

# HE SET ETERNITY IN THEIR HEARTS

by Steve Zeisler

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Today we come to the famous third chapter of Ecclesiastes, the well known poetic section which proclaims that there is "a time for every event under heaven."

I find it amusing that we will be looking at these words on the very day when we come to the end of Daylight Savings Time. We all put our clocks back one hour last night, and in doing so commanded a time change. But we are not really the masters of time and seasons, even if we can change conventions by which we measure a day. We are all bound to live through various cycles in life, and this will never change whether we like it or not. We must respond to these cycles, not they to us. When I was young I played every team sport I had time for, but I find myself limited these days to watching my children participate while I coach. As they are growing up, even that form of participation is winding down. I am well on my way to becoming a full-time spectator, and feel that the time is not too far away when I won't care at all. Generations of parents before me have experienced it the same cycle, as will generations of parents who will follow me.

## LIFE'S CYCLES

Think for a moment about matters which you have prayed over during the last six months. My guess is that you know people who are in various stages of life that are somewhat predictable. We go through these stages and then move on, from advantage to disadvantage, etc. Your own prayers therefore will probably allow you to trace some of these human experience. A close friend is having her patience stretched while she awaits the birth of her baby who is now a few days overdue. On the other end of the spectrum, I have prayed recently with a brother whose elderly father has just died. I know some people who are experiencing certain things for the first time: parents whose children are going through their teen years; newly married couples entering life together. On the other hand, I know people who for the first time feel physically limited because of age. These are the cycles described in this wonderful poem.

There is an appointed time for everything. And there is a time for every event under heaven:

A time to give birth and  
a time to die;  
A time to plant, and a time  
to uproot what is planted.  
A time to kill and a time to heal;  
A time to tear down,  
and a time to build up.  
A time to weep and a time  
to laugh;  
A time to mourn and a time  
to dance.  
A time to throw stones,  
and a time to gather stones;  
A time to embrace, and a time  
to shun embracing.  
A time to search, and a time  
to give up as lost;  
A time to keep, and a time  
to throw away.  
A time to tear apart, and a time

to sew together;  
A time to be silent, and a time  
to speak.  
A time to love, and a time to hate;  
A time for war, and a time  
for peace.

Some people think it is possible for them to avoid what Solomon describes here. They feel they can somehow transcend the lot of ordinary humanity. Every now and then a political or religious demagogue will lead astray a group of people by convincing them that he can overturn the vicissitudes of life. But this is impossible. A fatalist will bow before the difficulties of life. Some try to anticipate what is coming so as to try and turn the cycles of life to their advantage. Thoughtful, honest observers, however, are more inclined to nod in agreement with these words.

## **CREATION AND DESTRUCTION**

It's difficult to avoid recognizing that we are not in command of our circumstances. Times of laughter and joy are followed by times of crying and deterioration. There are times when we may be busy sewing together, and times when we rip apart. We are not required to have the skills to change our circumstances, but to find a way to succeed given these cycles and changes, a way that will allow for spiritual growth and emotional health.

Verses 2 and 3 describe in four metaphors the wedding together of creation and destruction. Nothing gets created ultimately unless something has already been destroyed. Nothing gets destroyed ultimately unless it is part of creation again. "A time to give birth and a time to die." I remember the excitement and anticipation my wife Leslie and I shared when she became pregnant with our first child. As we prepared to become a family and establish a home, insurance, education and other issues became important. But children grow up and leave the home. Time passes and different preparations must be made, not geared toward new growth but toward death. We sense that we do not have much time left, so we ask ourselves questions like, "Are my affairs in order?" "Have I said what I wanted to say to the people I love?" "Am I prepared for the second part of the creation/destruction cycle?" This time comes to us all.

Verse 2b describes two elements of life in the ancient world: "A time to plant, and a time to uproot what is planted." We plant because we expect to harvest what grows. "A time to kill and a time to heal." Animals are brought into existence so that we may eat. We nurture them and treat their diseases so that we may at last slaughter them for food. A friend told me that he is taking his aged dog to the vet and, depending on what the tests show, the vet either nurse the dog back to health or put her to sleep. The same man will either heal or put down this dog. And this is appropriate. It may be sad, but it's not wrong.

"A time to tear down and a time to build up." This verse reminds me of one of the most frustrating periods I can remember, the time when our house was remodeled. All five of us were sleeping in one bedroom. We had one bathroom that worked when the water was not turned off, and a kitchen that was functional only occasionally. There was dust everywhere. The roof was open to the skies as were the walls. All of us were irritable and cranky because it seemed like the confusion would never end. Besides, the whole thing turned out to cost more than we thought. And yet there is no other way to remodel. You must tear down first before it's possible to build up. It's impossible to argue with this creation/destruction cycle as Solomon makes his case.

Verse 4 talks about our emotional life and our assignments in this area: A time to weep and a time to laugh; a time to mourn and a time to dance." Both of these assignments are handed to us at different times in life. Some things are so wonderful, weddings and festivals, for instance, so delightful and encompassing of others that we respond by laughter and dancing.

As surely as we have those assignments, however, we know that later will come painful times, occasions when we must weep and mourn over a death or some other form of loss. No one escapes this cycle of laughing and weeping.

## **EVALUATIONS**

Verses 5 through 8 describe a series of events in which judgment must be rendered; when a mature man or woman must look at life and render an evaluation. "A time to throw stones, and a time to gather stones; A time to embrace, and a time to shun embracing. A time to search, and a time to give up as lost; A time to keep, and a time to throw away. A time to tear apart, and a time to sew together; A time to be silent, and a time to speak. A time to love, and a time to hate; A time for war, and a time for peace."

These pains require us to think about what is happening and to decide where on the circle we find ourselves. Leslie and I have had a number of discussions regarding old clothes of mine which she cannot imagine me wearing in public but which I can't imagine being without. We may not easily agree on whether it is "time to keep or a time to throw away." But both of us agree in principle that there does come a time ultimately when things should be thrown away, when they have outlived their usefulness.

You may disagree with those closest to you about when you ought to speak or remain silent, but no thinking person disagrees that silence and speech are both necessary at times. It is not always the case that one should be preferred over the other. Shunning embracing, hatred and war, seem as if they might be beyond the experience of Christians but they are not.

There are times when someone's actions are so wicked that we need to take a stance that says we disapprove thoroughly of their conduct. We must distance ourselves from them for a time in order to express our hatred of what they are doing. Hatred of the soul of a person is inappropriate but hatred of one's actions is required of Christians at times just as much as are expressions of love. At times we see life being sewn in unity, but at other times brothers and sisters must part from one another. Those too are the assignments of God.

Derek Kidner has written,

Obviously we have little to say in the situations which move us to weep or laugh, mourn or dance; but our more deliberate acts, too, may be time-conditioned more than we suppose. "Who would have imagined," we sometimes say, "that the day would come when I should find myself doing such and such a thing, and seeing it as my duty?" So the peace-loving nation prepares for war; or the shepherd takes the knife to the creature he has earlier nursed back to health. The collector disperses his hoard; friends part in bitter conflict; the need to speak out follows the need to be silent. Nothing that we do, it seems, is free from this relativity and this pressure---almost dictation---from outside.

## **THE PRESENCE OF GOD**

If it is incontrovertibly true for believers and unbelievers alike that this is life, our responsibility is to find a way in which these truths can be placed in a context that makes sense of them, gives honor to God, and is upbuilding to us; is useful, even eternal. This is what Qoheleth does, beginning in verse 9, in his comments on what he has just written. He asks,

What profit is there to the worker from that in which he toils?

What is the point of it all? We must evaluate these things, he is saying.

I have seen the task which God has given the sons of men with which to occupy themselves. 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. I know that there is nothing better for them than to rejoice and to do good in one's lifetime, moreover, that every man who eats and drinks sees good in all his labor-it is the gift of God. I know that everything that 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. That which is has been already, and that which will be has already been, for God seeks what has passed by.

Verse 11 makes two wonderful assertions about how we can live with life's cycles and find hope, perspective,

joy and opportunity. We cannot change them but we can live in them with the presence of God. Verse 11: "He has made everything appropriate [beautiful] in its time. He has also set eternity in their heart,..." In the long run, Solomon is saying, God (although within the scope of this book he cannot answer the question of how one comes to know God; such an answer requires revelation from heaven) makes all things beautiful for those who know him.

I don't know where you are at the moment in the cycle of things. I don't know if you feel that you are on a deterioration or a creativity cycle; whether you are feeling the loss of love or the expression of love as the dominant theme in your life; whether you sense that things are being gathered into something greater or they are about to slip away. God is present in the loss and the mourning. Jesus said, "Blessed are those who mourn." He comforts those who have to see sin in all its horror and react against it, who must fight and go to war at times. God is a part of that just as surely as he is part of the birth and the gathering. He is as much a part of the harvest as he is of the seed sowing. Everything is beautiful in its time.

## **ETERNITY**

Secondly, God puts eternity in our hearts, whispering to us as we hear the call from inside, "This is not all there is. Not only is this life livable in all its cyclical experience, not only is God present there, there is more." Our hearts call to us that we were created for eternity. God agrees with us that this is so. He makes promises to us about forever so that we can anticipate life that goes on infinitely beyond what we are experiencing now, life that is filled with his presence, with responsibilities and opportunities for joy and worship unbounded. Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, men and women of faith in every generation looked for a city that had foundations. They lived their lives on earth with all the same cycles of experience, trusting God in the midst of them, all the time remembering that this life is not the end. Something greater was awaiting them.

Here we have a very helpful announcement about how to live in the ups and downs in our experience. We are told that life is cyclical, and that God will be present in all our experiences. Also, he made us for eternity, and is committed to bring us into eternal fruitfulness.

## **THE GIFT AND FEAR OF GOD**

There are three things about God that are important to note in these verses. In verse 11 and following Solomon says: "...He has 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. I know that there is nothing better for them than to rejoice and do good in one's lifetime, moreover, that every man who eats and drinks sees good in all his labor-it is the gift of God." God does not give us the blueprint to life and let us run things on our own. Life lived apart from God does not make sense. But by God's grace a man can "see good in all his labor" as a gift from God. We cannot earn or hoard this gift. "Each day's troubles are enough for each day," said Jesus. God gives us grace each day as a free gift from his hand so that we can fulfill our assignments and sense his presence in the midst of them.

The second thing which Qoheleth says about the circles of life is that God makes things which last forever. Verse 14: "I know that everything that 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." The problem with the cycles is that they are forever wheeling about; nothing is ever sure and nothing ever remains. There is nothing new "under the sun," nothing unique or valuable, just birth and death, gathering and scattering, war and peace. Nothing is new. No one makes an original contribution. And nothing lasts. Whatever you create is run over by the wheel. But the things which God creates last forever. He makes people, human beings like you and me, into eternal creatures with character that will last forever. What God does lasts, and therefore we should fear him. Life comes to us as a gift from his hand. A proper response from us is fear and respect, a humble thank you, a sense of awe.

Third, we read that God brings what has already passed back to judgment. Verse 15: "That which is has been already, and that which will be has already been, for God seeks what has passed by." What seems to us to have been lost in the dust is remembered by God and brought back for examination and evaluation. God is the great evaluator of all that is. He has made us for eternity and he answers the cry for eternity which we feel inside.

You cannot change what Solomon describes in verses 1-8. You cannot opt out. Recently I was with a group of brothers who were talking about the rude things which doctors do to older men in their yearly physical examinations. I thought, "I don't want to have to suffer this way. I'll opt out of that kind of deterioration." But there's no way to escape this. What we must do is find a way in the midst of these certainties to have life and hope forever.

## WHO'S IN CHARGE?

We who know and love the God of the Bible are prone to a particular problem in these areas. The tendency for believers is to want to use God to "crisis manage" for them. We seek principles from God which we can operate ourselves so that we don't have to suffer what others suffer. We want to hold fast to beautiful things. Mountaintop experiences which we have had, friendships which we have developed, new work done for the Lord, these things make us want to hold on to the enthusiasm which we experienced at the beginning. Thus we want from God the wherewithal so that we may avoid the down side of things. Or else we fear tragedy so much that we expect principles from the word of God to defend us. Tragedy, sickness and death should happen to others, but we expect God to give us answers as shields to avoid these things and not sense his presence in the midst of them.

But we are wrong to expect this. The promise is that God will be there with us, that he will make what we have to go through beautiful in its time, and that he will accept us into his presence forever. What we get is God, not answers independent of him, not principles for Christian living that will allow us by ourselves to fashion things the way we want them to be. We get God and, having him, we have all that we need. "All things work together for good...", says the apostle Paul in Romans 8. All things-the hard and the easy together-"work together for good for those who love God and are called according to his purposes."

Describing his own battle in this area, C.S. Lewis wrote,

I mean this sort of thing. I say my prayers. I read my book of devotion. I prepare for, or receive, the sacrament. But while I do these things, there is, so to speak, a voice inside me that urges caution. It tells me to be careful, to keep my head, not to go too far, not to burn my boats. I come into the presence of God with a great fear lest anything should happen to me within that presence which would prove too intolerably inconvenient when I come out again into my "ordinary" life. I don't want to get carried away into any resolution which I shall afterwards regret.

I want the presence of God, but I want my world to be at my beck and call. It is easy for believers to think that they can enlist the Bible, their salvation history, even God, in that endeavor. But we can't. What we get is Him.

As Solomon viewed it from a distance, he saw people who walked with the Living God, who strengthened them through pain, brought joy to them that others could not understand, and allowed them to go through birth and death, gathering and scattering. Solomon saw people who knew that they had been created for eternity and did not fear that because they had an answer to that longing also.

Solomon describes what is available to us. By the grace of God we can live that way, too, a people who are "more than conquerors."

I will close by reading a prayer by one of the Puritans which speaks eloquently of these things:

*Thou hast taught me that faith is nothing else than receiving Thy kindness; that it is an adherence to Christ, a resting on Him, love clinging to Him as a branch to the tree, to seek life and vigor from Him. I thank Thee for showing me the vast difference between knowing things by reason and knowing them by the spirit of faith. By reason I see a thing is so; by faith I know it as it is. I have seen Thee by reason and not been amazed. I have seen Thee as*

*Thou art in Thy Son, and have been ravished to behold Thee. I bless Thee that I am Thine in my Savior Jesus. Amen.*

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