Lesson 3

Pg. 37-46

LESSON 3

BEAUTIFUL IN HIS TIME

Ecclesiastes 3:1-15

In this lesson we learn that God's plans and purposes rule over the affairs of this world.

OUTLINE

No one would choose a difficult time over an easy time, but everyone has some of both in this life. The challenge in life is not to eliminate the hard times, but to develop a deep confidence that there is a time and purpose for everything, that God's plans are, while mysterious, still good.

I. Some Impressions About Life
- A. How Time Affects Our Body
- B. How Time Affects Our Soul
- C. How Time Affects Our Spirit

II. Some Insights About God
- A. His Plan Is Good
- B. His Purpose Is Clear
- C. His Program Is Mysterious

III. Some Instructions About Living
- A. Don't Forfeit Enjoyment Because of What You Can't Understand
- B. Don't Forget to Be Thankful for God's Gifts to You
- C. Don't Fear Life; Fear God

OVERVIEW

Rabbi Harold Kushner wrote a book titled *When Bad Things Happen to Good People,* in which he told the tragic story of his young son's death from a debilitating disease. As a religious person, he wrestled with why God allowed such a thing to happen. He concluded one of two things must be true: Either God is all-loving, but not all-powerful (He wants to prevent disease but can't), or God is all-powerful, but not all-loving (He is able to prevent disease but won't).

The conclusion the rabbi came to was the first of the two options: God is loving but not omnipotent. God cares about us, but has decided to let the world run on its own without intervention from Him. God is not sovereign or all-powerful; He keeps His distance from the everyday affairs of this world.

After my own bout with cancer, I debated a disciple of Rabbi Kushner on the topic of suffering, and he echoed Kushner's position: We shouldn't pray to be healed because, since God has nothing to do with the cause of illness, we shouldn't expect Him to be involved in its removal.

Solomon would not agree with Rabbi Kushner's conclusions. He believed that God is sovereign over all of time and history and that nothing happens outside of His purposes—including suffering.

In this section of Ecclesiastes, Solomon offers impressions about life, insights about God, and instructions about living which touch the issues of pain and suffering in this life.

Some Impressions About Life

Solomon begins with 14 couplets—28 statements about life, 14 negative and 14 positive—which fall into three categories about time and its relationship to body, soul, and spirit (3:1-8). He mentions "time" 29 times as well as other time-related concepts such as seasons, eternity, and forever.

How Time Affects Our Body

He begins by affirming that there is a time for "every purpose under heaven" (verse 1), which certainly includes a time to be born and a time to die. And those aren't random times—they are times known by God.

When one of my grandsons was born, I remember thinking as I stood looking at him in the hospital nursery that in another room in

the same hospital a life was probably ending. Life begins and life ends; there is a time to be born and a time to die. Nurseries and morgues have a constant stream of human beings passing through them as life begins and ends. Life has its seasons.

In the same vein, there is a time to plant and a time to harvest—seasons which every farmer and every gardener knows. And there are seasons of killing and seasons of healing. Scientists tell us our body is completely rebuilt every seven years as our trillions of cells die off and are replaced. There are times to break down and times to build up. We are built up in our youth and we begin breaking down in our old age. It's the natural cycle of life.

Time definitely affects our bodies. We are born, and we die; we are built up, and we wear down; we sow, and we reap. And God is involved in all of those seasons of life. God is not outside of our lives—He is intimately involved in every aspect, even death and suffering. God is all-loving and all-powerful. If He doesn't prevent pain and suffering, it is not because He is impotent; it is because His purposes are otherwise.

How Time Affects Our Soul

Time also affects our soul, the emotional part of our life. There is a time to weep, to laugh, to mourn, and to dance. These emotions are common to every person in the world, and there is a time for each in the seasons of life we go through. At the two opposite ends of the spectrum, there is a time for weeping and a time for rejoicing. Both are in God's plan.

There are also times for affirmation and times for distancing, casting away and gathering, embracing and refraining. God is in all these emotional times as well. God is not in the good times alone, but in the hard times as well.

How Time Affects Our Spirit

The last six couplets have to do with the inner man . . . the spiritual experiences of life. We gain, we lose; we keep, we throw away; we tear, we sew; we speak, we keep quiet; we love, we hate; we enjoy peace, we go to war.

Life is a changing of seasons in the spiritual realm. We go through periods of accumulation, and then we decide to pare down. We have garage sales and start throwing or giving things away. Why? Because there are times when we have a need for both aspects of life.

Some wonder how there could be a time for hate. Jesus hated. He hated sin . . . injustice . . . corruption . . . destruction. And we need to learn to hate the same things He hated. There are times and seasons for us to be radical in our pursuit of righteousness and our abolition of injustice. We must love the sinner (for example, the abortion doctor) but hate the sin (the murder of unborn children). There is a time to love and to hate. Sometimes that translates into a time for war. We wish for peace at all times, but sometimes evil must be confronted and defeated.

Solomon is saying that all of life unfolds under the divine appointment of Providence. Nothing happens randomly or arbitrarily. There are times and seasons for everything under heaven. We may not like that fact, and certainly can't fully explain it, but it is biblical truth from the pen of the wisest man who ever lived.

How powerful would a God be who was not in control over everything? By definition, God is over all things at both ends of every spectrum and everything in between as well.

Does God promote evil? Is He responsible for sin? No! God is not the author of anything evil or wicked, but He is certainly in control of it all. His permissive will allows whatever His directive will does not cause. God does not edit out the unpleasant parts of life, for it is through trials that our faith is strengthened and our character is built. One day all suffering will be eliminated from planet earth; but until that time, we live with all the seasons of life. Our lives are lived according to His plan, not ours. He is in control of the times and seasons of our lives.

Some Insights About God

Who is this God who allows both the good and the bad in life? Solomon next answers that question with three key insights about the God who is over the times and seasons of life.

His Plan Is Good

Solomon begins by asking, in essence, "What's the point?" After all the seasons of life come and go—we build it up only to have it torn down—what profit remains? Solomon says that we become so busy with life that we fail to understand the meaning of it unless we stop and ponder this one fact: He made everything beautiful in its time. In other words, God's plan is good; everything that happens, happens for a purpose. This is the Old Testament equivalent of Romans 8:28.

We have no problem believing that the good things in life are beautiful in their time, such as meeting the love of our life. But ten or fifteen years into the marriage, we may not think things are as beautiful as they once were. We believe health is beautiful, but not cancer. We have to realize that life is life, and everything is part of God's good plan.

Consider the words of Malcolm Muggeridge, the British journalist who became a devoted Christian:

"Contrary to what might be expected, I look back on experiences that at the time seemed especially desolating and painful, with particular satisfaction. Indeed, I can say with complete truthfulness that everything that has truly enhanced and enlightened my existence has been through affliction and not through happiness, whether pursued or attained. In other words, if it ever were to be possible to eliminate affliction from our earthly existence by means of some drug or other medical mumbo jumbo, as Aldous Huxley envisaged in *Brave New World*, the result would not be to make life delectable, but to make it too banal and trivial to be endurable. This, of course, is what the Cross signifies. And it is the Cross, more than anything else, that has called me inexorably to Christ."

All the painful things that happen in life—the Holocaust, 9/11, the tragic death of a person in the prime of life—either drive us to God or away from God. Biblically, they should drive us to Him since Solomon teaches us that everything happens in its time, meaning God's plan is good.

His Purpose Is Clear

When Solomon says that God has put eternity in our hearts, it means we have a longing inside us for something more than we will ever gain from this world. Even after coming to know God, we still long to be free from the trappings of this world (Romans 8:22). Professor Walter Kaiser puts it this way: "Man has an inborn inquisitiveness and capacity to learn how everything in his experience can be integrated to make a whole. He wants to know how the mundane 'downstairs' realm of ordinary, day-to-day living fits with the 'upstairs' realm of the here-after. . . ."

St. Augustine said, "Thou has made us for Thyself, and our hearts are restless until they learn to rest in Thee." And C. S. Lewis put it this way: "Our Heavenly Father has provided many delightful inns for us along our journey, but He takes great care to see that we do not mistake any of them for home." Our hearts know the difference between a temporary and permanent home.

His Program Is Mysterious

Good and mysterious are summarized by the fact that "no one can find out the work that God does from beginning to end." No one can figure out God's plan on his own.

If you embraced Christianity thinking you would be provided the answers to all of life's mysterious and painful questions, you will be disappointed. God's plan is good and His purpose is clear, but those plans and purposes remain a mystery at some level. God is God and He doesn't owe us an answer or an explanation for what He does. The secret things belong to Him (Deuteronomy 29:29).

Some Instructions About Living

Finally, Solomon gives us three instructions about living in light of what we know about life and what we know about God.

Don't Forfeit Enjoyment Because of What You Can't Understand

Don't spend your life trying to figure out what God is doing. If you do, you'll miss the great joy that life has to offer which comes from God as a gift. I think a lot of Christians, in the sunset of their life, are going to look back and wish they had enjoyed life more. Somehow we have the idea that God expects us to work and minister diligently, and that if we're enjoying ourselves, we must not be working or ministering hard enough! If you can't enjoy life because you're hung up on what you don't understand about life . . . well, that's your fault, not God's.

Don't Forget to Be Thankful for God's Gifts to You

When I hear people complaining about their job, I want to remind them to be thankful that they have a job at all. Solomon says we ought to "eat and drink and enjoy the good of all [our] labor," which we do as a result of being able to work. Everything is a gift from God for which we ought to be thankful (1 Chronicles 29:10-15). Sometimes we get so caught up in what we don't like about life that we forget to be thankful for life itself.

Don't Fear Life; Fear God

God is in control, and His plans and purposes will stand. Instead of fearing or complaining about life, we ought to fear God; for what He decides is what will happen. We can neither add to nor take

away from God's plan, which makes Him worth fearing (respecting, honoring). The next time something about life confuses you, instead of it being a stumbling block, let it remind you that God is God and you're not. Be thankful He will never leave you nor forsake you even when you are confused and lack understanding (Hebrews 13:5).

Let the same attitude be in you that was in Christ Jesus who was treated more unfairly and painfully than anyone in history (Philippians 2:5-11). You can rejoice in all the times and seasons of your life because God makes them all beautiful in His time.

PERSONAL QUESTIONS

1. What are three ways Solomon says time affects us? What are some examples of these in your life?

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   a. Although our times are constantly changing, what stays the same?

2. Write down instances in your life where there was:

   a. A time to sow followed by a time to reap.

   b. A time to break down and a time to build up.

   c. A time to weep and a time to laugh.

   d. A time to gain and a time to lose.

   e. A time to express love and a time to express hatred.

3. List some examples of situations in which you should love the sinner yet hate the sin.

   a. Is this easy to do? Explain.

   b. Take a moment to ask God to give you the strength to love those whom you may find difficult to love.

GROUP QUESTIONS

1. Read Ecclesiastes 3:9-15 and discuss the following questions:

   a. According to the lesson, how can a God that is all-good and all-powerful allow evil to occur?

   b. What three key insights does Solomon give about God's control?

   c. Does being a Christian entitle us to the answers of life's hardest questions? Explain.

2. What are three pieces of instruction, discussed in the lesson, about living in light of all we know about God? Elaborate on each. How can we practice these in each of our own lives?

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3. Read Romans 5:3-5 and discuss the following questions:

   a. What does suffering lead to? (verse 3)

   b. What does perseverance produce? (verse 4a)

   c. What does character produce? (verse 4b)

d. What is the advantage of having hope? (verse 5)

e. Therefore, what should you do when you suffer? (verse 3a)

4. Read James 1:2-5.

a. When you encounter negative "times," what does James say you should do? (verse 2)

b. What are the advantages of the negative times? (verse 3)

c. What is the ultimate reason God allows the negative times? (verse 4)

d. What discipline should you employ when you are confused about what God has allowed? (verse 5)

DID YOU KNOW?

Ecclesiastes falls into the category of books in the Bible that are primarily written as Hebrew poetry or songs (the others being Job, Psalms, Proverbs, and Song of Solomon). Ecclesiastes 3:2-8 is written as couplets, units of verse consisting of two lines which usually rhyme, have the same meter, and contain a unity of thought. In our English Bibles, each of the seven verses contains two couplets, making fourteen in all. Among his other attributes, Solomon was a master of poetic verse. Proverbs is written in the form of (mostly) short sayings (Hebrew *mashal*, "to be like"), and Song of Solomon is written as a love poem or song.