Life by God's Clock Ecclesiastes 3:1-15

April 17, 2016 Steve DeWitt

Many of you probably know the Song of Solomon. If I said, "Where is the Song of Solomon?" You'd say, "Right after the book of Ecclesiastes." It would also be accurate to say the Song of Solomon can be found as a number one song on the Billboard 100. You didn't know Solomon was still writing hits, did you? It was a collaborative effort. Solomon wrote the lyrics and a guy name Peter Seeger wrote the tune directly from Ecclesiastes 3. The song was picked up by a group in the '60s named The Byrds. The result is this well-known tune:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xVOJla2vYx8

The lyrics are remarkably close even to the ESV translation. It was the 1960s so of course the song ended with an anti-war message. The song has the distinction of being the number one hit with the oldest lyrics. 3,000-year-old lyrics. Way to go Solomon! So the text is popular and familiar while the meaning is less known.

We are covering verses 1-15 today. I am dividing it into its natural two parts. You will see that verses 1-8 even look different as this is a poem. What is it about? It is a poem about everything. The verses that follow explain that the poem is about everything describing a God over everything. A poem *about* everything. A God *over* everything.

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

- ² a time to be born, and a time to die;
 - a time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is planted;
- 3 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;
- 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;
- ⁶ a time to seek, and a time to lose;
 - a time to keep, and a time to cast away;
- ⁷ 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." (Ecclesiastes 3:1-8 ESV)

Right away we see that this is a list of life's varying aspects. Don't these all sound like the normal activities of the human race? Birth. Death. Weep. Dance. Love and even hate. That is why I call it a poem about everything.

A Poem About Everything

As is his style, Solomon is writing a big picture statement on the reality of the human condition. Our hopes. Our despairs. Our joy and pains. I suspect this poem has been so popular because at every stage of life it seems to be describing us. Where are you in the poem?

This is Solomon's purpose. Notice that each of these lines show opposite extremes. Love/Hate. War/Peace. Break down/Build up. He is including both extremes and everything in between. Verse 1 provides that summary. "For everything there is a season." Time is mentioned 28 times in this passage. Life has times, seasons. Episodes. Chapters. Times of this and times of that. Human nature tends to be discontent in one season while waiting for the next. Just ask our seniors in high school. Or ask a child how old they are, almost 4. There's always a new season of life coming. Everything has a season.

Another thing to note in this list is that these are all things that happen **to** us. (See Peter Enns, *Ecclesiastes: The Two Horizons Old Testament Commentary*, p. 52). These are circumstances or responses to those circumstances that are thrust upon us and sometimes overwhelm us. We don't see them coming. We don't anticipate our birth and we are often surprised when our day of death arrives. Times of mourning are normally a painful interruption to life. But on the positive side, life has seasons of surprise joy too. Life brings unexpected laughter and dancing. A special season of love and peace.

The list overall is to point out that while we may think we are in control, the real things that define life are out of our control. Ever feel that way?

I remember this past September, we were having dinner with some friends when suddenly we realized our 3-month-old daughter was seriously struggling. An ambulance ride for our 3-month-old began four days of parental terror for us. Where did that come from? We weren't planning that. It wasn't on the calendar.

What do you think when life brings a sudden change of season? Solomon wants us to see these through the larger grid of mankind's dilemma. We make our plans. We act like we are in control. But there is a season for everything whether we have planned for it or not, like it or not, ready or not, here it comes.

This is a long list, so let me point out some of the highlights.

"A time to be born, and a time to die." (Ecclesiastes 3:2) Solomon starts with the two bookends of life. The day you are born, and the day you die. How many of you planned the day you were going to be born? Similarly, we cannot control or know the day that will be our last day. Both the starting and the stopping of life are out our control. "You cannot live any longer than the Lord has prescribed nor die any sooner." (Martin Luther, as quoted by Philip Graham Ryken, Ecclesiastes: Why Everything Matters, p. 82)

"A time to kill and a time to heal." (Verse 3) This may sound grotesquely violent but that is because we may miss the biblical distinction between murder and killing. A violent and wartorn culture like the ancient Middle East had to simply acknowledge there was a time for war and killing and a time for healing those wounds. War and peace.

Verse 4 is so human. "A time to weep and a time to laugh. A time to mourn and a time to dance." These are both seasons we experience in life. Weeping and mourning signify the tragic and painful circumstances. Laughing and dancing signify the opposite. Joyful circumstances. One is the funeral home and the other is the wedding reception.

I perceive a grace gift for some of us here in this little verse. Sometimes when we have experienced a season of mourning or pain, we feel obligated to remain in that mourning or pain. We feel loyalty to the person we lost or the losing cause we stood up for. A biblical example of this is Naomi in the book of Ruth. Her husband died and she was so committed

to her disappointment that she changed her name to Mara which means *bitter*. When you change your name to "bitter" you are committed to perpetual mourning. *I'll never get over this. I'll never get past this. I will always be in this season. I'll always be Mara.*

But even Mara didn't stay Mara. Ruth ends with Ruth married to Boaz and Naomi caring for her grandson Obed, the grandfather of King David himself. Some of us need biblical permission to get back to Naomi—the person you were before the great pain. It's okay. There was a season for mourning and anger but seasons come and seasons go. Isn't it time you left behind the obligation to your season of pain and experience perhaps a new season of replanting, gathering stones, laughing, and dancing? God brings those into the human experience as well and they are a gift to be enjoyed. I'll bet somebody here needed Ecclesiastes 3:3.

Solomon's song describes the polarities and realities of life on the clock but he doesn't say in his poem why. But he does in the next section. Look at verses 9-14,

"What gain has the worker from his toil? ¹⁰ I have seen the business that God has given to the children of man to be busy with. ¹¹ 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. ¹² I perceived that there is nothing better for them than to be joyful and to do good as long as they live; ¹³ also that everyone should eat and drink and take pleasure in all his toil—this is God's gift to man. ¹⁴ 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."

Solomon returns to his familiar question, if these seasons come and go and we can't know or control them, what gain do we have from all our efforts? If the whims of politics and financial markets and hurricanes and terror attacks and sudden health issues are completely unpredictable, what's the point of all our efforts?

That sounds fatalistic, doesn't it? Makes you want to either run away or get drunk or end it all. But here is where Solomon's faith peeks in again. He does this throughout Ecclesiastes. He takes things to the logical and depressing conclusion and then can't help but introduce God into the equation.

A God Over Everything

"He has made everything beautiful in its time." (Verse 11) Remember this is a chapter about everything. He begins in verse 1, "For everything there is a season" and here God makes everything beautiful.

In due time, God works through all the seasons of life, good and bad, to make it all good. Does this sound like any New Testament verse? "And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose." (Romans 8:28) These are both verses highlighting the sovereignty of God over everything in this world. God is sovereign over our seasons. The specific season may be tough or overwhelming but the power of God is greater than our pain. One great comfort in any season of life is that everything happening is controlled by a God who loves us and promises, in the end to make it good (Romans) and beautiful (Ecclesiastes).

The sister doctrine is the providence of God.

"We may define God's providence as follows: God is continually involved with all created things in such a way that he (1) keeps them existing and maintaining the properties with which he created them; (2) cooperates with created things in every action, directing their distinctive properties to cause them to act as they do; and (3) directs them to fulfill his purposes." (Wayne Grudem, Systematic Theology, p. 315)

The sovereignty of God is his absolute control and direction of everything. The providence of God is his sovereignty at work on the street level of our lives. His directing of the details of our lives. Nothing is random. Nothing is chance. All is sovereignty. All is providence.

These two truths give us assurance in any season of life that what we are suffering through or rejoicing in is from the hand of God. Job got this. Remember his response when he lost everything? "The LORD gave, and the LORD has taken away; blessed be the name of the LORD." (Job 1:21)

Job saw behind the painful circumstances a gracious God who alone has the sovereign right to give and take away. We like God's sovereignty when it is giving; we struggle when it is taking. Our right posture is to see the giving and taking as God's right and for us to live in humble submission to him.

Great. Thank you. But I want to understand why. Why God, this season? Why this trial?

Man's Response to Living by God's Clock

Acknowledge life is a mystery

"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." (Ecclesiastes 3:11)

God uniquely placed in humans the search for "why?" An instinct to wonder about the complexities and directions of life. The animals don't do this. They just take whatever the day brings. But we ponder things. Where did I come from? Why did this happen? What is the deeper meaning? We are bound by time, but we long to understand eternity and the future and where life will lead.

But what can we know for certain about the future? Nothing. What can we absolutely control about our futures? Nothing. The angels told the disciples after Jesus' ascension, "It is not for you to know times or seasons that the Father has fixed by his own authority." (Acts 1:7) Isaiah 55:9 says,

"For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts."

So many things that happen in our lives remain mysteries to us. I look at my own life. I'm not just a pastor. Did you know I'm a person too? I think about my life story. I have some questions I want to ask God about someday. I think about a couple decades spent praying for and desiring marriage and family, but waiting, waiting, waiting—decades of waiting. Then I became a husband and found out about three weeks later that I would be a father. And I think, *God, couldn't we have spread those out a little bit?* I probably could have coped a bit better with the change. But what can I say? It wasn't God's plan for my life. Yet in it all, God is weaving and working to make all things beautiful eventually, in a way we can't fathom or see. It is a mystery to us.

Trust in God's control allows us to enjoy life even in its uncertainties

Verse 12 says, "I perceived that there is nothing better for them than to be joyful and to do good as long as they live." The sovereignty of God shouldn't make us fearful, rather it is the only thing that allows us to be joyful in our uncertainties.

How many of you rode the school bus to school? Anyone remember the name of their school bus driver? They became friends of the family over time. How many of you remember worrying about where the bus was going or how it was going to get there? A typical school bus is filled with generally unconcerned passengers. We knew we were on a bus that would eventually arrive at school. How it got there was in the hands of someone else. Because we trusted Mrs. Smith or Mr. Jones' driving ability, we were free to laugh and giggle and carry on.

But what if there's no one at the wheel? That's what the atheist believes. The deist and agnostic believe God is at the wheel, but he doesn't really care about the students. The Bible says God is at the wheel and loves the kids. We need to understand that we are on a bus that will arrive at a beautiful destination. It will take unexpected turns and hit bumps along the way. Sometimes it will mean riding with some unpleasant people. Sometimes it goes slow or fast. But we know where this bus ends up. It ends at the glory of Jesus, resurrection and eternal life. It ends with all things right and all things new. That's where the bus is going. It ends with justice and righteousness and shalom. And we know who is driving our bus—God.

This allows us to not to be too depressed about the bumps or the weather conditions or the route we happen to be on. We know where the ride ends and we know who is at the wheel. Solomon says, enjoy the ride, like kids on the school bus. Be joyful and do good.

But why the road God has me on? "God has done it, so that people fear before him." (Verse 14)

Reverence the God who controls our times

Eventually life brings us to the realization that we are not in control. Ravi Zacharias recounts a story he heard personally from Malcolm Muggeridge, who interviewed Svetlana Stalin, Josef Stalin's daughter. "According to Svetlana, as Stalin lay dying...he suddenly sat halfway up in bed, clenched his fist toward the heavens once more, fell back upon his pillow, and was dead." The irony of Stalin's life is that he was once a seminary student, but at some point abandoned his belief in God, which resulted in such hatred that it fueled his murder of 20 million of his own people. (Ravi Zacharias, *Can Man Live Without God*, p. 26)

This is the spirit of the famous poem "Invictus" (William Ernest Henley, "Invictus," poetryfoundation.org, accessed April 15, 2016) which ends with these words,

"It matters not how strait the gate,
How charged with punishments the scroll,
I am the master of my fate,
I am the captain of my soul."

Mr. Henley, who wrote this, died at the age of 53. So much for master of his fate. God uses the seasons of life to force us to a conclusion that we don't want to embrace, *I am not in control. I am not God.* Life got you feeling that way? We think this is an undesirable

conclusion but it is why God brings us to this point—to humble the proud and bring us to our knees in a willing submission to God's reign. To reverence and worship him.

God's sovereignty over time was no more on display than when he sent his Son Jesus into the world.

- "For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly." (Romans 5:6)
- "But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons." (Galatians 4:4-5)

God's sovereignty over everything included sending his Son Jesus at just the right time. Right when prophecy said. Right when God determined it best, the right virgin young Jewish girl and carpenter dad. At just the right spiritual moment in history, Jesus came and died to redeem us.

We cannot understand his timing but we can wonder at it and with fearful reverence, submit our lives to his clock, his Son, and his will.

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