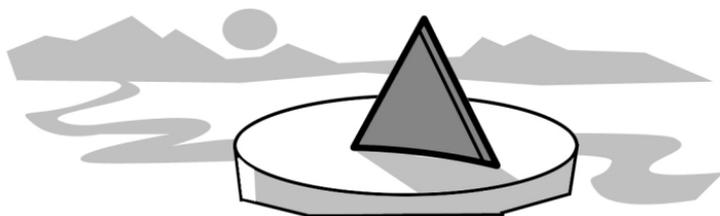


# Of Being *and* Time



## SABBATH AFTERNOON

**Read for This Week's Study:** *Ecclesiastes 3.*

**Memory Text:** “I said in mine heart, God shall judge the righteous and the wicked: for *there is a time there for every purpose and for every work*” (*Ecclesiastes 3:17*).

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

Maybe we all don't measure our lives out with coffee spoons, but we do measure out our lives, and for most of us, if blessed, that measurement comes out to about “threescore years and ten” and, if especially blessed, “fourscore.” As those who already have seen a good portion of their years pass by, it's not a lot. Time is, therefore, a precious commodity for mortal beings.

For that reason, maybe, chapter 3 opens up a theme important to us all: time. Beginning with some of the most beautiful poetry ever written, Solomon touches on various themes all related one way or another with the question of time: How important is the timing of the things we do? What does the concept of eternity mean to human beings, who, in and of themselves, are left behind by eternity? When will all the evil and iniquity in the world be judged by God? What's the ultimate difference between humanity and animals if, in the end, all wind up in the same place?

Heavy themes for just one chapter. But, as we've been saying all along, they can be understood only through looking at these verses in the context of all Scripture, which has much to say on these crucial topics.

*\*Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, January 27.*

## The God of Time

How accurate is your watch? Probably not as accurate as a cesium-beam clock, which measures time down to the 9,192,631,700th of a second—the frequency at which certain atoms absorb and emit radiation. In other words, that’s the timing that God has built into that part of nature. Talk about precise!

At the NASA-Goddard Space Flight Center in the United States, scientists have a chart on which they have written down all the eclipses from about 2000 B.C. until A.D. 3000. In other words, the timing that God has built into this aspect of nature is so accurate that we are able to know not only when past eclipses occurred but when future ones will, as well.

As nature shows, the Lord is in control of time. As Adventists, people who are particularly interested in prophecy, this comes as no surprise. After all, many of the prophecies that have helped us understand our identity and mission as a movement are tied in with time.

**Review** the following time prophecies that have meant so much to us as a people, prophecies that have been fulfilled (*Dan. 7:25, 8:14, 9:24-27, Rev. 12:14*). **What do these prophecies tell us about the power and sovereignty of God over human affairs?**

---



---



---

In numerous places the Bible talks about the role of time in God’s plans. Jesus appeared in Galilee declaring that “the time is fulfilled” (*Mark 1:15*). Paul, in reference to the first coming of Jesus, wrote that “when the fulness of the time was come, God sent forth his Son” (*Gal. 4:4*); in reference to the Second Coming, he wrote: “until our Lord Jesus Christ’s appearing, which He will manifest in His own time” (*1 Tim. 6:14, 15, NKJV*). An angel appeared to John and said to him, “ ‘Do not seal the words of the prophecy of this book, for the time is at hand’ ” (*Rev. 22:10, NKJV*). We can see that God works through time in order to bring about His will.

**Are there any issues you are struggling with regarding the timing of events? If so, you must get on your knees, surrender your will to the Lord, and trust in Him who has shown that He is in control of time. What else can you do to learn to trust in the Lord’s timing of events?**

## A Time to . . . ?

**Read** Ecclesiastes 3:1-8. Notice the contrast of opposites: birth, death; build, break down; love, hate; and so forth. Though scholars debate the exact meaning of these verses, Solomon seems to be talking about various aspects of human life and that at certain times some things are appropriate while at other times the opposite things are.

The key, perhaps, to help unlock the meaning is the beginning of verse 11 in which, after talking about God, Solomon says, “He has made everything beautiful in its time” (*NKJV*); that is, these various things, in their proper time, are right. Rather than these verses being about God’s overriding providence, they deal more with human freedom and our timing of events.

Most problematic, of course, is “a time to kill” (*vs. 3*). Though various explanations have been given, it’s important to remember who Solomon was, the king, and that he ruled over a nation that had the death penalty (*see Exod. 22:18-20; Lev. 20:2, 9-16; 24:14-16; Num. 15:35*). Also, it’s worthwhile noting that the Hebrew verb for “kill” in Ecclesiastes 3:3 is not the same Hebrew word as that in Exodus 20:13, a word that is commonly understood as “murder.”

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

*Ps. 37:9*

---

*Matt. 5:21-24*

---

*Matt. 8:21, 22*

---

*Rom. 8:25*

---

*Rom. 12:19*

---

*1 Cor. 4:5*

---

*James 1:19*

---

**Are there any big decisions or choices you have to make? If so, how important is timing in your decision? Might the decision be better off being delayed? Or might delay be the wrong thing to do? Think through, again, the importance of the words “To every thing there is a season, and a time.” How could prayer, Bible study, and counsel with others help you make the right decision at the right time?**

## Eternity in Their Hearts

The concept of time continues in Ecclesiastes 3:11-15. As you read through these difficult texts, take note of the various references to time in them (it's important to note that in verse 11 it can be translated as "he has put eternity in their heart" [NKJV]).

**According** to your best understanding of these texts, what point is Solomon making? Again, interpret them by taking into account all Scripture.

Solomon here acknowledges the power of God in contrast to the weakness and folly of humanity. Again, Solomon isn't advocating a life of mindless physical pleasure; instead, in their right time, the fruits of human labor can reap enjoyment now, "under the sun," in this life.

We can't fully understand the works and providence of God ("no man can find out the work that God maketh from the beginning to the end" [vs. 11]); we don't need to. Might Solomon be expressing what Jesus said in Matthew 6:34? "Take therefore no thought for the morrow: for the morrow shall take thought for the things of itself. Sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof."

**How** do you understand the phrase that God has "put eternity" in the hearts of human beings? Think of the answer in the context of Solomon's unhappy and unfulfilled life as king (see also Heb. 11:13-16, 1 John 2:15-17).

As we'll see in Thursday's lesson, humans and animals alike have a common destiny "under the sun." We—along with goats, alligators, and weasels—die. The difference, though, is that God has put eternity in our hearts. As humans we can conceive of an existence beyond us; we realize that though we die, time will go on, even for eternity, while we are left behind. Thus, every day of our lives we are confronted with death, and this causes us worry, fear, and a sense of incompleteness. Which is how it should be; we shouldn't be content with, or indifferent to, our fate, because we were never meant to die. Death is an intruder, the work of Satan (Heb. 2:14, 1 John 3:8). That's one reason why, in the end, all physical enjoyments are so hollow, empty, such *hebel*—they can't answer the reality of death, which is always lurking over our shoulder and never farther than a heartbeat away.

**Of course, the good news, the great news, is that Jesus came in order to destroy death and thus, for now, free us from the fear that death often brings (Heb. 2:15).**

## Jesus and Judgment

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

**Read** verse 16. What is he saying? How could there be wickedness in the “place of justice” (*NIV*)? And in the place of righteousness, iniquity? What could he be talking about? Where have you seen, even today, wickedness where there should be justice and iniquity where there should be righteousness? Also, how do these things make you feel? How did they make Solomon feel? (See also *Prov. 17:23, 21:27, John 2:14.*)

Who, of course, isn't upset at injustice and iniquity, especially in places in which there should be justice and righteousness? Thus, Solomon, like us, wanted to see judgment done, and despite his sour attitude about a lot of things, he still believed in the ultimate justice that God would mete out in His own time (*Eccles. 3:17*), for, as he said, there is a time “for every purpose and for every work,” especially the work of God's judgment.

**Read** John 12:31, where Jesus says “Now is the judgment of this world.” In what sense could we say that the Cross was a judgment of both the righteous and the wicked?

At the Cross, a place of judgment, we see incredible injustice: the sinless Son of God dying for the sins of an ungrateful and wicked world (*Rom. 5:6, 1 John 2:2*). At the same time, it is a place of righteousness because Jesus, who has “the righteousness of God” (*2 Pet. 1:1*) Himself, is there. And yet, in this place of righteousness, we see iniquity—the iniquity of the whole world being punished in the person of Jesus, who became sin “for us” (*2 Cor. 5:21*). We can say that judgment of the righteous occurred at the Cross, because there, through the death of Jesus, vindication in judgment is assured (*Rom. 8:1*); at the same time, the condemnation of the lost is guaranteed, because, in light of the Cross, they will have no excuse (*John 3:19*).

**If someone were to ask you to explain, in a short paragraph, what the death of Christ offers you, what would you write? Bring that paragraph to class to share with others.**

## Of Men and Beasts

**Read** Ecclesiastes 3:18-22. Keeping in mind, again, the whole message of Scripture, not to mention the context in which Solomon was writing, what important point is he making here? What message is here that we all should pay heed to?

---



---

It is true: At one level what's the difference between a dead person and a dead dog? And the longer they're dead, the harder it is to tell them apart, for eventually both become nothing but crumbled bones.

Solomon is, again, looking at the meaninglessness of life lived apart from God, a life lived only for the immediate pleasures of this world. It has to be meaningless because when it's all done, humans and beasts "all go unto one place; all are of the dust, and all turn to dust again" (*vs. 20*). As we saw in Tuesday's lesson, that's a conclusion most humans find unsettling, one that makes all that comes before death not only *hebel* but even worse. One atheist author wrote about the "absurdity" of life: It taunts us with the hope and promise of meaning, and yet in the end we all end up in the same meaningless place as the beasts.

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

*vs. 18 (for example, Ps. 8:5-8)*

---

*vs. 19 (for example, John 3:16)*

---

*vs. 20*

---

*vs. 21*

---

*vs. 22*

---

Life itself, even in the best of circumstances, can be hard. We all struggle, one way or another. How thankful we should be for the hope that awaits us once this is all said and done.

**Which is your favorite Bible text that talks about life for the redeemed after the Second Coming? Read it over, pray over it, and then write out in your own words what the text says to you.**

**Further Study:** Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy*, pp. 662–678.

“True, refined independence never disdains to seek counsel of the experienced and of the wise, and it treats the counsel of others with respect.”—Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 4, p. 240.

“The timing of things may tell much in favor of truth. Victories are frequently lost through delays. There will be crises in this cause. Prompt and decisive action at the right time will gain glorious triumphs, while delay and neglect will result in great failures and positive dishonor to God.”—Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 3, p. 498.

“Christ was treated as we deserve, that we might be treated as He deserves. He was condemned for our sins, in which He had no share, that we might be justified by His righteousness, in which we had no share. He suffered the death which was ours, that we might receive the life which was His. ‘With His stripes we are healed.’ ”—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, p. 25.

### **Discussion Questions:**

- 1** As a class, discuss your answer to Wednesday’s question. What can you learn from what each other wrote?
- 2** 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? If so, and that person is open to counsel, what could you do as a class to help that person know not only what decision to make but to know the best timing for it?
- 3** As a class, talk about death, about what it means to us as Christians, about how we should face it, about the hope that we have despite death, about why even with the promises of God it’s still so painful.
- 4** What are some of the great injustices that 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 here? Also, as a class, discuss this question: Should the fact that God promises to bring final justice hinder us in our pursuit of justice in this life now?

# Soldier for Christ

by MICHAEL SOKIRI

Sudan is a nation that has been at war with itself since before I was born. When I was 12, I joined the army.

One day as I walked along a path near a village, I heard a group of people arguing about religion. I had no religion, but I was curious, so I stopped to listen.

In our culture we listen to what visitors have to say. But these villagers were arguing with their visitors. I urged them to let the visitors speak. They were discussing the Sabbath. The villagers listened for a while, but they started arguing again about which day is God's day. "Let those who want to worship on Sunday do so," I urged, "and those who wish to worship on Sabbath do so."

I learned that the visitors lived near me. So, I went to talk to them about religion. I sensed they knew the truth, but I tried to provoke them to argue. When they refused I began asking sincere questions. Eventually I studied with them and decided to follow them. But before I could be baptized, I was sent to the front lines.

When I shared my new faith with fellow soldiers, they were surprised, for they knew I used to smoke opium. When they learned that I had cut down my opium bushes, some soldiers were angry, for they had bought opium from me. They found the lay evangelists who had taught me the Bible and beat them. The evangelists dared not flee because the soldiers would kill them.

The war turned against us, and we soldiers fled. I fled into Uganda, where I lived as a refugee. There God taught me to read the Bible. I became a gospel evangelist and returned to Sudan to work for God.

I shared my faith with Simon and told him what God was doing for me and the beliefs that Adventists hold dear. Simon became an Adventist, but his wife rejected his new faith and left him. However, when she saw the changes in his life, she returned and joined him in baptism. His sisters also accepted the Adventist faith. Word spread about Simon's conversion, and people from his village were so amazed at the changes in him that they studied the Bible with him and became Adventists too.

I share my faith with everyone I can, both in the refugee camp and in my home area. How precious it is to read God's Word and share it with others, to watch their faith grow until they accept God's truths.

Your Sabbath School Mission offerings support the work of the church in difficult-to-reach areas such as Sudan.

---

MICHAEL SOKIRI *is a church elder in Yei, Sudan.*