

A Guide To The Reader

Pastor recommends that to obtain maximum benefit from his comments you read in full from the Bible every reference whenever one appears. Otherwise the reading of the comments is simply a skimming over the surface. They are rather designed to make you stop and meditate and even look up further references as the Holy Spirit guides you. Do pray before you read that the Holy Spirit will be your Tutor and that the time you spend will be time spent with Him.

Ecclesiastes 3

3.1. This chapter is one of the two most famous chapters in this book, the other being chapter 12. If we are thinking of the whole book as one sermon, maybe we should think of these as two “purple patches.” Excellency of speech is not for showcasing the skills of the orator, but to make the content memorable to the hearers that they might recall it effectively afterwards. We say that there is a time and place for everything, which is true. But “place” is not mentioned until verse 20 and then not in that sense exactly. Rather the subject is time and significance. There is a time for everything and a significance in its timing and in its purpose.

It is true that there are 24 hours in the day and that we have time to do everything and for everyone. It is dishonouring to the Lord to declare that we do not have enough time for everything. In that event the management of our time has to be seriously questioned before we can address what purpose the Lord has in raining down events upon us in such quick succession or, alternatively, of making significant rest times available to us. So the meaning of “time” in this passage is “appointed time” not simply “available time” though the latter is, of course, appointed by God. If we can master both the usage of time and understand the significance of the time allotted to us, we are well on the way to being well-instructed in the delightful realms of God’s providential dealings with us and to understanding the times in which we live, which is a rather more advanced subject. If we can not only understand with our minds but also with our emotions concerning God’s appointed times, that will also be a major step forward in our Christian pilgrimage. For it follows that if God has appointed a specific time for study (or anything else at all) then we should not be having half an eye on doing something else. We should be fully immersed for that time in what we are doing. This will then lead on to the divine jewel of contentment for what we are doing at any one time will satisfy us, “redeeming the time because the days are evil” (Ephesians 5.16). The scriptures also teach us that the way we use our time has an impact on unbelievers, urging us to “walk in wisdom toward them that are without (that is, without the faith), redeeming the time” (Colossians 4.5).

Again, to understand the purpose of our lives we must first understand the purpose God has for the world, and therefore for the individual members of it. It is too vast a subject to survey here. To study this subject we should begin with Ephesians 1.9 and the surrounding verses concerning “the good pleasure which he hath purposed in himself” and (in verse 11) the predestination of believers “according to the purpose of him who worketh all things after the counsel of his own will.” What becomes clear is that this purpose is fulfilled in Christ and by gathering believers in Christ into heaven. Within that framework lies the purpose of our lives.

“...That we should be to the praise of his glory, who first trusted in Christ” (Ephesians 1.12). Now it is clear that to bring all things to pass for the sake of Christ and His kingdom the Lord must manage every detail of creation and history to that end. The Saviour is “head over all things,” and Head over all things “to the church,” that is, to the sole advantage of that body (Ephesians 1.22-23).

We are ready now to begin to mould our thinking Biblically on the subject of time. This is very important, for we all live within “time” and our usage of it may well have been long conditioned before we became Christians, born-again believers. There may be some reassessment to do. Nothing occurs in the providence of God without a reason or at the wrong time. Though the world uses the expression “to be in the wrong place at the wrong time,” and we understand only too well what is meant, yet it presupposes a purely natural way of looking at things. Yet, though believers look at things in this way, they are not determinists, believing that though God predestinates, and therefore predestines, He does not do so without taking perfectly into consideration all the make-up of our natures; so that, within most parameters that we are aware of, we are free and certainly not automatons and He also expects us to pray concerning the outcome of events. This is an undeniable mystery but we need to realise this to be able to take on board how we are to react to things we wouldn’t choose for ourselves when they happen to us. This would not be an inappropriate time to re-read Hebrews 12.4-11. Times of our lives may be grouped as being seasonal. A time of childhood, youth, manhood or womanhood and old age, for example. A season of training and then of using our expertise and perhaps even of extending the bounds of knowledge. Wherever we live in the world, or at whatever time of history, this is always and everywhere the case.

3.2. It starts with birth as far as the burgeoning awareness of any of us is concerned. Of course, our history lies further back than that, much further even than the nine months of our growth within the womb. In relation to death and dying, it is precisely because “it is appointed unto men once to die, but after this the judgment: so Christ was once offered to bear the sins of many” (Hebrews 9.27-28). If any of us come away from the hospital where a dear loved one has died we notice, with some dismay, that the world is carrying on as if nothing had happened. While some are being born, some are dying. I found it quite difficult as a boy (designedly so) to be in detention while others were playing in the sunshine. The experience is shortlived to teach a sharp lesson, but of real, lasting worth. The purposes of our life are played out (worked out) in interaction with the lives of others. So the Lord has appointed it. Our experience of one situation is simultaneous with the opposite experience of another, while contemporary, in some things, with our peers. But even in our own age group where we are all growing in much the same way and learning much the same things as we grow up there may be loving homes for some and broken homes for others and so on.

We may have to start again, in some circumstances. Or what we have begun will last a while, but then we shall have to begin again some new project, or in some new appointment. Beginning again does not necessarily mean destroying the old, but it sometimes does. Society sometimes opts to reverse the building or design strategy of an earlier generation or businesses to restructure.

3.3. According to the scriptures it is a time to kill, for example, if a person is a murderer. There are things which are right for the state to authorise which no individual in his personal capacity must take upon himself to decide or undertake. In that connection not all punishment is retributive; it may rightly be designed, but not primarily designed, to restore. If we have considered, under the heading of “plucking up that which is planted,” what might also be termed “breaking down,” perhaps we might also consider the breakdown or analysis, whether fiscal or forensic or in any other sphere, with its concomitant result of presenting a balance sheet or solving a crime. It is wonderful in God to create; it is still more wonderful to re-create where first the old must be removed before that which is new can be created whole. Building up may first require dismantling and both require forward thinking.

3.4. Sad and painful times come in many ways. The Lord may appoint them to save us from carelessness in our relationships, our health or our work. The Lord appoints happy times as a foretaste of heaven and as a respite from our labours. Indeed satisfaction, if not laughter, is an inbuilt reward for work well done. Deep sadness and loss have things to teach us, but so have physical pleasure and movement.

3.5. It is probable that building stones are in mind here. There come times when the old is to be swept away en masse, after a plague or warfare for example, and complete areas rebuilt. And, of course, this may apply to us, as picture language of a totally new beginning with a decided rejection of an old lifestyle and the putting on of a new one in Christ. There are times of separation, as in war or on business; there are times to commence new relationships within the bounds of Christian liberty.

3.6. All manner of experiences are appointed to form a rounded character. Will “getting” bring pride or true wisdom - “with all thy getting get understanding” you recall that Solomon earlier wrote (Proverbs 4.7). Many a ship foundered at sea thereby bankrupting rich businessmen in years gone by. We may lose a day’s work on computer or mislay carefully compiled information. The greater the loss the more significant the testing of our character. Job’s wife bad him, “curse God, and die” (Job 2.9). What, die in sin? Die unforgiven?

There was, for Joseph, a time to lay up in store (Genesis 41.35). There is a time to reject evil lifestyles and bad habits. This summary simply awakens our minds to all the different happenings, all the different opportunities with which God is continually presenting us to yield to the moulding of our lives after righteousness. Sometime we recognise this in theory but find it much more difficult to accept in practice.

3.7. There are times when we must deliberately “rend” that is tear apart, render unfit for further use, old clothing. This is a domestic picture. Maybe we would hoard many old things, long since past their sell-by date. It is quite an emotional wrench to downsize. So the emotional pull is what is signified by “rend;” Referring to the ancient Jewish means of expressing abhorrence by rending their clothes (as in, for example, Genesis 37.29) Joel wrote, “rend your heart and not your garments” (Joel 2.13). Sewing may suggest either patching or making something new; a time to get down to new ideas or to produce new models.

We all recognise that tact requires us to be quiet at times. The psalmist wrote, “I held my peace, even from good” (Psalm 39.2) but soon afterwards came a time to speak, “while I was

musings the fire burned: then spake I with my tongue” (Psalm 39.3). Do not be hotheaded or have a rush of blood to the head. Wait for guidance or, in the psalmist’s case, inspiration. Wait for the Lord to direct our steps.

3.8. Sometimes the sterner emotions are proper; we are to love our enemies but the Bible teaches us to hate sin. Paul speaks of “perilous times” (2 Timothy 3.1) for believers, and Daniel prophesies of “troubled times” (Daniel 9.25). “Ye have not yet resisted unto blood, striving against sin” (Hebrews 12.4). This is our warfare and there are times when we would like to be excused, but it is of the Lord’s appointing. There will come a time when peace shall be taken from the earth (Revelation 6.4). There was war in David’s day and peace in Solomon’s.

3.9. “Time” remains a key factor in the remainder of the chapter but with this verse Solomon’s list comes to a close and he reflects upon what he has so truly written in a backsliding way. “What profit” is it all? The ultimate scripture answer for the believer is in 2 Corinthians 4.17-5.1, “Our light affliction, which is but for a moment, worketh for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory; while we look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen: for the things which are seen are temporal; but the things which are not seen are eternal. For we know that if our earthly house of this tabernacle were dissolved, we have a building of God, an house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens.” Solomon had lost “sight” of the things which are not seen, which is, in effect, the definition of backsliding. It would not come amiss at this point to read all the passage from Ephesians 4.6 – 5.9.

3.10. A woman’s travail is sharp but short. From a backsliding point of view life is a travail, long and unremitting, with not even the prospect of a new-born life at the end. It is a dismal picture without the Lord Jesus Christ.

3.11. “Beautiful in his (its) time.” Little things, puppies, cubs, chicks, babies are cute. A man or woman, fit and in prime condition, is beautiful. But we soon decay. Prime time is a short time, and is not to be enjoyed for its own sake else all we desire will vanish with the passing of beauty. What a telling comment is the expression, “he hath set the world in their heart.” There are many things which interest us here, but the scripture tells us that “the love of money is the root of all evil: which while some coveted after, they have erred from the faith, and pierced themselves through with many sorrows” (1 Timothy 6.10). These interests are like the weeds that choke (Matthew 13.22). “So that” does not mean “in order that” but “with the result that.” If you substitute the latter the meaning will become clear:- “he hath set the world in their heart with the result that no man can find out the work that God maketh...” These are the things which separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord (Romans 8.39), as they did in the case of the rich young ruler (Mark 10.21-22).

3.12. Here Solomon’s backsliding comes through. There is a good beyond man’s labours other than simply rejoicing and doing good. In addition to what we considered above from Ephesians 4, consider also what is written for the believer who, when he is not backsliding, will understand these things fully. “We are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus unto good works, which God hath before ordained that we should walk in them” (Ephesians 2.10).

3.13. Of course, a believer may enjoy as the gift of God all His daily mercies, but these things are simply delightful means to an end, or resting places along life's way to recover strength, not to be enjoyed simply for their own sake.

3.14. Death is irreversible. There are many conditions and occurrences which, though the Lord might do a miracle, are in effect irreversible and it is from these that we learn to trust Him and live in the fear of God. God's ways are indeed perfect and past finding out (Romans 11.33). What comes across here is that, while what Solomon is saying is true, "it is the gift of God" "whatsoever God doeth, it shall be for ever" it is undermined by his current perspective. It is true also that Job's friends also said some things that were true but what they said was irrelevant to the issue Job was facing because their whole belief system was in error. Folks of all religions or none may believe some things correctly among all the errors of their total faith or unfaith.

3.15. There is no question but that history repeats itself in principle, though not with the same characters and situations. It is also true that God requires an account from us of our past. How wonderful it is to know that "if we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (1 John 1.9). Without that knowledge the requirement of that which is past is a cause of much trepidation. Still worse, is not to face up to it. To the man who said in the parable, "Soul, thou hast much goods laid up for many years; take thine ease, eat, drink and be merry," the Lord Jesus said, "Thou fool, this night thy soul shall be required of thee" (Luke 12.19-20). Retirement out of Christ is living on the edge of danger.

3.16-17. Man's justice is often corrupt, neither does it always take everything into account. However, God's final judgment day does. There is a time there for a judicial review of every work.

3.18. We can only see our true state in the sight of God if He reveals it to us. A beast has no eternal soul, and if mankind acts as if it had no eternal soul then we are acting like the beasts. Since Adam fell man's lost estate (condition, standing, status) has not yet been restored but our relation to the beasts is still that of supremacy. Read Psalm 8.4-8.

3.19. Once the notion of man's eternal soul is taken out of the reckoning then the cynicism of this verse becomes apparent. It is true that we all die and that "nature is red in tooth and claw" but the destinies of man and beast are different; and the destinies of believers and unbelievers differ as widely as heaven from hell.

3.20. They do not all go to one place. If it is merely the grave and the disintegration of our bodies that is being taken into consideration then, within its limits, that is, of course, true.

3.21. But the spirit of man "that goeth upward" must be taken into consideration. Our spirits, our souls are invisible, so we do not know in one sense for we do not see the departure of the human spirit. Because this verse speaks of the spirit of the beast, and beasts do not have eternal souls, we must understand that this verse is only talking about breath and breathing. When breathing ceases both man and beast die. But though it is the end of a beast it is not the end of a man.

3.22. Again, at an earthly level, we shall not see the following generations. But on a spiritual level of course believers will see the glory that is to come. Nothing brings out more clearly the disparity between thinking merely about earthly things and contemplating heavenly things than this verse. The man of this world, or the believer who has temporarily allied himself with this world, can only say his works are his portion. A believer says, “the LORD is the portion of mine inheritance” (Psalm 16.5). Men of the world have their portion in this life alone (Psalm 17.14).