

Everything Beautiful In Its Time

Ecclesiastes 3:1-15

The world and everything in it is completely out of our control, vapor of vapors. We experience endless cycles of repetition such that the more things change, the more they stay the same. Cliches are repeated because they are true, and you'll hear them again. Satisfaction out of man's reach, but this does not mean it's out of God's reach; those who trust and rest in Him receive this gift and rejoice in their labor under the sun. Solomon turns now to consider the inscrutable march of time. We cannot make the crooked straight, but He makes everything beautiful in its time.

The Map

The first section, 1:1-2:26, demonstrates Yahweh alone provides satisfaction in a vaporous world. Section two spans 3:1-5:20, describing God's sovereignty over all and the joy He gives in the midst of it. The first 15 verses address the issue of time, and then Solomon handles various objections and seeming contradictions: courts are unjust (3:16-17); everyone dies (3:18-21); people are oppressed (4:1-3); others are envious (4:4-6); the problem of isolation (4:7-12); and popularity is ephemeral (4:13-16). We should therefore take caution (5:1-17). Finally, the glorious conclusion: it's good to eat and drink and enjoy the good of your labor, letting joy swallow up sorrow (5:18-20).

Times & Seasons

Verses 1-8 are some of the best known today in all of Scripture (thanks, Byrds). Solomon is not giving us a to-do list but teaching that God, in Westminster's phrase, foreordains whatsoever comes to pass. The Alpha and Omega knows the end from the beginning (Is. 46:10), and therefore your end and beginning. These fourteen contrasting pairs don't describe on everything under the sun, but they do represent the total course of our lives and human history. There's not a clear order from first to last, just like our lives. There's a time to be born, and a time to die, and neither is determined by us—they occur according to God's purpose under heaven (v. 2; cf. Matt. 10:29-30). The Lord does not commit sin, but He uses all the shadows of history—including death—to glorify Himself, which is the ultimate good. There's a time to plant, and one to pluck up (v. 2). Nothing ought to be preserved for its own sake. You don't keep a school, a church, an organization, or a country around in order to pay the light bill and keep people on staff, but rather to achieve the mission. Our founders addressed the right and obligation of a people to "dissolve political bands" and overthrow unjust governments that violate inalienable rights. There's a time to kill and heal, a time to break down and build up (v. 3). Thus, Christians have developed just war theory and invented hospitals, torn down sacred groves of human sacrifice and built cathedrals. Demo, construction, and remodel all have their place in the human heart and life. There's a time to weep and laugh, to mourn and dance (v. 4). Though the Preacher is recommending rejoicing, he recognizes the time to mourn, as Paul did, consistent with bedrock joy (2 Cor. 6:10; 1 Thess. 4:13). To refuse to cry or laugh, to be exclusively sad or only cracking up, is to fail to understand the breadth of the story you are in and the personality of its author. The Lord appoints mourning and then gives us beauty for ashes (Is. 61:3). There's a time for casting away and a time for gathering stones, for houses being built and falling apart. There's a time for embracing and for abstaining (v. 5). God calls us to be in fellowship with one another, to let love cover a multitude of sins, but also to deal with conflicts and problems. Sometimes the economy booms and all boats rise, and other times you lose your shirt (v. 6). There's a time to keep and gather, and another to give and purge (v. 6). There's a time to tear and another to mend. Sometimes we should say nothing and other

Everything Beautiful In Its Time

Ecclesiastes 3:1-15

times we should speak out (v. 7). God rules over relationships, at times requiring love, and other times hate (v. 8): “Do I not hate them, O LORD, who hate You? And do I not loathe those who rise up against You?” (Ps. 139:21). God gives us peace in relationships, friendships and partnerships, and He is also present in conflicts, fall-outs, and loss (cf. Acts. 15:39). None of this justifies sin or lack of hope in restoration, but there is a time. There is a time for war and a time for peace, so we pray for our leaders that we would live quiet and peaceable lives, knowing that conflict may come (1 Tim. 2:2). To say we cannot control or determine the times is not to say that our actions make no difference. Solomon is no fatalist. Our times are in the hands of God (Ps. 31:15), and so we must redeem the time (Eph. 5:15) and ask Him to bless our days (Ps. 90:15).

Eternity In Our Hearts

Living from our limited vantage is like seeing the underside of a tapestry. We can't understand why the Lord allows certain things to happen. Some Christians want to distance Him from the shadows and pain, positing that God doesn't know the future because it doesn't exist. But He knows the end from the beginning and gives every task to the sons of men to occupy us (vv. 9-11). What appears to be a tangled web from below is an intricate design with each event beautiful in its time. God plants nations and plucks them up (Jer. 1:10). He raises up kings and throws them down (Ps. 2:9). He used the Assyrians to judge the northern kingdom of Israel, and then brought the Babylonians to judge the Assyrians. He laid Judah low with the Babylonians and then toppled them and restored Israel using Cyrus the Persian. He used Pontius Pilate and apostate Jews to crucify His own Son, and through that travesty of justice accomplished the salvation of the world, making Jesus King of kings and Lord of lords and establishing His flourishing kingdom on this earth. Why do we care about these things? Because God has put eternity into our hearts. We live tiny lives in the midst of a grand narrative, and we are given the gift of knowing the eternal narrator. “You have made us for yourself, O Lord,” Augustine said, “and our heart is restless until it rests in You.”

Fear God

Rather than a book of meaningless despair, this story is one of unconquerable joy: “I know that nothing is better for them than to rejoice, and to do good in their lives, and also that every man should eat and drink and enjoy the good of all his labor—it is the gift of God” (vv. 12-13). Who can take that away? Some characters try to thwart the author, but they can do nothing to subtract from His story; whatever He does stands forever and He will administer justice (vv. 14-15). He puts eternity into our hearts and governs the world so that we would fear Him. Jesus says the same thing when He tells the disciples not to fear those who can kill the body but fear Him who can destroy both body and soul in hell (Matt. 10:28). Not a sparrow falls to the ground apart from your Father's will: “Do not fear therefore; you are of more value than many sparrows” (Matt. 10:31). Rest in God's sovereignty over all times and places, over every detail of your life, in the grand story He is telling despite the baffling chapters. Do good and enjoy the food and drink.