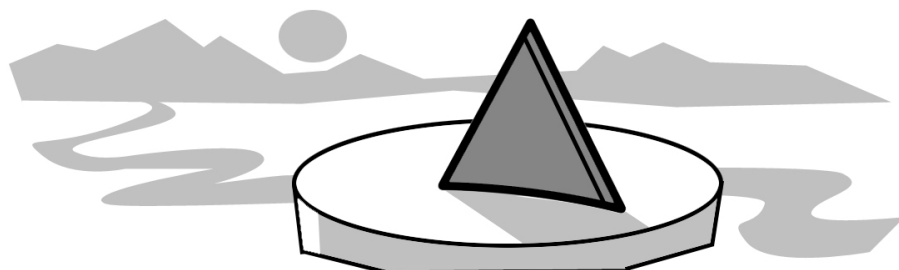


Of Life and Time



SABBATH—JANUARY 20

READ FOR THIS WEEK'S STUDY: Ecclesiastes 3.

MEMORY VERSE: “God will judge godly [good people] and sinful people alike. He has a time for every act. He has a time for everything that is done” (Ecclesiastes 3:17, NlrV).

“For I have known them all already. I have known them all. I have known the evenings, mornings, afternoons. I have measured out my life with coffee spoons.”—Adapted from T. S. Eliot, “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock.”

MAYBE WE ALL DO NOT MEASURE OUT OUR LIVES WITH COFFEE SPOONS, BUT WE DO MEASURE OUT OUR LIVES. And for most of us, if blessed, that measurement comes to about “threescore years and ten [seventy years of age].” If we are especially blessed, we have “fourscore [eighty years].” This really is not a lot. Time is a special treasure for all humans who will die in due time.

For that reason, Ecclesiastes 3 opens up a theme important to us all: time! Beginning with some of the most beautiful poetry ever written, Solomon deals with different themes. They are all related to time. How important is the timing of the things we do? What does the understanding of eternity¹ mean to humans, who are left behind by eternity? When will God judge all the evil and sin in the world? What is the difference between humans and animals if they all end up in the same place?

These are heavy themes for just one chapter. But we can understand them only through looking at Ecclesiastes 3 on the basis of the whole Bible. The Bible itself has much to say about these crucial topics.

¹eternity—life without end; forever.

SUNDAY—JANUARY 21**THE GOD OF TIME (Daniel 7:25;
Mark 1:15)**

How well does your clock work? Probably not as well as a cesium beam clock! This clock measures time down to the 9,192,631,700th of a second when certain atoms accept and give out radiation. That's the timing God has built into that part of nature. Talk about perfect timing!

At the NASA-Goddard Space Flight Center in the United States, scientists have a chart. On it, the scientists have written down all the eclipses from about 2000 B.C. until A.D. 3000. The timing God has built into this part of nature is so perfect, we are able to know when past eclipses happened and when future ones will happen.

As nature shows, God is in control of time. This does not surprise Adventists at all. Adventists are very interested in prophecy. Prophecies have helped us understand who we are and what our mission is. We are a movement tied in with time.

Review the following time prophecies that have meant so much to us as a people. They are the prophecies that have been fulfilled (Daniel 7:25; Daniel 8:14; Daniel 9:24-27; Revelation 12:14). What do these prophecies tell us about the power and rulership of God over current events?²



Revelation 12:14 is a time prophecy. God is in control of time.

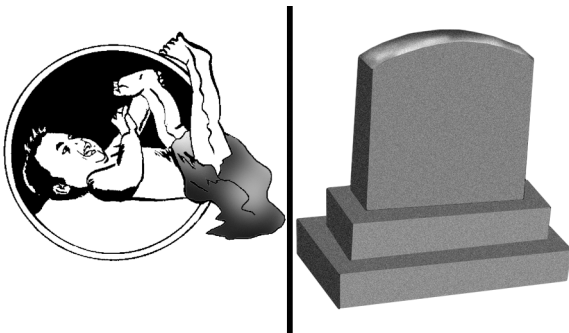
In many places, the Bible talks about the importance of time in God's plans. Jesus appeared in Galilee and announced that "the time has come. The kingdom of God is near" (Mark 1:15, NIV). Paul was speaking about Jesus' first coming. Paul wrote that when "the right time came, God sent his Son" (Galatians 4:4, NIV). About the Second Coming, Paul wrote, "God will bring Jesus back at a time that pleases him [God]" (1 Timothy 6:14, 15, NIV). An angel appeared to John and said to him, "Do not seal up the words of the prophecy in this book. These things are about to happen" (Revelation 22:10, NIV). We can see that God works through time to do His will.

Are there any questions you have about the timing of events? If so, surrender your will to God. Trust in Him who has shown that He is in control of time. What other things can you do to trust in God's timing of events?

²events—things that happen.

MONDAY—JANUARY 22**A TIME TO . . . ?
(Ecclesiastes 3:1-8)**

As you read Ecclesiastes 3:1-8, notice the opposites: Birth, death. Build, break down. Love, hate. And so on. Bible thinkers argue about the exact meaning of these verses. But Solomon seems to be talking about different parts of human life. He points out that at certain times some things happen at the right time while at other times opposite things happen.



There is a time for everything.

The key to understanding the meaning of Ecclesiastes 3:1-8 is Ecclesiastes 3:11. After talking about God, Solomon says, “He [God] has made everything beautiful in its time” (NIRV). These various things, in their proper time, are right.

The most difficult verse to understand is “a time to kill” (Ecclesiastes 3:3). Many explanations have been given for this verse. But it is important

to remember that Solomon was the king who ruled over a nation that had the death penalty (Exodus 22:18-20; Leviticus 20:2, 9-16; Leviticus 24:14-16; Numbers 15:35). Also, it is important to note that the Hebrew word for *kill* in Ecclesiastes 3:3 is not the same Hebrew word in Exodus 20:13. The word in Exodus 20:13 means murder.

How do the following verses help us understand how important timing is in our lives?

Psalms 37:9 _____

Matthew 5:21-24 _____

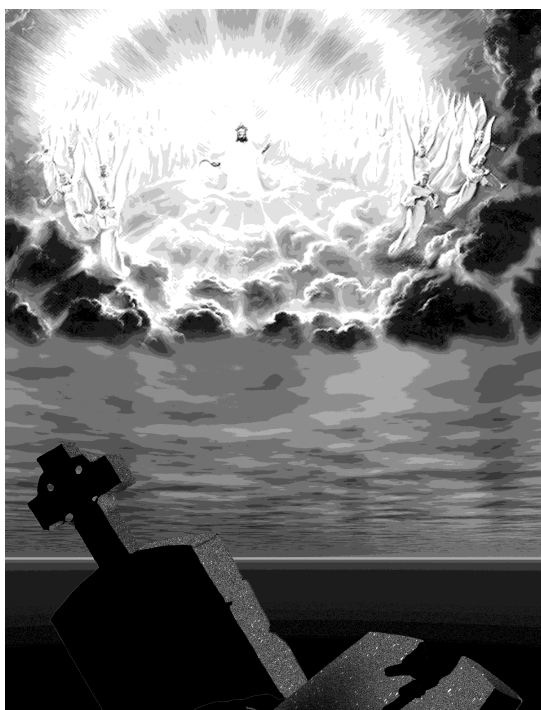
Matthew 8:21, 22 _____

Romans 8:25 _____

Romans 12:19 _____

1 Corinthians 4:5 _____

James 1:19 _____



Wait until Jesus returns to show the real reasons why people do things.

Are there any big decisions you have to make? How important is timing in making those decisions? Might it be better to delay making the decisions? Or would delaying the decisions be the wrong thing to do? Think through the importance of the words “To every thing there is a season [period of time].” How could prayer, Bible study, and talking with others help you make the right decisions at the right time?

TUESDAY—JANUARY 23

ETERNITY IN THEIR HEARTS (Ecclesiastes 3:11-15)

The subject of time continues in

Ecclesiastes 3:11-15. As you read through these difficult verses, take note of the different comments about time. It is important to note that verse 11 can be translated “he has put *eternity* in their heart” (NirV).

According to your understanding of Ecclesiastes 3:11-15, what point is Solomon making? Again, think of what the whole Bible says when you try to understand these verses.

Solomon admitted the power of God as contrasted³ with the weakness and foolishness of humans. Again, Solomon is not encouraging a life of foolish physical pleasure. Instead, in their right time, the results of human labor can earn enjoyment in this life. We cannot fully understand God’s works and leading (Ecclesiastes 3:11). We do not need to. Could Solomon be explaining what Jesus said in Matthew 6:34? “So don’t [do not] worry about tomorrow. Tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own” (NirV).

How do you understand the idea that God has “put eternity” in our hearts? Think of the answer with Solomon’s unhappy and unfulfilled life in mind. Also read Hebrews 11:13-16; 1 John 2:15-17.

Thursday’s lesson will show that humans and animals come to the same end. We—along with goats,

³contrasted—to have shown how things are different.

alligators, and weasels—will die. But the difference is that God has put eternity in our hearts. As humans, we can think about life after this life. We understand that we die, but that time will go on while we are left behind. So every day of our lives, we think about death, and this causes us worry, fear, and a sense of not being able to have a good end. This is how it should be. We should not be satisfied with our end, because we were never meant to die. Death is the work of Satan (Hebrews 2:14; 1 John 3:8). That is one reason why, in the end, all physical enjoyments are empty. They cannot answer the reality of death. Death is always looking over our shoulder and never further than a heartbeat away.

The good news is that Jesus came to destroy death and free us from the fear of death (Hebrews 2:15).



Is eternity in your heart?

WEDNESDAY—JANUARY 24

JESUS AND JUDGMENT (Ecclesiastes 3:16, 17)

Solomon again continues exploring the question of time. But he now switches the topic to something else. In Ecclesiastes 3:16, 17, he opens up a theme that will often appear in the book of Ecclesiastes: human injustice and God's judgment.

What is Solomon saying in Ecclesiastes 3:16? How could there be wickedness in the “place of justice” (NIV)? How could there be evil in the place of righteousness (holiness)? What could Solomon be talking about? Where have you seen wickedness where there should be justice, and evil where there should be righteousness? How do these things make you feel? How did they make Solomon feel? Also read Proverbs 17:23; Proverbs 21:27; John 2:14.

Who should not be upset at injustice and evil in places where there should be justice and righteousness? So Solomon wanted to see judgment done. He had a sour attitude⁴ about a lot of things, but he still believed in the final justice that God would give in His own time. Solomon even said, “God will judge godly and sinful people alike. He has a time for every act. He has a time for everything that is done” (Ecclesiastes 3:17, NIV).

⁴attitude—how a person thinks and feels toward God, other people, or things.

Read John 12:31. In what way could we say that the Cross was a judgment of both righteous (holy) people and wicked people?

The Cross is a place of judgment, where we see unbelievable injustice. The sinless Son of God is dying for the sins of an unthankful and wicked world (Romans 5:6; 1 John 2:2). At the same time, the Cross is a place of righteousness. This is because Jesus, who has “the righteousness of God” (2 Peter 1:1) Himself, is there. But, in this place of righteousness, we see evil. It is the sin of the whole world being punished in the person of Jesus, who became sin “for us” (2 Corinthians 5:21). We can also say that judgment of the righteous took place at the Cross. This is because Jesus’ death has brought pardon and forgiveness (Romans 8:1). At the same time, the condemnation⁵ of the lost is guaranteed. They will have no excuse because of what happened on the cross (John 3:19).

Suppose someone asked you to write a short paragraph about what Christ’s death offers you. What would you write? Bring that paragraph to class to share with others.

THURSDAY—JANUARY 25

OF MEN AND BEASTS (Ecclesiastes 3:18-22)

With the whole Bible in mind,

what important point is Solomon making in Ecclesiastes 3:18-22? What message do these verses have that we all should accept?

Solomon is looking again at the uselessness of life separate from God. This kind of life has to be useless, because “people and animals go to the same place. All of them come from dust. And all of them return to dust” (Ecclesiastes 3:20, NIV). As we learned in Tuesday’s lesson, that is an opinion that upsets most humans. It is an opinion that makes all that comes before death worse than *hebel* (vapor, wind). One atheist⁶ author wrote about the “absurdity [foolishness]” of life. It mocks us with the hope and promise of meaning. But we all end up in the same useless place as the beasts.

What Bible verses can you find that would answer each of the verses in Ecclesiastes 3:18-22?

Ecclesiastes 3:18 (for example, Psalm 8:5-8)_____

Ecclesiastes 3:19 (for example, John 3:16)_____

Ecclesiastes 3:20_____

⁵condemnation—judgment of guilt.

⁶atheist—a person who does not believe in God.

Ecclesiastes 3:21 _____

Ecclesiastes 3:22 _____

Even at its best, life can be hard. We all struggle. We should be thankful for the hope that the gospel offers us.

What is your favorite Bible verse that talks about life for the saved after the Second Coming? Read it. Pray over it. Then write what that verse means to you.

FRIDAY—JANUARY 26

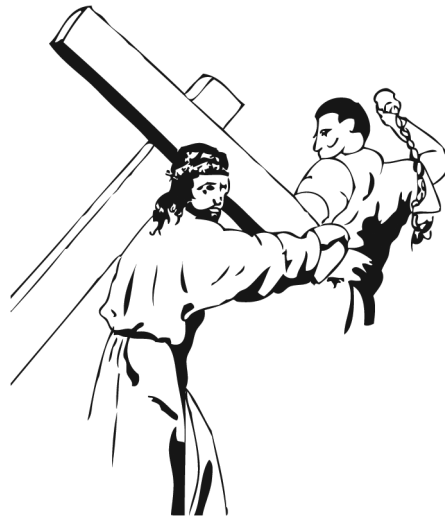
ADDITIONAL STUDY: Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy*, pp. 662–678.

“True, faithful thinkers never try to ignore the advice of experienced and wise people. They are to listen to the advice of others with respect.” —Adapted from Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 4, p. 240.

“The timing of things may tell much in favor of truth. Victories are often lost through delays. There will be crises in God’s work. Quick and determined action at the right time will gain glorious victories. But delay and neglect will lead to great failures and real dishonor to God.”—Adapted from Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 3, p. 498.

“Christ received the punishment we deserve so that we might be rewarded as He deserves. He was punished for

our sins, for which He was not responsible, so that we might be forgiven and made righteous [holy] by His perfect character. This character we did not have. He suffered the death which was really ours, that we might receive the life that was His. ‘With His stripes we are healed.’ ” —Adapted from Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, p. 25.



By His wounds we are healed from sin.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- ❶ As a class, discuss your answer to Wednesday’s question. What can you learn from what others wrote?
- ❷ It has been said that a right decision at the wrong time is still a wrong decision. Is there anyone in your church about to make an important decision? Suppose that person is open to advice. What could you do as a class to help that person know that

his or her decision is the right one at the right time?

③ As a class, talk about death. What does death mean to us as Christians? How should we face it? What about the hope we have in the face of death? Even with the promises of God, why is death still so painful?

④ What are some of the great injustices you have seen in your lifetime? How should the knowledge that God will bring final and perfect justice help you deal with so much human injustice on earth? Should God's promises to bring final justice prevent us from trying to get justice in this life?