

# Ecclesiastes 3 • Dealing with Life's Conditions & Timing

## Introduction

Why is it that when circumstances aren't "good" or going the way we desire, that we assume that something is wrong and out of control? To be sure, if we sin we should expect there will be consequences, but in the normal course of life there are ups and downs. Some people think everything that is "up" is of God and everything that is "down" is from Satan. Although this might be true at times, the greater truth is that God is sovereign and **ALWAYS** in control. If the greatest biblical examples such as Joseph, Moses, Daniel, David, Job, Paul, and so many others who experienced suffering and hardship within the will of God for their lives, then how should we deal with the same?

Throughout this study, consider the possible parallel meanings to Christ's own statements:

Therefore Jesus answered and was saying to them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, the Son can do nothing of Himself, unless it is something He sees the Father doing; for whatever the Father does, these things the Son also does in like manner.

John 5:19

"I can do nothing on My own initiative. As I hear, I judge; and My judgment is just, because I do not seek My own will, but the will of Him who sent Me.

John 5:30

<sup>1</sup>There is an appointed time for everything. And there is a time for every event under heaven—

<sup>2</sup>A time to give birth and a time to die;  
A time to plant and a time to uproot what is planted.

<sup>3</sup>A time to kill and a time to heal;  
A time to tear down and a time to build up.

<sup>4</sup>A time to weep and a time to laugh;  
A time to mourn and a time to dance.

<sup>5</sup>A time to throw stones and a time to gather stones;  
A time to embrace and a time to shun embracing.

<sup>6</sup>A time to search and a time to give up as lost;  
A time to keep and a time to throw away.

<sup>7</sup>A time to tear apart and a time to sew together;  
A time to be silent and a time to speak.

<sup>8</sup>A time to love and a time to hate;  
A time for war and a time for peace.

<sup>9</sup>What profit is there to the worker from that in which he toils? <sup>10</sup>I have seen the task which God has given the sons of men with which to occupy themselves. <sup>11</sup>He has made everything appropriate in its time. He has also set eternity in their heart, yet so that man will not find out the work which God has done from the beginning even to the end.

## [Read v.1-11]

**Point:** If you don't know that v.2-8 were made famous in 60's pop music by The Byrds with their hit "Turn, Turn, Turn", you're one lucky person. But for all the rest, let's examine a couple of things that are wrong with that song and begin to claim back the proper context of this Scripture.

1. The lyrics are not taken directly from this passage. The first few stanzas follow the basic structure but the last couple of stanzas not only deviate significantly in the order they're given, but 2 Scriptural references are completely left out:
  - a. "A time to keep and a time to throw away"
  - b. "A time to be silent and a time to speak"
2. The song ends by repeating the line "A time to love, a time to hate" a second time and then showing it's true emphasis by ending with something completely **NOT** in Scripture: "A time of peace, I swear it's not too late!"
3. As we can plainly see from the context, this is **NOT** a teaching about how humans can control their times and circumstances, but how they are **SUBJECT** to them because they are produced by God. The true message is completely antithetical to the secular song, which is what Satan likes to do with Scripture – reinterpret it to a false meaning.

**Q: What is significant about Ecclesiastes' repeated use of the term "under heaven" such as in v.1?**

A: It sets the boundaries to what is being discussed to the realm of earth, to our time in this life. The meaning of v.1 is that there is a **GOD**-appointed time for everything concerning earth's past, present, and future.

**Q: How do we know for sure that this references times appointed by God and not random "seasons" that come and go?**

A: It's reinforced by the statement in v.11, "He [God] has made everything appropriate in its time."

**Q: Re-read the list of times with the direct view that God appoints them to happen. What are some of the things we learn about the character of God and their application to our life? [The group may have LOTS of answers; the following are provided to facilitate discussion.]**

1. Not all times are what we might label “happy” or even “positive” times. Some of them incur trials, hardships, or testing. It shows that God is sovereign regardless of the conditions and works through **EVERY** phase into which our life leads.
2. A truly obedient and “spiritual” life is not free of hardship and difficulty.
3. Just because a “time” is not a “good” or “happy” time does not automatically mean it is a “bad” or “evil” time. Faith is supposed to maintain its focus and composure in spite of the surroundings and in spite of personal emotions.
4. If there are no “seasons” or random fluctuations that happen to change these times from one side to the other, then we have to face the fact that God is sovereign and in control regardless.
5. From a certain point of view, autumn and winter might not be viewed as favorably as spring and summer, but they are necessary nonetheless for the entire cycle of growth.

**Q: Which of these times cannot be taken out of sequence?**

1. “A time to give birth and a time to die” (v.2)
2. “A time to plant and a time to uproot what is planted” (v.2)
3. “A time to search and a time to give up as lost” (v.6)

The other things are choices to be made depending on the circumstances: to kill or heal, to tear down or build up, to weep or laugh, to mourn or dance, to throw stones or gather stones, to embrace or shun embracing, to keep or throw away, to tear or sew, to be silent or speak, to engage in war or peace. These are all opposites of each other which require discernment as to God’s direction to determine the right course. The 3 things listed above are singular events brought about at specific times in life such as life, death, planting, etc. They seem to intend a dual layer of meaning that parallels spiritual events in our life.

**Q: What kind of question is actually being posed in v.9 and why?**

A: It’s a rhetorical question implicitly indicating there is, in reality, no profit to be gained from one’s earthly toils. It is phrased this way to teach that apart from God, life’s endeavors are ultimately meaningless.

**Q: What are v.10 and 11 teaching about how to view things from God’s perspective?**

A: God has placed within each of us the keen awareness that there is something beyond this life, something eternal that comes after this life. But God has not fully revealed it in detail that we might live by faith rather than works or knowledge. We have to trust that God will fill in all the gaps in His own time according to His own way.

**Q: How would these verses apply to the following famous people in the Bible? (Add others as they come to mind.)**

- **Joseph.** Many hardships endured that ultimately brought him not just success, but the place in which God could best use him.
- **Moses.** 40 years of “ups” growing up in Egypt, 40 years of “downs” in exile, 40 years of “ups” AND “downs” leading Israel through the wilderness to the Promised Land.
- **David.** The struggle to become king, the good and bad of maintaining his reign, his ups and downs in relationships with friends,

family, strangers, other nations, etc.

- **Paul.** Times of great response to the Gospel, times of great persecution, but always steadfast in or out of prison so that God's work never faltered.
- **Others?**

### **Application**

- *Have you personally – or do you know anyone – who believes that the evidence of being in a right relationship with God is that things are going perfect all the time? That any kind of hardship or trouble must indicate being out of God's will? How does that track with these verses?*
- *Have you noticed that everyone listed in Hebrews 11 – the "Faith Hall of Fame" – went through hardships and trials at least equal in size with their successes? How does this compare with our personal definition of "faith"?*

**Point:** Consider the following testimony of Paul, and how he holds most dearest the "negative" times of his life – the times of testing and suffering – rather than holding up the signs and miracles God performed through him. How does this speak to our own witness and faith?

*Are they servants of Christ?—I speak as if insane—I more so; in far more labors, in far more imprisonments, beaten times without number, often in danger of death. Five times I received from the Jews thirty-nine lashes. Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was stoned, three times I was shipwrecked, a night and a day I have spent in the deep. I have been on frequent journeys, in dangers from rivers, dangers from robbers, dangers from my countrymen, dangers from the Gentiles, dangers in the city, dangers in the wilderness, dangers on the sea, dangers among false brethren; I have been in labor and hardship, through many sleepless nights, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure. Apart from such external things, there is the daily pressure on me of concern for all the churches. Who is weak without my being weak? Who is led into sin without my intense concern? **If I have to boast, I will boast of what pertains to my weakness.***

2 Corinthians 11:23-30

<sup>12</sup>I know that there is nothing better for them than to rejoice and to do good in one's lifetime; <sup>13</sup>moreover, that every man who eats and drinks sees good in all his labor—it is the gift of God. <sup>14</sup>I know that everything God does will remain forever; there is nothing to add to it and there is nothing to take from it, for God has so worked that men should fear Him. <sup>15</sup>That which is has been already and that which will be has already been, for God seeks what has passed by.

### **[Read v.12-15]**

**Q: What are v.12-13 teaching about the proper handling of God's times in one's own life?**

A: They are to be used "to do good" and that each one "sees good in all his labor". The biblical definition of "good" is to live according to God's commandments, doing things according to His will and ways only. This is expressing how we should use the things in life to express our love for God and our neighbor. The true blessing and fulfillment of our life is using what comes our way to God's glory alone.

**Q: Seasons come and go, times come and go, and man comes and goes; but what remains constant and unchangeable?**

A: God's will and ways. He set conditions before creation that are unfolding from our point of view, but immutable and constant throughout all of history past, present, and future.

*And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose. For those whom He foreknew, He also predestined to become conformed to the image of His Son, so that He would be the firstborn among many brethren; and these whom He predestined, He also called; and these whom He called, He also justified; and these whom He justified, He also glorified.*

*Romans 8:28-30*

**Q: Although God's entire plans and purposes have not been revealed, what is the one critical purpose He has revealed which is all we need to operate by in this life?**

A: "...for God has so worked that men should fear Him." (v.14) It's a complex picture involving recognition of God for who He is, man's proper relationship to God, and how our own actions of faith should shape our life and its mission.

**Q: How is v.15 an expression of God's view of time and how HE acts, as opposed to how man must view time and act as previously described in v.2-8?**

A: God's cycles are immutable and will always accomplish His will, whereas man must actively subject himself to fit in with the various seasons of those cycles. Even though new generations of mankind may "feel" like they're experiencing something no previous generation has gone through, the truth is that it **IS** cyclical according to God's will and purpose.

**Application:** *If all times are set by God, and all supporting conditions set by Him so as to be unchangeable, how do we approach "good" and "bad" times? How well do we live according to the main, stated purpose "that men should fear Him"? Does our awe and respect of God reflect faith that He is in control of all the circumstances?*

<sup>16</sup>Furthermore, I have seen under the sun that in the place of justice there is wickedness and in the place of righteousness there is wickedness. <sup>17</sup>I said to myself, "God will judge both the righteous man and the wicked man," for a time for every matter and for every deed is there. <sup>18</sup>I said to myself concerning the sons of men, "God has surely tested them in order for them to see that they are but beasts." <sup>19</sup>For the fate of the sons of men and the fate of beasts is the same. As one dies so dies the other; indeed, they all have the same breath and there is no advantage for man over beast, for all is vanity. <sup>20</sup>All go to the same place. All came from the dust and all return to the dust. <sup>21</sup>Who knows that the breath of man ascends upward and the breath of the beast descends downward to the earth? <sup>22</sup>I have seen that nothing is better than that man should be happy in his activities, for that is his lot. For who will bring him to see what will occur after him?

**[Read v.16-22]**

**Q: What is the most succinct way of re-stating v.16-17?**

A: Life is unfair and only God will ultimately make things right for all concerned.

**Q: What is the test God puts to all men according to v.18-21?**

A: From the very life-cycle of all things on this planet – not just men – they're to realize that because death comes to all, something significant must be coming after death. Every person must deal with the fact that something needs to be done in this life to have an affect on the next, otherwise we're no better off than the ordinary animals.

**Q: According to v.22, what is therefore the most we can personally hope for in this life?**

A: That in being subject to God's timing and circumstances, we shall be content to have used them in accordance with His will and ways. Given that we can't know and must trust God for the future, our best outcome is the proper devotion to God of the things of this life. (If you have time, see "The Parable of the Talents" and "The Parable of the Minas".)

*But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys, and where thieves do not break in or steal; for where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.*

*Matthew 6:20-21*

*Do not worry then, saying, 'What will we eat?' or 'What will we drink?' or 'What will we wear for clothing?' For the Gentiles eagerly seek all these things; for your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. **But seek first His kingdom and His righteousness, and all these things will be added to you.** So do not worry about tomorrow; for tomorrow will care for itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own.*

*Matthew 6:31-34*

### **Overall Application**

*In the introduction to this study, it was suggested to keep in mind the following verses. How does Christ's own example speak to us regarding God's times and circumstances?*

*Therefore Jesus answered and was saying to them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, the Son can do nothing of Himself, unless it is something He sees the Father doing; for whatever the Father does, these things the Son also does in like manner.*

*John 5:19*

*"I can do nothing on My own initiative. As I hear, I judge; and My judgment is just, because I do not seek My own will, but the will of Him who sent Me.*

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