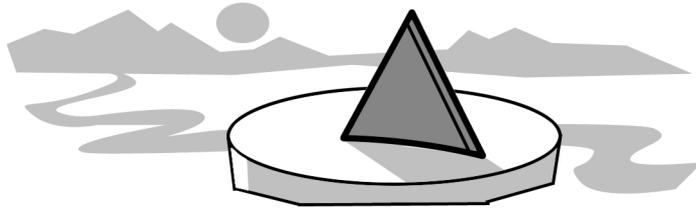


Of Being *and* Time



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?

I Have to Teach Tomorrow . . .

► **Key Text:** *Ecclesiastes 3:17*

► **Teach the Class to:**

Know: Lives in harmony with God’s will are lives fulfilled.

Feel: In spite of life’s stresses and insecurities, God’s will is being accomplished.

Do: Amid the confusion of modern life, respond to God’s invitation: “ ‘Be still, and know that I am God’ ” (*Ps. 46:10, NIV*).

► **Lesson Outline:**

I. A Time for Everything (*Eccles. 3:1-8*)

A What does the Bible have to say to those who struggle with heartache and disappointment?

B “There is . . . a season for every activity under heaven,” wrote Solomon (*Eccles. 3:1, NIV*). Briefly describe the different seasons of a person’s life (childhood, teen, young adult, middle age, senior citizen, etc.). How does God use them for our spiritual development?

II. Everything Beautiful in Its Time (*Eccles. 3:11-15, 18-22*)

A What is meant by the statement “God will call the past to account” (*Eccles. 3:15, NIV*)? Did Solomon view this as a threat that inspired fear or a promise that inspired hope?

B What gives Christians courage to face the judgment? What Bible promises can we claim?

► **Summary:** God wants us to enjoy a life that is qualitatively better than that of those who have nothing to look forward to.

Learning Cycle

► **STEP 1—Motivate!**

Just for Teachers: Step 1 of the Natural Learning Cycle links the learners’ experiences to the lesson. Help your class members answer the question, *Why is this lesson important to me?*

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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?

Learning Cycle CONTINUED

Time is life. As we work in our livelihoods, we exchange a “piece of life” for what eventually we exchange our paychecks for (pieces of others’ lives).

Time is love. Following are two scenarios of misspent time by professed Christians who overexchanged to themselves their time needed by others:

- One cannot reap in later life a harvest for the Lord that one has not first taken time to sow (*Ps. 126:6*).
- Likewise, one cannot reap in later life a family not sown by earlier time investments. The well-taught offspring will then be too busy themselves to be harvested.

One father flew down the front steps past his son, who was sitting there slamming his baseball into his gloved left hand. “Love you, Son!” Father called back over his shoulder. “I don’t want you to love me. I want you to play ball with me,” responded the lad.

Prayerfully consider this inspired challenge:

“Of no talent [God] has given will He require a more strict account than of our time.”—Ellen G. White, *Christ’s Object Lessons*, p. 342.

Consider This: To spare ourselves Solomon’s experience, what can we learn from his life?

► **STEP 2—Explore!**

Just for Teachers: This step of the Natural Learning Cycle presents information learners can use to help them better understand the lesson. Help your class members answer this question: **What do I need to know from God’s Word?**

Bible Commentary

I. Sense of Timing (*Eccles. 3:1-8*)

Is Ecclesiastes 3:1-8 a statement of divine rigidity? Some extremists claim that even the “time to die” is absolute—concluding that there is no need for speed limits or medical intervention. Or does Ecclesiastes 3:1-8 urge complacency? “Don’t worry, relax. In due time the right time for

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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*).

Learning Cycle CONTINUED

[whatever] will come.”

Time is what keeps everything from happening at once. We know, for example, that Solomon didn’t want the pairs in verse 4 merged: no “cheer up” input when he was in a weeping state. “*As he that taketh away a garment in cold weather, and as vinegar upon [a wound], so is he that singeth songs to an heavy heart*” (*Prov. 25:20*).

In other words, “When I’m mourning, I want my warm blanket around me and not someone trying to pull me out of my grief prematurely.” Later, Solomon will add that time does not stand alone: “*Time and chance happeneth to them all*” (*Eccles. 9:11, emphasis supplied*). Be “in the right place, as well as at the right time!”

II. Time for Work

One must ask what Solomon—whose court was filled with slaves and servants—knew about “work.” Indeed, his account of accomplishments in Ecclesiastes 2:4-8 contains the introduction “I” ten times and concludes (*vs. 9*) with “So I was great”! (Compassionately remember here that he is recounting his period of apostasy.)

Solomon does give his job description in Ecclesiastes 1:17! “So I worked hard to be wise” (*TLB*). Apparently he’d exhausted himself studying wisdom. First heavenly wisdom (*Proverbs*), then earthly wisdom, then a comparison study (*Ecclesiastes*). But this, too, proved “chasing the wind” and “futile” (*1:17, 2:15, TLB*), with a warning that mind-taxing overstudy is “a weariness of the flesh” (*Eccles. 12:12*).

It is difficult to understand Solomon’s utterance of the “sore travail” of his “lot in life,” the “labor” of searching out wisdom—directed by God—which only gave him grief (*Eccles. 1:13, 18*).

But does mankind have a choice, he asks, other than following God’s purpose (*vss. 13, 18*)? And speaking as a king again, he states that “there’s no use arguing with God about your destiny” (*Eccles. 6:10, TLB*).

Consider This: Upon which of the following two resolves is Solomon’s submission based, “*They will be done,*” or “*OK then, have it Your way*”?

Fast-forward to the end of chapter 5 if you wish to grasp Solomon’s progress in comprehending that human beings can, after all, find enjoyment in their appointed lot—provided God has given them the health to go

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.

Learning Cycle CONTINUED

with it. This health perplexity hasn't yet been figured out (*Eccles. 6:2, TLB*).

III. Time and Criteria for Judgment (*Eccles. 3:16-18*)

Solomon's own role as king came piggy-backed with the responsibility of judging (*1 Kings 3:16-28*). Therefore, that aspect of the ultimate King's job description is heavy on his mind.

Since he can't figure it all out, is Solomon here bowing to the ultimate Judge? Is he inferring that if this judge (Solomon) doesn't get you, the next One—the One greater than he—will? (Recall his father David's theme of pleading with God to take care of his enemies.)

Note that Solomon's final punch, his conclusion in the last verse of Ecclesiastes, also is about judgment.

► STEP 3—Practice!

Just for Teachers: This step of the learning cycle will assist you in helping your class members find the answer to the following question: **How can I practice the information I just learned?**

Thought Questions:

- ❶ Is “timing” an art or a science? Is there “law and order” in art? Does the science of timing (appointments) diminish my spontaneity, my freedom of “winging it”?
- ❷ How has Satan “turned around” the Eden curse that humans were to toil (work) for a livelihood into something so pleasurable that for many the goal is to achieve status and power?

Application Question:

As I review Solomon's list of contrasts (*Eccles. 3:2-8*), for which appropriate “times” do I have no sense of timing at all?

Invite the class to set aside some quiet alone time to list the phrases in which they feel exceptionally weak. They may invite a relative to identify phrases in which they see the asker as strong. As members privately

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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.

Learning Cycle CONTINUED

compare their own two lists, a profile should appear.

Witnessing

“There is something peculiar in the temper of the House [of Representatives],” said James Garfield. “A clear strong statement of a case if made too soon or too late fails. If well made at the *right time* it is effective. It is a nice point to study the *right time*.”—*Respectfully Quoted: A Dictionary of Quotations Requested from the Congressional Research Service* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1988, p. 342, italics supplied.)

Consider This: As I gently lead others to the Water of Life, am I praying for the right time to hand them a drinking straw? Or, as a bad example of witnessing, do I try to draw of the cisterns of earth from their straw?

For example: There is a saying, “Don’t work for your money; make your money work for you.” Is this possible without taking advantage of others? Is this the appropriate application of wit in witnessing?

► **STEP 4—Apply!**

Just for Teachers: In this fourth and final step of the Natural Learning Cycle, you will want to encourage class members to make a life response to the lesson. Help them answer this question: **With God’s help, what can I do with what I have learned from this lesson?**

Solomon concludes in his final verse today that people “should be happy in their work” (*Eccles. 3:22, TLB*). An enthused church-employed organist once exclaimed, “I can’t believe I actually get paid for this!”

Consider This: If you are young, have you prayerfully considered your work/career choices, or are you merely planning to “go find a job” once faced with responsibilities? How can those somewhat older and happy in their work counsel and minister to the youth, and even to those who feel trapped? (Recall *Evangelism*, p. 495, in lesson 2.)

Earlier Solomon had profited by exploiting those around him. Does this conclusion indicate a change of heart—that not just the king deserves to be happy in work?

Invite a class member to close with prayer.

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?