may embrace
 A time to refrain from embracin’
 To everything (Turn, turn, turn)
 There is a season (Turn, turn, turn)
 And a time to every purpose under Heaven
 A time to gain, a time to lose
 A time to rend, a time to sew
 A time for love, a time for hate
 A time for peace, I swear it's not too late*
Seeger covered the entire text of Ecclesiastes 3:1-8. Why?
Because he saw the truth in these verses. This is what God’s world is really like.

Verses 2-8 present 14 poetic lines, each describing opposing truths about life.

2 x 7 encompassing everything that there could be in life, everything under the sovereignty of the Lord.
 God’s gifts in life comes to us at the times that He determines.

Sure, we have choices. We make plans. But it is God’s design that takes place.

“The mind of man plans his way, But the LORD directs his steps.” Proverbs 16:9

James must have read Ecclesiastes. Consider **James 4:13-15**.

God gives us this life, both in the big picture and purpose, and in the arrangement of all the parts of life.

II. But what is all this under heaven all about?

Ecclesiastes 3:9-11

Verses 1-8 have helped us to see that there is a time for all the parts that make up life.

But those verses have not helped us to see what it all means. That comes next.

In verse 9, Solomon recalls his question of the book from Ecclesiastes 1:3

Then in verses 10-11 Solomon looks back on those 14 lines describing the times of life.

Now he is going to make a few observations to help us understand all the different times God puts in life.
 He tells us that he has seen all of this “business” that God has given to us to be busy with.

This “business” is a reference to all of verses 2-8. We know this absolutely because of verse 11.

In Ecclesiastes 1:3, “It is an unhappy business that God has given to the children of man to be busy with.”

It is indeed a grim depiction of life under the sun. Life is not easy. And yet it is a gift from God.

A second observation hits us right away in verse 11, "He has made everything beautiful in its time."

The NASB translates this, "He has made everything appropriate in its time."

But "beautiful" is the better translation, especially when you consider everything "in its time."

You might think of life in this way. God is painting a picture of your life.

Someday, when you are finished (when God is finished), there will be a complete picture.

And yet, as God is doing the painting, things do look very unfinished, even messy.

And also, God is painting in bright moments and dark moments, the sum of which will be beautiful.

You cannot have a beautiful painting that is all brightness, of all darkness.

And God is making it. Do you see that?

You don't have to figure it all out or do the painting. You don't even have to know what He's painting.

All you have to do is receive each day from God as a gift, thank Him, trust Him, and seek obey Him.

Next comes one of the most interesting, cryptic, hopeful, and puzzling statements in the entire book.

All of life, in all its moments, is modified by this single mysterious thought.

Verse 11, "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."

What can this mean?

There is something about man, human beings, that is not true of anything else in God's creation.

Even people who do not know God and have never read a word of the Bible have a sense of this.

There is something eternal about human beings, our expectations, our soul.

We long for significance, for connection to the transcendent, for relationship with God, for eternal life.

Why? Genesis tells us that we have been created in the image of God, yet banished from His presence.

Augustine and then reformers like Zwingli wrote that within our soul is an awareness of the divine likeness.

The philosopher/scientist/theologian Blaise Pascal described every person as having a deep desire:

"What else does this craving, and this helplessness, proclaim but that there was once in man a true happiness, of which all that now remains is the empty print and trace? This he tries in vain to fill with everything around him, seeking in things that are not there the help he cannot find in those that are, though none can help, since this infinite abyss can be filled only with an infinite and immutable object; in other words, by God himself."

Jesus said to the woman at the well in Samaria, "whoever drinks of the water that I will give him will never be thirsty again. The water that I will give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life." John 4:14

Jesus said, "I am the Bread of Life."

"I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live." John 11:25

Why are these statements so compelling to people, then and now for 2,000 years?

It is because deep in our hearts we know that we have been made by God to live forever.

The most horrible thought is that a person would die and then go to hell forever.

You may have seen the movie "Gettysburg." It is worth watching.

It is an account of the Civil War battle named after the town Gettysburg in Pennsylvania.

The movie is largely based on the book The Killer Angels by Michael Shaara. The book is good reading.

Just before the second day of battle, we see a conversation between two soldiers from Maine.

Sargeant Buster Kilrain is speaking with his superior officer, Colonel Lawrence Chamberlain.

Col. Joshua Lawrence Chamberlain: Tell me something, Buster. What do you think of Negroes?

Pvt. Buster Kilrain: Well, if you mean the race, I don't really know. This is not a thing to be ashamed of. The thing is, you cannot judge a race. Any man who judges by the group is a pea-wit. You take men one at a time.

Col. Joshua Lawrence Chamberlain: To me, there was never any difference.

Pvt. Buster Kilrain: None at all?

Col. Joshua Lawrence Chamberlain: None at all. Of course, I haven't known that many freed men, but those I knew in Bangor, Portland, you look in the eye, there was a man. There was a "divine spark," as my mother used to call it. That is all there is to it. Races are men. "What a piece of work is man. How infinite in faculties, in form and moving. How express and admirable. In action, how like an angel."

Pvt. Buster Kilrain: Well, if he's an angel, all right then. But he damn well must be a killer angel.

And, yet, verse 11 tells us that we cannot figure out these questions and answers about eternity on our own. We do not know what God is up to. In any particular moment, we do not understand what God is doing. Try as we might, we are unable to think God's thoughts after Him, at least not without the Bible. Paul writes in Romans 11:33, "Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways! One of my professors told us once, "We cannot unscrew the inscrutable!" "For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who has been his counselor? "Or who has given a gift to him that he might be repaid? "For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever. Amen." Romans 11:34-36

In the next four verses are two truths that Solomon has now figured out as he looks at life and everything in it. The first on these truths is found in verses 12-13, the second in verses 14-15.

III. I know that we ought to enjoy all things that God gives. Ecclesiastes 3:12-13

The ESV reads, "I perceived." But the other translations all translate the Hebrew literally, "I know..." He says, "I know that there is a right way to live life." Are you ready.

Maybe this is a lesson that we should have figured out by reading the book thus far.

But, just in case you missed it, Solomon here makes it explicit.

How should you live each one of these days that God gives to you?

1. Be joyful.
2. Do good.
3. Take pleasure in all your work.

You might say here, "Pastor John! You've been wasting our time. I knew this!"

Yes. Many people do. You might say that this is obvious to the perceptive person.

And still, people who say that they know all this do not actually live this way.

We too often live our day complaining and grumpy. This is the opposite of Joyful.

Rather than doing good and blessing others we seek the fulfillment of our own desires.

Rather than taking pleasure in our work, we grumble about it.

There is a final lesson that Solomon delivers, now in verses 14-15.

IV. I know that God rules absolutely over all things. Ecclesiastes 3:14-15

Do you know that God is in control over your life and all your days?

Do you actually live like He is in control and like He is the sovereign King who must be obeyed?

In verse 14 Solomon tells us the extent of God's control.

Whatever God does endures forever. This is not true for what I do, unless God makes it last.

Nothing can be added; nothing can be taken away from anything that God does.

Some people imagine that there are a few things that God doesn't know... like what my decisions will be.

This is utter foolishness and human arrogance.

And there are many examples of God knowing exactly what people are going to choose... Judas.

Solomon even gives us a reason for the way that God works, "So that people fear before Him."

Proverbs 1:7 tells us that, "The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge."

In other words, you really cannot know anything worthwhile until you fear God.

And fear doesn't just mean "respect," "honor," and "worship." Yes, it does mean all those things.

But fear also means that we should be afraid, because we know what God has the right and power to do.

Jesus said, "Do not fear those who kill the body but are unable to kill the soul;

but rather fear Him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell." Matthew 10:28

In verse 15 we learn one of the principal reasons that we should fear God.

From God's perspective everything in the past and in the future has already happened.

The last line reads, "for God seeks what has passed by."

This seems cryptic and puzzling. The NIV reads, "God will call the past to account."

It is verses like this that are the reason Philip Ryken titled his book on Ecclesiastes, Everything Matters.

Here, under the sun, nothing you do will be remembered. But God sees all of it and will bring it all to account.

Don't waste a moment of this gift that is life that God has given. Use it all to thank God and bless others.

God has made everything beautiful in its time. Treat it all that way.