

MAKING CHANGE

"YOUR TURN"

ECCLESIASTES 3:1-15

Ecclesiastes 3:1-8 contains "the most famous poem ever penned on the subject of time" according to one literary critic (Leland Ryken, *Words of Delight*, 326). It begins, "For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven." The rest of the poem contains a series of variations on that theme. The eloquence of the poem is achieved by its strict parallelism, e.g., "a time to be born" // "a time to plant" and "a time to die" // "a time to uproot," combined with antithesis, e.g., "a time to be born" versus "a time to die," and "a time to plant" versus "a time to uproot" (v. 2). In a nutshell, life is filled with change. Matter of fact, Heraclitus, the Greek philosopher, has said, "Change is the only constant in life." I can testify to that. Each time I look in the mirror I'm reminded that change, and that not for the better, has dogged me all my life. Life demands that we adapt to changes in life that *inevitably* come. We must make friends with what we too often fear.

What makes befriending change so hard? One essayist observes: "Some people fear change because it may mean that they lose their livelihood. Some people fear change because they believe that it may come with a loss of status or face. Other people fear change because they think that it will come with disruption, violence and instability. Some people fear change because they worry about facing the consequences of things that they have said or done. Some fear change just because they fear the unknown. Many fear change because they believe that change will turn the tables and enable others to do unto them that which they

***That everyone may eat and drink,
and find satisfaction in all his toil—
this is the gift of God.***

— Ecclesiastes 3:13

have been doing unto those others. But our fears, whether rational or not, cannot stop the hands of time and as time marches forward it drags change along with it. So we all have to face the inevitable, inescapable and immutable fact that change is coming" (David F. K. Mpanga, "Embrace Change: It Is the Only Constant in Life," www.monitor.co.ug/OpEd/Commentary/Embrace-change).

Perhaps the Serenity Prayer needs to be mentioned at this point: "God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change; courage to change the things I can; and wisdom to know the difference."

This Week's Core Competency

Peace – I am free from anxiety because things are right between God, others, and me.

Peace is a two-sided coin. One side connotes "freedom from or the cessation of war or violence;" the other side connotes "freedom from disturbance; quiet and tranquility." Peace with God entails both. On the one hand, we are no longer enemies but are now friends (Rom 5:1, 10). On the other, we are no longer personally filled with angst but are filled with peace (Ro 15:13). The first is factual; the second is a practical. And the first makes the second possible.

The dictionary definition of "serenity," or the practical side of peace, namely, "the state of being calm, peaceful, and untroubled," doesn't do justice to the experience of serenity. The definition is so insipid while the experience is so poignant. Each year when we vacation in British Columbia, we always visit the Scandinave Spa at the base of Whistler Mountain, where we are surrounded by silence. There is no talking, only quiet. The only sounds heard during our five-hour stay are those of the wind in the hemlocks, water cascading into the plunge pool, and the occasional cry of a Steller's Jay. Fifteen minutes in

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steam or sauna, followed by a quick plunge into 55-degree water, and then 30 minutes in the solarium repeated throughout the day is a recipe for serenity.

Since serenity is experienced, it can be cultivated, even when nowhere near Whistler, BC. Here are three ways tailor-made for Christians to welcome serenity into your life.

First, engage your mind; meditate on your identity in Christ. Paul says, "whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable-if anything is excellent or praiseworthy-think about such things" (Php 4:8). The fact that you are beloved, an heir of God and co-heir of Jesus Christ (Ro 8:17), fits the bill in that regard. Your identity is not rooted in your pedigree, appearance, health, fitness, education, career path, income, marriage, children, the neighborhood in which you live, or how well you're connected. Your identity is rooted in your relationship to God, which is secure in Jesus Christ. Keep things in perspective. You have hope; you have a future. Life after, life *after* death is yours.

Second, engage your soul; make room for solitude and silence in your life. In a nutshell, stop talking and stop listening to others talk. Henri Nouwen has much to say about this in his little book, *The Way of the Heart*. He writes: "We enter into solitude first of all to meet our Lord and to be with him and him alone" (20). The way to do that surprisingly doesn't depend on physical location; you don't have to go to a retreat center on the other side of nowhere to practice solitude. You can go for a quiet walk or have coffee on your patio. The one thing you cannot do is talk or listen to someone else talk, which explains why solitude and silence are so often mentioned together. Again, he writes: "Silence is the way to make solitude a reality" (35). You cannot be alone with God if you're talking to or listening to someone else! So, if you want to practice solitude while driving to work, silence your media.

Third, engage your body; go for a quiet walk. Physical activity reduces stress, anxiety, and depression—all roadblocks to the experience of serenity. What's more, physical activity improves your mood. It also contributes to your ability to think clearly so that meditation and reflection are improved. Physical activity actually facilitates the practice of solitude and silence.

day 1 ENCOUNTER – read God's word to put yourself in touch with him.

Ecclesiastes 3:1-15

1 *There is a time for everything,
and a season for every activity under the heavens:*
2 *a time to be born and a time to die,
a time to plant and a time to uproot,*
3 *a time to kill and a time to heal,
a time to tear down and a time to build,*
4 *a time to weep and a time to laugh,
a time to mourn and a time to dance,*
5 *a time to scatter stones and a time to gather
them,
a time to embrace and a time to refrain from
embracing,*
6 *a time to search and a time to give up,
a time to keep and a time to throw away,*
7 *a time to tear and a time to mend,
a time to be silent and a time to speak,*

8 *a time to love and a time to hate,
a time for war and a time for peace.*

9 *What do workers gain from their toil? 10 I have
seen the burden God has laid on the human race. 11 He
has made everything beautiful in its time. He has also
set eternity in the human heart; yet no one can fathom
what God has done from beginning to end. 12 I know
that there is nothing better for people than to be happy
and to do good while they live. 13 That each of them
may eat and drink, and find satisfaction in all their toil-
this is the gift of God. 14 I know that everything God
does will endure forever; nothing can be added to it and
nothing taken from it. God does it so that people will
fear him.*

15 *Whatever is has already been,
and what will be has been before;
and God will call the past to account.*

EXAMINE – what the passage says before you decide what it means.

- * Underline "time" and "season" in v. 1.
- * Double underline "everything" and "every activity" in v. 1.
- * Bracket "to be born" in v. 2.
- * Underline "weep" and "mourn" in v. 4.
- * Double underline "laugh" and "dance" in v. 4.

- * Highlight v. 11.
- * Circle "eternity" in v. 11.
- * Box "yet" indicating *contrast* in v. 11.
- * Circle "do good" in v. 12.
- * Box "so that" indicating *purpose* in v. 14.
- * Bracket v. 15c.

day 2

EXPLORE – the answer to these questions to better understand what the passage means.

Consult the explanation of the message and the notes to follow if you need help.

1. Put the meaning of verse 1 in your own words.
2. Explain the relationship of verses 2-8 to verse 1.
3. Describe how the Teacher uses polar opposites to express totality (e.g., "kill"—"heal") in verses 2-8.
4. Doesn't the fact that marriage and divorce are not on the list of 28 activities in verses 2-8 invalidate the Teacher's premise in verse 1? Explain.
5. *Parallelism* is a device used by Hebrew poets. Identify the two pairs of similar activities in verse 4.
6. The meaning of "scatter stones" and "gather them" in verse 5a is uncertain. Explain why that does or doesn't matter.
7. What is the presumed answer to the *rhetorical* question in verse 9?
8. The "burden" God has laid on people (v. 10) is identified in verse 11. Describe your experience of it.
9. If people cannot fathom God's ways, then life must not be worth living. Right?
10. **Discussion:** Talk about why God has done things the way he has (v. 14).

day 3

EXAMINE – an explanation of the message to better understand the meaning of the passage.

One writer calls Ecclesiastes 3:1-5 (esp. vv. 1-8) "a masterpiece of wisdom poetry" (Duane A. Garrett, *Proverbs Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*, NAC, 297), while another calls it the Teacher's "most memorable poem" (Tremper Longman, III, *The Book of Ecclesiastes*, NICOT, 113). Just as people recognize the words "To be or not to be," so also they recognize the list of refrains that begin, "a time to be born and a time to die." They recognize the first quote is from Shakespeare, even if they don't recall it comes from the lips of Hamlet; likewise, they recognize the second is from the Bible, even if they don't recall it comes from the pen of Qohelet. The passage can be divided into two parts. In the first part (vv. 1-8), the Teacher unpacks his basic premise, "There is a time for everything, and a season for every activity under heaven." In the second part (vv. 9-15), he works out its practical implications.

Part one moves from general to particular; it contains a list of 14 antitheses that cover the spectrum of human activity and support the Teacher's opening premise. The list is not exhaustive in that it does not include "every single activity under heaven." Neither is it particular in that it does not limit "every activity under heaven" to these specific activities. Instead, the list uses the literary device *merism* to refer to the totality of human activities; this figure of speech uses opposites to express completeness or totality. It's easy to see how each poetic line pits one action or state against its opposite, e.g., "a time to weep and a time to laugh" (v. 4). About the 28 activities on the list, one author writes, "Though the exact meaning of some of these 'activities' is uncertain, Solomon intended to affirm that all a person's activities, both constructive and destructive, and all his responses to people, objects, and events happen in their times" (Donald R. Glenn, "Ecclesiastes," in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: Old Testament*, 983). Since what's important is the pairing of opposite activities, it isn't necessary to identify the precise activity the Teacher has in mind in every instance. For example, the verbs "tear down" and "build" (v. 3b) refer generally to construction, but some think based on the parallel verbs "kill" and "heal" (v. 3b) that the Teacher is thinking of warfare.

One commentator explains, "An attacking army tears down buildings, but after hostilities cease, they are built once again." But then he admits, "This case cannot be pressed too strongly since the words are widely used outside battle contexts" (Longman, 115). In other words, the sense of verses 2-8 taken together is clear even though the meaning of individual lines is not. The meaning of verse 5a is probably the most obscure. The Midrash Rabbah (rabbinic comments on the Old Testament) took "scatter stones" and "gather them" to refer to sexual relations and continence based on the parallel verbs "embrace" and "refrain" in the next line. While possible, as one commentator says, "perhaps it is best to see them as referring to the gathering and rejecting of building materials. This relates these opposites both to the idea of building (v. 3) and to the thought of keeping and throwing away (v. 6)" (Glenn, 984).

Part two identifies the "burden" God has laid on people and how they are to respond to it. In verse 9 the Teacher repeats his inference that people net nothing from all their labor under the sun (1:3; cf., 2:22), and then explains why. God has placed a two-fold burden on people. "He has set eternity in the hearts of men; yet they cannot fathom what God has done from the beginning to end" (v. 11). In other words, people want to know the meaning of life. They want to know that their lives have some ultimate significance, and they want to know what that ultimate significance is. Ironically, while God has given them this longing, he has not given them the ability to understand his ways, and without an understanding of his plan, they cannot understand their place in it and hence the significance of their activities. One commentator puts it this way: "We feel like aliens in the world of time and yearn to be part of eternity. We feel the need for ourselves and our work to be eternal and yet are grieved to be trapped in time. We also desire to understand our place in the universe against the backdrop of eternity. But we cannot find out what God has done from beginning to end. That is, we are not able to discern any plan or pattern to all of this. God's purposes are outside our realm of control or investigation. We

thus have a sense of alienation and bewilderment in time" (Garrett, 299). It doesn't follow, however, that life isn't worth living and that suicide is the only option. Instead, the Teacher concedes that people are "to be happy and enjoy themselves as long as they live." Moreover, he adds "it is God's gift that all should eat and drink and take pleasure in all their toil" (NRSV). But why? Why has God given

people the desire to know the meaning of their lives but withheld the ability to understand his overall plan? According to the Teacher, "God does it so that men will revere him" (v. 15). In a similar vein he says later, "When times are good, be happy; but when times are bad, consider this: God has made the one as well as the other. Therefore, no one can discover anything about their future" (7:14).

day **4** **EMBRACE** – how God spoke to you in his word.

The Message of the Passage

God has provided a time for every activity in life, but he has not enabled us to know the ultimate meaning of our lives, so we can only enjoy life and find satisfaction in all we do, which is the gift of God.

Our desire is to not be merely hearers of the word, but doers of the word as James teaches in James 1:22.

I cannot recall my father ever questioning the meaning of his life. By the way, he was a house painter and furnace repairman in Detroit in the 1950s. If he entertained the notion, he never mentioned it. I, on the other hand, have fretted over the meaning of mine for years. Are you more like my father or me? Journal your response below:

notes STUDY – the commentaries to answer the questions.

v. 1 **time, season** Cf., "For everything there is an appointed time, and an appropriate time for every activity on earth" (NET); "For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven" (NRSV). Two Heb. words with slightly different nuances are used synonymously in verse 1. Most English versions render the first "season" and the second "time" (NKJV, NJB, NLT, ESV). Every human activity has an appointed season and an appropriate time.

v. 1 **activity** (NET, NLT, HCSB); cf., "matter" (ESV, NRSV); "purpose" (NKJV); "event" (NASB); "occupation" (NJB). "The Hebrew word for 'activity,' always used of people, literally means 'desire,' and then by metonymy 'what one desires' (cf. Isa. 58:13). For these 'willful acts' people are held accountable" (Glenn, 983). A series of 14 antitheses containing 28 items in verses 2-8 is meant to cover the spectrum of human activity. "The widespread figurative uses of these verbs strongly suggest they were chosen here to express not only specific activities but all the manifold pursuits of men, creative and destructive, good and evil, benevolent and malevolent" (Michael A. Eaton, *Ecclesiastes*, TOTC, 79).

v. 2 **to be born** Cf., "to give birth" (NASB). Although the Hebrew verb is active rather than passive (see Eaton, 79), because of its association with "a time to die," most English versions translate it passively. One explains, "it should be taken as a metonymy of cause (i.e., to give birth to a child) for effect (i.e., to be born)" (the NET Bible, 6tn on Ecc 3:2). On the other hand, the active sense "to give birth" provides a better parallel with "to plant" (see James L. Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes*, OTL, 93).

v. 5 **scatter stones** "What was the purpose of discarding stones and collecting others? Interpreters have given several answers to this question, drawing from the realms of warfare, agriculture, business, and affections. During war rocks were thrown on cultivable fields to render the fields useless (II Kings 3:19, 25). In peace time rocks had to be cleared from a field before cultivation; on hillsides these stones were usually arranged in terraces to prevent erosion, catch the rain, and allow it to penetrate the dry soil (cf. Isa. 5:2). Rocks were also used in the construction of houses in Palestine, both temporary and permanent (a grave heap) . . . the discarding and gathering of pebbles refers to the economic realm. Shepherds carried pouches and small pebbles, which represented the number of animals in their care. As the number decreased, they discarded an appropriate number of pebbles, and as it increased, they collected enough rocks to represent the flock. Likewise merchants used stones for recording commercial transactions of various kinds, a possible background for this text . . . The Midrash Rabbah on Qohelet understands this entire verse in an erotic sense [cf., GNB], and in so doing continues the structural pattern of the previous verses. Discarding stones is taken as a symbol for sexual relations, and activity which corresponds to embracing; gathering stones is understood to mean continence. . . This allusion to stones would be the only metaphor in the poem, which troubles some critics" (Crenshaw, 94, 95).

v. 11 **beautiful** "Or 'appropriate'; the same word is trans. 'proper' in 5:18" (Glenn, 984; Duane A. Garrett, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*, NAH, 299). "Qohelet's point is that an action performed at the right time is appropriate, hence lovely to behold" (Crenshaw, 97).

v. 11 **eternity** "This expression has been taken to mean (i) eternity (RSV, LXX), (ii) the world (Mishnah, AV), (iii) ignorance (revocalizing 'elem), (iv) darkness (on the basis of an Ugaritic root). 'Eternity', by far the commonest meaning, fits the context well, for the whole passage has been concerned with God's scheme of 'times. Yet his actions endure for ever (14)" (Eaton, 81; cf., Garrett, 299; Crenshaw, 97, 98). "People have a longing or desire to know the extratemporal significance of themselves and their deeds or activities. Solomon added that people cannot know the works of God . . . from beginning to end, that is, they cannot know the sovereign, eternal plan of God. Human labor is without profit because people are ignorant of God's eternal plan, the basis by which He evaluates the appropriateness and eternal significance of all their activities. Because of this ignorance there is an uncertainty and latent temporality to the value of all one's labor" (Glenn, 984).

v. 12 **do good** "The words do good (in the NIV and NASB) should be rendered 'enjoy themselves' (RSV). No moral qualification is suggested here as a requirement for receiving God's gift of enjoyment (as there is in 2:26). Most commentators are undoubtedly correct in pointing to the parallel words find satisfaction (lit. 'see good') in 3:13). There "good" is used in a nonethical sense (cf., 2:24; 5:18 for the same idiom)" (984).

v. 15c **God will call** . . . Cf., "God requires an account of what is past" (NKJV); "God seeks out what has gone by" (NRSV, cf., ESV); "God makes the same things happen over and over again" (NLT, cf., GNB); "God seeks out anyone who is persecuted" (NJB; cf., Garrett, 301, who connects 15c to vv. 16, 17). The variety of interpretations reflected in such diverse translations points to the obscurity of this verse.

Family Talk

Encouragement from one parent's heart to another

You've heard the old adage; the only thing constant is change. Change can be good and bad. We don't generally get to pick how or what changes in our life, but rest assured it's going to happen. Several years ago, a water leak caused our ceiling to collapse. A heaping mess of wet insulation and sheetrock landed mere inches from where my children were resting. Because of the damage we relocated to a hotel for a month - right in the heart of a new school year. Without a doubt, being displaced had its challenges. However, our family looks back at that time as one of the most fun adventures we've ever had. We've conveniently forgotten all the heartache, remembering only Texas-shaped waffles for breakfast, warm cookies at the front desk after school, going to the pool and hot tub every day, and housekeeping! School starting is definitely a season of change for families. As you navigate this season of new teachers, friends, and afterschool activities, hold fast to the One who never changes. What a wonderful opportunity to prayerfully guide your children through a new season. Take a moment to encourage them that God is fully aware of all their concerns and loves them deeply. We may not know what's to come, but He does, and He is able to do more than all we ask or imagine. Invite God to do amazing things through this season of change!

What Does The Bible Say

Weekly Verse: Read Ecc 3:1-15

1. Circle the word "time" throughout the passage. What does God say about time?
2. Verse 11 says God makes everything beautiful in its time. What do you think that means?
3. What is God's gift to His people (verse 13)?

What Do You Think

This passage tells us there is a season for everything. Do you believe God cares about the season you are in?

What R U Going To Do

A new school year is a busy time. Make a list of all the things that will change in your life as the new year begins. Take a moment to tell God how you feel about all the upcoming changes.

Core Comp

Peace - I live without worry because things are good between God, myself and others.

Memory Verse

James 1:17 - Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows.

KIDPIX COUPON

I memorized my verse _____, completed *Scrolls* _____, brought Bible _____, brought a friend _____.

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30 CORE COMPETENCIES

10 CORE BELIEFS

Trinity 2 Corinthians 13:14

I believe the God of the Bible is the only true God - Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Salvation By Grace Ephesians 2:8-9

I believe a person comes into a right relationship with God by His grace, through faith in Jesus Christ.

Authority of the Bible 2 Timothy 3:16-17

I believe the Bible is the Word of God and has the right to command my belief and action.

Personal God Psalm 121:1-2

I believe God is involved in and cares about my daily life.

Identity in Christ John 1:12

I believe I am significant because of my position as a child of God.

Church Ephesians 4:15-16

I believe the church is God's primary way to accomplish His purposes on earth today.

Humanity John 3:16

I believe all people are loved by God and need Jesus Christ as their Savior.

Compassion Psalm 82:3-4

I believe God calls all Christians to show compassion to those in need.

Eternity John 14:1-4

I believe there is a heaven and a hell and that Jesus Christ is returning to judge the earth and to establish His eternal kingdom.

Stewardship 1 Timothy 6:17-19

I believe that everything I am or own belongs to God.

10 CORE PRACTICES

Worship Psalm 95:1-7

I worship God for who He is and what He has done for me.

Prayer Psalm 66:16-20

I pray to God to know Him, to lay my request before Him and to find direction for my daily life.

Bible Study Hebrews 4:12

I read the Bible to know God, the truth, and to find direction for my daily life.

Single-mindedness Matthew 6:33

I focus on God and His priorities for my life.

Spiritual Gifts Romans 12:4-6

I know and use my spiritual gifts to accomplish God's purposes.

Biblical Community Acts 2:44-47

I fellowship with other Christians to accomplish God's purposes in my life, others' lives, and in the world.

Giving Away My Time Colossians 3:17

I give away my time to fulfill God's purposes.

Giving Away My Money

2 Corinthians 8:7

I give away my money to fulfill God's purposes.

Giving Away My Faith Ephesians

6:19-20

I give away my faith to fulfill God's purposes.

Giving Away My Life Romans 12:1

I give away my life to fulfill God's purposes.

10 CORE VIRTUES

Joy John 15:11

I have inner contentment and purpose in spite of my circumstances.

Peace Philippians 4:6-7

I am free from anxiety because things are right between God, myself, and others.

Faithfulness Proverbs 3:3-4

I have established a good name with God and with others based on my long-term loyalty to those relationships.

Self-Control Titus 2:11-13

I have the power, through Christ, to control myself.

Humility Philippians 2:3, 4

I choose to esteem others above myself.

Love 1 John 4:10-12

I sacrificially and unconditionally love and forgive others.

Patience Proverbs 14:29

I take a long time to overheat and endure patiently under the unavoidable pressures of life.

Kindness/Goodness 1 Thess. 5:15

I choose to do the right things in my relationships with others.

Gentleness Philippians 4:5

I am thoughtful, considerate and calm in dealing with others.

Hope Hebrews 6:19-20

I can cope with the hardships of life and with death because of the hope I have in Jesus Christ.

About the Authors

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