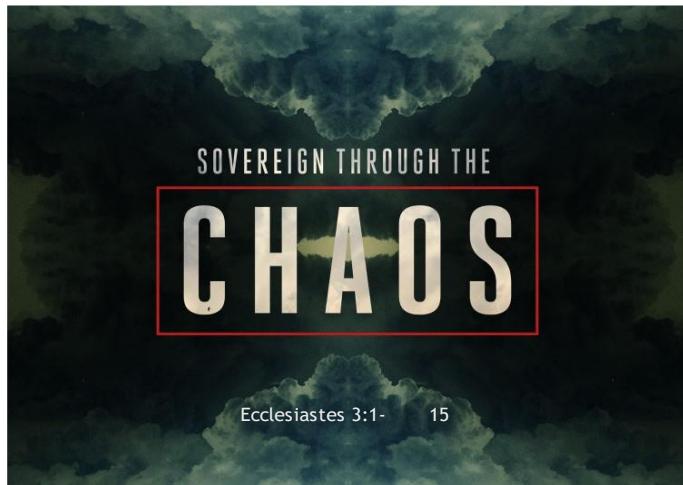


TBC SERMON NOTES & STUDY

January 10, 2021 – Dr. Bryan Ferrell, Senior Pastor
Video file: www.timberlakebaptist.org – (Or on Facebook & YouTube)



Sermon Text:

Ecclesiastes 3:1-15 (ESV)

- ¹ For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven:
- ² a time to be born, and a time to die; a time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is planted;
- ³ a time to kill, and a time to heal; a time to break down, and a time to build up;
- ⁴ a time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance;
- ⁵ a time to cast away stones, and a time to gather stones together; a time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing;
- ⁶ a time to seek, and a time to lose; a time to keep, and a time to cast away;
- ⁷ a time to tear, and a time to sew; a time to keep silence, 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 gain has the worker from his toil?
- ¹⁰ I have seen the business that God has given to the children of man to be busy with.
- ¹¹ He has made everything beautiful in its time. Also, he has put eternity into man's heart, yet so that he cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end.
- ¹² I perceived that there is nothing better for them than to be joyful and to do good as long as they live;
- ¹³ also that everyone should eat and drink and take pleasure in all his toil—this is God's gift to man.
- ¹⁴ I perceived that whatever God does endures forever; nothing can be added to it, nor anything taken from it. God has done it, so that people fear before him.
- ¹⁵ That which is, already has been; that which is to be, already has been; and God seeks what has been driven away.

Sermon Outline: (Sovereign Through the Chaos)

6 Beliefs About God's Grip That Help You Navigate a Genesis 3 World

1. It is Noticeably Absolute (vs.1-8)
2. It is Eternally Complete (vs.9-11a)
3. It is Purposefully Inexplicable (vs.11b)
4. It is Delightfully Good (vs.12-13)
5. It is Worshipfully Durable (vs.14)
6. It is Unquestionably Certain (vs.15)

(See the PowerPoint outline for the systematic and extended sermon outline)

Sermon Points: (Shepherding Group Discussion)

1. Why does the book of Ecclesiastes help us understand how to live in a crooked world?
2. Why is embracing God's sovereignty an especially important part of our understanding of genuine Christianity in a corrupt and wicked world?
3. How does knowing that God is absolutely sovereign over all things helpful to you when you are trying to make sense of this world?
4. Why will frustration be the result of those who do not understand the sovereignty of God over sin?
5. Explain why the first fifteen verses of the third chapter of Ecclesiastes are designed to help us to shift our thinking from asking "why" questions to "how" questions.
6. Why is God's sovereign control not fatalism?
7. How is the world must worst than what we think? Give some examples.
8. How did this message help you in understanding life in a fallen world?
9. Why should this be helpful in making you a durable Christian under suffering?

Deeper Study #1 (Expositional Study)

The Futile Search for True Happiness: Man's Struggle for Meaning, Purpose, and Fulfillment in Life, 1:1–3:22

A. The Answer to the Greatest Disappointment of Life: God's Ultimate Plan for the Human Race, 3:1-22

(3:1-22) Introduction: What makes human beings different from every other species of created life, and what points toward or proves that they have greater value and meaning to their existence than other orders? Is man any better than the rest of God's creatures? Or is he just another animal, like the beasts, the birds, and the fish? An abundance of people—even educated ones—believe that man is just another animal, that there is nothing special about him. What does God have to say on the subject?

“What is man, that thou art mindful of him? and the son of man, that thou visitest him? For thou hast made him a little lower than the angels, and hast crowned him with glory and honour. Thou madest him to have dominion over the works of thy hands; thou hast put all things under his feet: All sheep and oxen, yea, and the beasts of the field; The fowl of the air, and the fish of the sea, and whatsoever passeth through the paths of the seas” (Ps.8:4-8).

God says that man has been created as a higher being than animals. Of God's created beings, angels are a higher, more powerful order than human beings, and animals occupy a lower order than humans. God has given man dominion—authority, power—over the rest of His earthly creation. In addition, God has crowned man with a glory and honor that animals do not have.

This great fact gives meaning, purpose, and value to human life that no other created species possesses. Finding purpose and fulfillment in life begins with understanding that God has added value and significance to our lives that He did not bestow on any of His other creatures. In *Ecclesiastes* ch.3, Solomon teaches us that God's ultimate plan for the human race rises above all the disappointments and dissatisfactions that are so common on earth. Notice four great gifts from God that set people apart from the rest of God's creatures: This is, *The Answer to the Greatest Disappointment of Life: God's Ultimate Plan for the Human Race, 3:1-22*.

- 1. God's great gift of time and life (vv. 1-8).**
 - 2. God's great gift of work (vv. 9-11a).**
 - 3. God's great gift of eternity: Placed in the human heart (vv. 11b-14).**
 - 4. God's great gift of justice and judgment (vv. 15-22).**
- 1. (3:1-8) God's great gift of time and life.**

What makes people different, more valuable, than every other species? First, human *time* and *life* differ from that of every other created being. And though every creature of God has its purpose, God added a greater dimension to the life of man. Solomon explained it:

a. The fact stated: Everything has a time and season (v.1)

Solomon began this chapter by stating a very basic fact: *There is a time or season for everything, and also a time for every purpose or activity* in man's life on earth (his days *under heaven*).

Think about this statement for a moment; it is one that is often quoted, but seldom fully understood.

⇒ First, he was saying that man's life includes a variety of activities and experiences. Our time on earth is marked by diversity and fluctuation; it is not always the same, unchanging, monotonous routine.

⇒ Second, the Teacher was emphasizing that the variety of events and experiences in life are *ordered and appointed by God*. The specific words the author uses in this verse are key to understanding this great truth:

In simple terms, a person's life is a variety of experiences, activities, and events controlled by God. This means a most wonderful thing: God has a plan for every individual's life. Things do not happen by chance. Fate does not determine the days of our lives or what occurs in those days. God has a specific purpose and plan, and the events of our lives are in accordance with that plan.

Solomon was speaking of the mysterious, magnificent providence of God. We know very little about God's providence; neither do we know how our choices affect it. But God knows all and is in control of our lives! "Some of these changes are purely the act of God, others depend more upon the will of man, but all are determined by the divine counsel."^[1]

There is more that we do not know about God's providence than we do know. Nonetheless, as stated, God has a purpose and plan for every person's life, and all that occurs in our lives. God works all things out for good to all who love Him. And He works them out according to His timing and plan for us. This great truth brings great meaning to our lives and also sets us apart from every other creature *under the sun*.

b. The events and activities of life (vv. 2-8).

Solomon proceeds to list fourteen couplets of activities that are a part of every person's life. In presenting these experiences, Solomon used a common literary device of his day by listing two extremes (as in birth and death, mourning and dancing), which includes everything in between as well. Therefore, we understand that he was not only referring to the two specific events in each pair, but also to the entire range of actions they encompass. Some commentators note that the use of multiples of seven (fourteen sets, twenty-eight life events)—the number of completion or perfection—indicates that Solomon was referring to everything a person might experience in life, not just to these events specifically named. Note that in each pair of experiences, the words are opposites: birth and death, weeping and laughing, tearing and mending, for example. Life is a balance of positives and negatives. No human being experiences exclusively one or the other.

Solomon is stressing the point that God's plan for our lives includes ups and downs, mountains and valleys, pleasure and pain. In His infinite wisdom, God knows that we need to face problems and trials that will stir us to pray and draw closer to Him. Through such trials, we grow stronger and learn to trust Him more and more. Therefore, both good experiences and trials are needed for God to complete His purposes for us. For this reason, we must learn to accept both. Job recognized this:

"But he said unto her, Thou speakest as one of the foolish women speaketh. What? shall we receive good at the hand of God, and shall we not receive evil? In all this did not Job sin with his lips" (Jb.2:10)."

Within the appointed times and seasons, these colorful, thought-provoking pairs paint a collective portrait of the experience of life here on earth.

1) Birth and death (v.2a): there is an appointed time for every person's birth and a time for every person's death. God is the giver of life and the taker of life. Because of our sin, He has appointed a time for us to die. As Scripture says, "It is appointed unto men once to die..." (Heb. 9:27). We celebrate annually the days our children were born into this world, but we also remember with sorrow the loss of our loved ones, in particular, on the anniversary of their death.

2) Planting and plucking (v.2b): the yearly cycle of climates declares that we do not sow and reap on our own schedule, but on God's. When is the time to plant? When is the time to harvest? We plant in the spring and harvest or uproot what we planted in the fall. It is God's cycle, and He has appointed seasons for both in our lives.

3) Killing (executing justice) and healing (v.3a): when a person deliberately commits murder, a time is set for the execution of justice—for killing the murderer. God's Holy Word commands that the murderer be executed. This too has been ordered by the Lord.

Likewise, God has given us the ability to learn more about how to promote the healing of the human body. And He has given our bodies the amazing ability to restore themselves. God's plan for human beings includes both the taking of life through the execution of justice and the preserving of life through the healing process.

4) Tearing down and building up (v.3b): from the planning stages of a new building to the grand opening, the progression is an exciting experience. Nevertheless, a time comes when nearly all buildings age and deteriorate to the point that they must be demolished. Great structures, like everything else, have a life cycle. This is another example of God's process of life.

5) Crying and laughing (v.4a): these two extremes of human emotion remind us that life is filled with both tears and laughter, both sad and happy affairs. Joy and sorrow, celebrations and solemn assemblies, weddings and funerals—these are all part of the fabric of life.

6) Mourning and dancing (v.4b): see pt.5 above.

7) Casting away stones and gathering stones (v.5a): some projects require the clearing of stones from the land, such as preparing a field for planting or clearing a lot for building. Other jobs require the gathering of stones together, for example, when a person is building a house or a wall. Both projects are an experience of life, a time that God has given us.

8) Embracing and turning away (5b): at certain times, it is appropriate to display affection for others. But there are other times when it is totally inappropriate to do so. Each has its appointed season in every human being's life.

9) Gaining and losing (v.6a): whether dealing with personal finances or business transactions, each has its ups and downs. The economy fluctuates, and so do profits and losses. This reminds us that we cannot place our trust in money or investments. There are times when we give and when we suffer loss in life.

10) Keeping and throwing away (v.6b): in their youth, people generally have few possessions to cling to; therefore, they work hard to accumulate the things they need and enjoy. Years later, however, many choose to simplify their lives. They move to smaller homes and begin to eliminate those same belongings they worked so hard to accumulate earlier on. The end result is the same regardless of which stage of life a person is in: none of us can take anything with us when we die. All these experiences are a part of life—the time and seasons of life—that God has given us.

11) Tearing and mending (v.7a): there is a time to sew or mend new garments and, when those coverings have served their purpose or worn out, a time to tear them into strips or rags.

12) Keeping quiet and speaking up (v.7b): one of life's most difficult lessons is learning when to keep quiet and when to speak up. All of us know the feeling of regretting something we said. At other times we should, and must, speak up and speak out.

13) Loving and hating (v.8a): evil abounds in this sin-cursed world. When despicable acts are committed, decent people and strong governments should and do take action against the guilty parties. This righteous indignation against such vile and lawless behavior is fitting and is as much a part of life as those things that we embrace and love. God commands us to hate the evil and to love the good (Ps.97:10; Pr. 8:13; Am.5:15). Life includes both love and hate.

14) War and peace (v.8b): our necessary hatred and refusal to tolerate horrendous evil sometimes leave nations and individuals no choice but to go to war against the violator or enemy. However, war should never be launched except for the cause of justice, freedom, righteousness or peace. War and peace are all part of the equation here on earth.

These fourteen contrasts illustrate that God's plan for our lives involves a collection of diverse experiences. Opposite extremes in life—and everything in between—are controlled by the One who designs our days and years. God takes these dissimilar experiences and works them out for the good of all who love Him (Ro.8:28). He uses every experience of life to mold us into what God desires us to be. This is the first truth the Teacher imparts to us that elevates us above the rest of God's creation, that gives meaning and value to human life. Our lives are not controlled

by fate, nor do things happen by chance or coincidence. Life is controlled by the One who appoints the activities of our lives and alters their occurrence according to His plan, purpose, and schedule.

God controls all of the above and everything else that we experience. This makes us uniquely valuable, far above all of God's other creatures.

Thought 1. God has a purpose for our lives and God's Holy Word tells what His purpose is: *that we be conformed to the image of His Son, Jesus Christ.*

"And we know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose. For whom he did foreknow, he also did predestinate to be conformed to the image of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brethren. Moreover whom he did predestinate, them he also called: and whom he called, them he also justified: and whom he justified, them he also glorified" (Ro.8:28-30).

When we respond to God's call by faith and repentance, He justifies us—He declares us to be righteous *just as if we had never sinned*. As we live the Christian life day by day, God chips away from us everything in our nature that is not like Christ. He gloriously shapes us into His perfect image. One day Christ will appear, and God's marvelous work in us will be complete, and we will be like Him:

"Beloved, now are we the sons of God, and it doth not yet appear what we shall be: but we know that, when he shall appear, we shall be like him; for we shall see him as he is. And every man that hath this hope in him purifieth himself, even as he is pure" (I Jn.3:2-3).

"For our conversation [citizenship] is in heaven; from whence also we look for the Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ: Who shall change our vile body, that it may be fashioned like unto his glorious body, according to the working whereby he is able even to subdue all things unto himself" (Phil. 3:20-21).

Thought 2. God accomplishes His plan for us even when others oppose and do evil against us. When Joseph reached the end of his life, he was able to see how God had worked good from the evil that his brothers had done to him years before. Notice what he said after God's plan had evolved:

"But as for you, ye thought evil against me; but God meant it unto good, to bring to pass, as it is this day, to save much people alive" (Ge.50:20).

The word *meant* or *intended* in the above verse is the Hebrew word *chashab*, which means to plait or to weave. The word was used of braiding hair or of weaving different threads together to make a fabric. God takes all the events of our lives and weaves them together to make a beautiful

tapestry of His design. The negative experiences of our lives—the difficult and often heartbreaking times—are a part of that design. God loves us so much that He even takes the evil that ungodly people do and works the evil out for good. As we grow older and become more mature in Christ, we are able to see more clearly the extraordinary work of God in our lives. We begin to see the glorious things He fashions from our heartaches and heartbreaks. In such times, we are stirred to praise the Lord and worship Him for His amazing plan and power!

“And we know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to *his* purpose” (Ro.8:28).

“In whom also we have obtained an inheritance, being predestinated according to the purpose of him who worketh all things after the counsel of his own will” (Eph. 1:11).

“The steps of a *good* man are ordered by the Lord: and he delighteth in his way” (Ps.37:23).

“Thine eyes did see my substance, yet being unperfect; and in thy book all *my members* were written, *which* in continuance were fashioned, when *as yet there was none of them*” (Ps.139:16).

“For I know the thoughts that I think toward you, saith the Lord, thoughts of peace, and not of evil, to give you an expected end” (Jer. 29:11).

2. (3:9-11a) God’s great gift of work.

What makes people different, more valuable, than every other species? Second, God has created us with the ability to do something that is productive and beneficial both for ourselves and for others. Everything God made in His infinite wisdom has a purpose. But God’s intent for man’s work has a higher purpose. God designed man with unique characteristics and abilities to accomplish His purpose and to contribute to His world in a significant, gainful way.

a. The question: Why work hard?

Solomon addressed the same question here that he asked in ch.1:3: “What does a person gain from his or her hard work?” His previous answer to the question was this:

Man gains absolutely NOTHING of lasting value from all of his hard work here on earth. It is all meaningless, empty, and futile!

This time, when he asked the question, he considered it from a different perspective. Therefore, his answer was different. What made the difference? What transformed the toil of man from being something meaningless and vain to something that had great meaning and value? The transforming factor that revolutionizes our labor is GOD!

When we omit God from our lives, everything we do is ultimately empty. We spend our days working for money to buy food, to gain strength, and to do more work—all to earn more

money...the cycle goes on and on. When we look at our labor and toil in this light, we become nothing more than another animal, grinding away at the mill, merely filling a place on earth.

But when God is added to the equation, when God becomes the focus of our existence, our work becomes something of value and significance. It contributes greatly to our satisfaction and fulfillment in life.

Solomon spent the first eight verses of this chapter explaining that the experiences of life are worked out by God to accomplish His purposes for human life—all in His infinite wisdom and providence. Our work is one of these experiences, one of those *seasons* of life. God appoints us to:

- ⇒ plant and harvest
- ⇒ build and tear down
- ⇒ gather and scatter stones
- ⇒ sew and tear up
- ⇒ keep and throw away

All of these involve work. All of these and much more are involved in God's plan for us. Notice the transformation this perspective produces in the next five verses (vv. 10-14).

b. The need (burden): Working is the task God has given man (v.10).

When God and His appointed purpose are factored into our life's work, we can see our work as a gift from God. We should then sense a need, even a burden, to perform it (v.10). And when we recognize that we have something significant to contribute to this earth, we are able to see that God has greatly blessed us by giving us the opportunity and ability to work.

The word *travail* or *burden* can also be translated as *task*. This specific word can have a positive, neutral, or negative implication, depending on how it is used. The Holy Spirit inspired this precise word here to describe human work: when God is omitted from the equation of a person's labor, it is toilsome—a very heavy burden. But when a person's work is seen in relation to God's purpose for his or her life, it becomes a privilege and a trust from God Himself. This is what gives meaning to our work. This is what converts...

- a job into a calling
- an obligation into an opportunity
- a burden into a blessing
- a displeasure into a delight
- a secular task into a sacred trust

Additionally, when the focus of our labor is on God, we are able to see that God has equipped us with the abilities needed gifts to carry out God's call. The various skills given to us are a wonder of God's creative design. Consider the special abilities that some have...

- business or professional skills
- technical or mechanical skills
- mathematical or scientific skills
- carpentry or construction skills
- medical or legal skills
- leadership or organizational skills
- teaching or preaching skills
- musical or verbal skills
- nurturing or training skills
- artistic or creative skills

God gifts or empowers us to do the work He calls or intends us to do. He then plants within us a seed of desire to heed that calling. Whether or not we respond to the calling—whether we nurture the seed or ignore it—is up to us. Regardless, God has planted within us a need to labor and to survive. Consider what God said to Jeremiah:

“Before I formed thee in the belly I knew thee; and before thou camest forth out of the womb I sanctified thee, and I ordained thee a prophet unto the nations” (Jer. 1:5).

Thought 1. God has established work as the means by which we secure the necessities of life and even some of our desires. Thus, our need to work is God's way of supplying life's provisions for us and our families: food, clothing, shelter, care, recreation, and rest.

“And that ye study to be quiet, and to do your own business, and to work with your own hands, as we commanded you; That ye may walk honestly toward them that are without, and that ye may have lack of nothing” (1 Th.4:11-12).

“For even when we were with you, this we commanded you, that if any would not work, neither should he eat” (2 Th.3:10).

“In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread, till thou return unto the ground; for out of it wast thou taken: for dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return” (Ge.3:19).

Many of us, believers in particular, receive great satisfaction from working and then enjoying the fruits of our labor. We receive even greater satisfaction when we give to help others who are unable to provide for themselves. God designed life to be this way; therefore, He placed within us a need to work. Furthermore, he has given us abilities to use our work productively in order to contribute to the world in which we live.

When we understand that God has designed us to work and given us specific skills to perform our work, we see how much we are needed in our world. Each of us has something important to offer, which adds tremendous meaning to our lives and greatly contributes to our satisfaction.

“Let him that stole steal no more: but rather let him labour, working with his hands the thing which is good, that he may have to give to him that needeth” (Eph. 4:28).

c. The purpose: Work makes all things beautiful (satisfying and helpful) when done well (v.11).

Solomon made a closing statement on the subject of work, tying everything together he had said in verses 1-10: “He has made everything beautiful in his time” (v.11a). God takes all the events and experiences of our lives and works them out according to His plan and purpose. He makes something beautiful of our lives.

And all the experiences of our lives work together like a tile in an intricate mosaic or a thread in an exquisite tapestry. Each of us is a part of God’s larger plan. When we use the skills God has given us and do our work well, we have a part in making something beautiful with God. This sets man apart from the rest of creation. This gives great meaning and value to our lives.

All too often, people are quick to boast in their accomplishments or to take pride in the fruits of their labors without recognizing that they can do nothing without God’s help. Many proclaim, “God hasn’t given me anything; I have worked for everything I have.” A person who thinks this way ignores the fact that the health required to work, the ability to work, and the opportunity to work are all gifts from the hand of God.

The *self-made person* does not exist. Certainly, the diligent will have more and accomplish more than the slothful, but let us never forget that without God’s help and blessing, we can do absolutely nothing. We must always guard against self-sufficiency.

“Wherefore let him that thinketh he standeth take heed lest he fall” (1 Co.10:12).

“And the Lord God took the man, and put him into the garden of Eden to dress it and to keep it” (Ge.2:15).

“He becometh poor that dealeth with a slack hand: but the hand of the diligent maketh rich” (Pr.10:4).

“He that laboureth laboureth for himself; for his mouth craveth it of him” (Pr.16:26).

“He that trusteth in his own heart is a fool: but whoso walketh wisely, he shall be delivered” (Pr.28:26).

“Though thou exalt thyself as the eagle, and though thou set thy nest among the stars, thence will I bring thee down, saith the Lord” (Ob.4).

3. (3:11b-14) God’s great gift of eternity: Placed in the human heart.

What makes people different, more valuable, than every other species? Solomon presented a third difference in verse eleven: God has made human beings to be eternal. People are not like animals that live and die and give no thought to what will happen in another life. We human beings ponder and lose sleep over what will become of us after death. This is true because we were made for something more—for eternity. We were created for a greater purpose, a greater objective, not just for this life, but for what comes after it.

This is what sets the human race apart from animals. This is what gives meaning to life. People were not made only for those things *under the sun*. People were ultimately made for all that is *above the sun*—eternity! God has placed eternity in the hearts of man.

Why is this true? When God created man, He created him differently than He did every other creature:

“And God said, Let us make man in our image, after our likeness: and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creepeth upon the earth. So God created man in his own image, in the image of God created he him; male and female created he them” (Ge.1:26-27).

“And the Lord God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul” (Ge.2:7).

Human beings are made in the image of God, and God is eternal. People are given a spirit that survives the body when it dies. In other words, people are given the capacity for eternity and a link to God that no other created being received. This is why Solomon found everything this world could offer unfulfilling and empty. The hole in the human heart can only be filled with the eternal because we are eternal beings. Worldly pleasure, power, and prosperity cannot satisfy a person because the human soul was not created to be temporary but eternal, not earthly but heavenly.

a. Man’s inability to fathom God’s eternal plan (v.11c).

God has made us for eternity and given us an eternal perspective and longing, but He has not revealed to us His entire plan (v.11c). The Lord declares that “He has made everything beautiful in His time,” but He has not declared to us how He does so. He has told us that “all things work together for good” (Ro.8:28), but He has not explained to us the details of how they do. God is God—He does not owe us any explanations.

Many people are distressed because of what they do not understand about God and His ways. If God is sovereign, if God appoints the times and events of life, if God is in control, why is there

so much evil in the world? Why is there so much pain and suffering? The questions are endless. Soon they evolve into: “What kind of God would allow...?” This is where we must have faith.

Remember Jesus’ words to *doubting* Thomas after the Lord’s resurrection:

“Jesus saith unto him, Thomas, because thou hast seen me, thou hast believed: blessed are they that have not seen, and yet have believed” (Jn.20:29).

“Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen” (Heb. 11:1).

Faith, then, believes what it cannot see. We cannot find out all of God’s workings nor fully understood His plan for the world and for our lives. We are helplessly incapable of understanding them in the limitations of our flesh. Therefore, we must simply trust God with childlike faith—faith that accepts Him at His Word.

“Trust in the Lord, and do good; so shalt thou dwell in the land, and verily thou shalt be fed” (Ps.37:3).

“Trust in the Lord with all thine heart; and lean not unto thine own understanding. In all thy ways acknowledge him, and he shall direct thy paths” (Pr.3:5-6).

God’s sovereignty should comfort us and provide us a sense of security. Though things are often harsh and disturbing in this sin-cursed world, the earth is not spinning out of control. God is aware of everything that is happening. “He is not always pleased, but He is never perplexed.”

However, a day is coming when we will understand all of His works. This is the wonderful promise of God’s Holy Word:

“For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known” (1 Co.13:12).

Only in eternity will we fully comprehend what God was doing in the hours that things did not make sense. Only in eternity will we receive the answers to all of our questions. Only in eternity will we see how God wove all the various threads of our circumstances together to make something beautiful. In eternity, we will understand the Lord’s eternal plan.

“Which doeth great things and unsearchable; marvellous things without number” (Jb.5:9).

“Hast thou not known? hast thou not heard, *that* the everlasting God, the Lord, the Creator of the ends of the earth, fainteth not, neither is weary? *there is no searching of his understanding*” (Isa. 40:28).

b. Man’s present duty: To enjoy life now (v.12).

Since we are eternal beings ultimately created to live with God (*above the sun*), how, then, should we live now—here on earth (*under the sun*)? Though we were made for eternity, and God

instructs us to live with eternity in view, He desires that we enjoy and find fulfillment in this present life (vv. 12-14). Some people travel through life distressed and questioning God because of what they cannot understand about God and His ways. This is not what God intends for us. Hear and heed the counsel of the wise Teacher:

1) Be happy and do good (v.12). God wants His people to enjoy life here on earth. When Jesus walked among us, He was full of life—abundant life (Jn.1:4). He came that we might enjoy that same abundant life (Jn.10:10). Remember: eternal life does not begin when we die and go to heaven. Eternal life begins when we receive Jesus Christ as Savior. It is then that we are born spiritually and that God imparts to us the spiritual life we lacked before. Before salvation, we were spiritually dead in trespasses and sins. At the moment we are saved, we are made alive (Eph. 2:1)! We should make the most of it and enjoy life, recognizing that each day is a gift from God.

Furthermore, we should spend our days doing good. Jesus did (Ac.10:38), and we are commanded to do so as well (Gal. 6:10; Heb. 13:16, 21). The good that we do for the Lord outlives us and is a treasure that we send ahead to heaven (Mt.6:20).

2) Live day by day—eat and drink (v.13a). First, we must trust God to provide our daily bread, then we should enjoy what He graciously and sufficiently provides.

“Give us day by day our daily bread” (Lu.11:3).

“But my God shall supply all your need according to his riches in glory by Christ Jesus” (Phil. 4:19).

“Bring ye all the tithes into the storehouse, that there may be meat in mine house, and prove me now herewith, saith the Lord of hosts, if I will not open you the windows of heaven, and pour you out a blessing, that *there shall not be room enough to receive it*” (Mal.3:10).

3) Be satisfied in your work (v.13b). Solomon explained that a person’s labor does not have to be empty and unfulfilling. We are to see our jobs or vocations as God’s call, thank God for them, and work as hard as we are able. We must always do the very best we can.

“And whatsoever ye do, do it heartily, as to the Lord, and not unto men” (Col.3:23).

“For thou shalt eat the labour of thine hands: happy *shalt thou be*, and it shall be well with thee” (Ps.128:2).

4) Know that God’s work endures forever (v.14a). God is doing an eternal work in the world, and He has called us to join Him in His work (1 Co.3:9). We can be a part of something that can impact others for eternity. We should go about our daily tasks looking for opportunities to do something of lasting, unending significance.

5) Know that God’s purpose is to stir people to fear and reverence Him (v.14b). All of our activities and experiences should bring us to the place of acknowledging and recognizing Him. What does this mean? To fear God means...

- to revere Him, to show Him reverence
- to worship Him
- to stand in awe of Him
- to recognize who He is
- to obey Him
- to give Him His proper place in our lives

God's eternal work—His purpose for creating us—was to have for Himself a people who would love Him and glorify Him. This is what the redeemed believers in Christ will do throughout eternity, and this is what we should do during our days here on earth (*under the sun*). We alone, of all God's creatures, have this capacity. We alone are connected to the eternal. This brings meaning and value to our lives.

“And now, Israel, what doth the Lord thy God require of thee, but to fear the Lord thy God, to walk in all his ways, and to love him, and to serve the Lord thy God with all thy heart and with all thy soul” (De.10:12).

Thought 1. How should we respond to the truth that we are eternal beings, that God has placed eternity in our hearts?

1) First, we must make absolutely certain that we are prepared for eternity. We must prepare to meet God, and prepare to face God in judgment (Heb. 9:27; Am.4:12). We must examine ourselves, make sure we are genuinely born again (2 Co.13:5). It is of the utmost importance that we remember what Jesus said:

“Not every one that saith unto me, Lord, Lord, shall enter into the kingdom of heaven; but he that doeth the will of my Father which is in heaven. Many will say to me in that day, Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in thy name? and in thy name have cast out devils? and in thy name done many wonderful works? And then will I profess unto them, I never knew you: depart from me, ye that work iniquity” (Mt.7:21-23).

Our lives must bear witness that we have truly repented and placed our faith in Christ, that we are sons and daughters of God (Ro.8:16). There is no room for doubt. If we are plagued by doubts about our salvation, we must settle them today, because we never know what tomorrow will bring.

“Whereas ye know not what *shall be* on the morrow. For what *is* your life? It is even a vapour, that appeareth for a little time, and then vanisheth away” (Jas. 4:14).

“Boast not thyself of tomorrow; for thou knowest not what a day may bring forth” (Pr.27:1).

2) Second, we must invest our lives and resources in those things that will yield eternal dividends. Again, recall the words of Scripture:

“Lay not up for yourselves treasures upon earth, where moth and rust doth corrupt, and where thieves break through and steal: But lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust doth corrupt, and where thieves do not break through nor steal: For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also” (Mt.6:19-21).

“But seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you” (Mt.6:33).

“That they do good, that they be rich in good works, ready to distribute, willing to communicate; Laying up in store for themselves a good foundation against the time to come, that they may lay hold on eternal life” (1 Ti.6:18-19).

Someday soon, every one of us will stand before God to give an account for the kind of life we have lived (2 Co.5:10). Christ will examine us and reveal what we did with all He entrusted into our care:

- ⇒ Our time—the time utilized and the time wasted
- ⇒ Our talents—the abilities used and the abilities not used or misused
- ⇒ Our treasure—the wealth used for good and the wealth wasted or stored up
- ⇒ Our testimony—the righteous behavior and the sinful behavior we demonstrated before the world

God’s Holy Word graphically describes this somber scene:

“Every man’s work shall be made manifest: for the day shall declare it, because it shall be revealed by fire; and the fire shall try every man’s work of what sort it is. If any man’s work abide which he hath built thereupon, he shall receive a reward. If any man’s work shall be burned, he shall suffer loss: but he himself shall be saved; yet so as by fire” (1 Co.3:13-15).

Tears will be shed at the *judgment seat of Christ*:

- ⇒ Tears of joy will be shed by those who are graciously rewarded for their service to the Lord.
- ⇒ Tears of regret will be shed by those who have misused the trusts that God placed into their hands. They will have little or nothing to show for their lives—lives that were redeemed by the blood of Christ. Imagine

the great remorse and shame of standing face-to-face before the Lord Jesus *emptyhanded*. Only those things of eternal duration will be rewarded. All else will perish with this sin-cursed world.

3) Third, we must share the message of God's salvation with those who are not prepared for eternity. Our most important responsibility as Christian believers is to take the gospel to others, that they too may be reconciled with God and live eternally with Him:

"Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost: Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you: and, lo, I am with you alway, even unto the end of the world. Amen" (Mt.28:19-20).

"And he said unto them, Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature" (Mk.16:15).

"But ye shall receive power, after that the Holy Ghost is come upon you: and ye shall be witnesses unto me both in Jerusalem, and in all Judaea, and in Samaria, and unto the uttermost part of the earth" (Ac.1:8).

"And all things are of God, who hath reconciled us to himself by Jesus Christ, and hath given to us the ministry of reconciliation; [Oh! To know], that God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto himself, not imputing their trespasses unto them; and hath committed unto us the word of reconciliation. Now then we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God did beseech you by us: we pray you in Christ's stead, be ye reconciled to God. For he hath made him to be sin for us, who knew no sin; that we might be made the righteousness of God in him" (2 Co.5:18-21).

"But sanctify the Lord God in your hearts: and be ready always to give an answer to every man that asketh you a reason of the hope that is in you with meekness and fear" (1 Pe.3:15).

Eternity is a long, long time—we cannot even begin to fathom it. All of our comparisons and illustrations fall appallingly short of communicating the concept of *forever*. "Only one life will soon be past; only what's done for Christ will last."

"And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of man be lifted up: That whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have eternal life. For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life" (Jn.3:14-16).

"This is the bread which cometh down from heaven, that a man may eat thereof, and not die. I am the living bread which came down from heaven: if any man eat of this bread, he shall live for ever: and the bread that I will give is my flesh, which I will give for the life of the world" (Jn.6:50-51).

“He asked life of thee, *and thou gavest it him, even length of days for ever and ever*” (Ps.21:4).

“And many of them that sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame *and everlasting contempt*” (Da.12:2).

4. (3:15-22) God’s great gift of justice and judgment.

Once more the wise Teacher addressed the question: What makes people different, more valuable, than every other order of created life? The answer: God holds people accountable for their lives and actions.

a. The strong declaration: A day of accounting is coming (v.15).

Every individual must face God in judgment. No one is exempt. A day of accounting is coming for every person (v.15). And Scripture reveals that there will be two days of reckoning for two different groups of people.

⇒ Those who have not received Christ as Savior must face the Lord at the *great white throne judgment*. At that time, all of their sins will be exposed, and they will be separated from God forever—all because of their unbelief and their rebellion against God.

“And I saw a great white throne, and him that sat on it, from whose face the earth and the heaven fled away; and there was found no place for them. And I saw the dead, small and great, stand before God; and the books were opened: and another book was opened, which is *the book of life*: and the dead were judged out of those things which were written in the books, according to their works. And the sea gave up the dead which were in it; and death and hell delivered up the dead which were in them: and they were judged every man according to their works. And death and hell were cast into the lake of fire. This is the second death. And whosoever was not found written in the book of life was cast into the lake of fire” (Re.20:11-15).

⇒ Those who have received Christ as Savior must face the Lord at the *judgment seat of Christ*. All of us who are true believers will give an account for what we have done while living in these earthly bodies.

“But why dost thou judge thy brother? or why dost thou set at nought thy brother? for we shall all stand before the judgment seat of Christ....So then every one of us shall give account of himself to God” (Ro.14:10, 12).

“Now if any man build upon this foundation gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, stubble; Every man’s work shall be made manifest: for the day shall declare it, because it shall be revealed by fire; and the fire shall try every man’s work of what sort it is. If any man’s work abide which he hath built thereupon, he shall receive a reward. If any man’s work shall be burned, he shall suffer loss: but he himself shall be saved; yet so as by fire” (1 Co.3:12-15).

“For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ; that every one may receive the things *done* in *his* body, according to that he hath done, whether *it be* good or bad” (2 Co.5:10).

b. The tragic cause: A world of injustice and wickedness (v.16).

Solomon accurately observed something that people throughout the ages have also witnessed and reacted against: we live in a world marked by injustice and wickedness (v.16). Seldom, even in the best judicial systems, is justice fairly and consistently carried out. In every nation, in every generation, corrupt courts exist. Some are crooked because they hand out rulings based on corrupt laws. Others are corrupt because the attorneys who present the cases and the judges who occupy the benches are deceitful and unethical. It was true in Solomon’s day; it is true in ours; and it will be true in every generation that follows. Tragically, corrupt and wicked individuals are frequently placed in positions of authority. Then, whether voted in or forced upon the people, these individuals are given the critical responsibility—and the absolute authority and license—to judge *other corrupt people*. It is a vicious cycle that never changes. Nevertheless, though injustice exists, it does not go unnoticed. God takes very seriously the responsibilities of those who are appointed as agents of justice on this earth:

“Ye shall do no unrighteousness in judgment: thou shalt not respect the person of the poor, nor honour the person of the mighty: *but in righteousness shalt thou judge thy neighbour*” (Le.19:15).

“Therefore have I also made you contemptible and base before all the people, according as ye have not kept my ways, but have been partial in the law” (Mal.2:9).

c. The ominous warning: A day of judgment is coming (v.17).

In the midst of injustice and corruption, Solomon reminded himself that a day of judgment was coming for all evildoers (v.17). This is an ominous warning to every citizen of every nation: God will execute true justice on the righteous as well as the wicked. Yet, as Solomon dwelt on the matter of the unjust judges of the world, he found solace in this thought: a day was coming when...

- they would stand before God and face His scrutiny
- they would answer to God for their gross miscarriages of justice
- they would be rewarded according to their deeds

Again both the righteous and the wicked have been appointed a time when they must give an account to God. The appointment is already set:

- ⇒ Nobody can cancel it.
- ⇒ Nobody can change it.
- ⇒ Nobody can avoid it.

Every human being *must* stand before God to give an account for his or her *every* activity and *every* deed ([Ro.14:12](#)). God's records are painstakingly detailed and thorough. Therefore, we must not be deceived into thinking that some things in life slip by God or escape His attention. Instead, we should carefully heed the very last admonition of the Teacher's message:

"For God shall bring every work into judgment, with every secret thing, whether it be good, or whether it be evil" ([Eccl. 12:14](#)).

d. The needed understanding: God tests (judges) people now ([vv. 18-21](#)).

Solomon revealed an additional truth about God's judgment: not only do we face a future judgment *after* life here on earth, but in addition, God is testing and judging us *during* our lives here on earth (*under the sun*) ([vv. 18-21](#)). God is testing us *now* to clarify or shine light upon certain truths:

1) Human beings are a higher order than the animal kingdom, but we have something in common with all of God's creatures: we are mortal—just like animals ([vv. 18-20](#)).

⇒ People suffer the same fate as animals: pain in life, and then death (v.19). We are mortal beings; our physical bodies are going to die. No one escapes death. Ultimately, death catches up and lays hold of every one of us. We have breath one moment, and then we die—just like animals. Solomon's conclusion was very straightforward: if this was all there was to a human being's life, then life was indeed meaningless, empty, and unsatisfying.

⇒ People come from dust and return to dust—just like animals (v.20). This is the destiny of man's physical body. God did not create man's body from nothing: He reached down, picked up a handful of dirt, and from it crafted man's physical being ([Ge.2:7](#)). When we die, our bodies return to what they once were ([12:7](#)); they will decompose and be reduced to dust—just like animals.

2) The physical body is not all there is to human life (v.21). If we restrict and confine man's being merely to the physical, man has no advantage, no preeminence, no greater value or worth than the animals. What makes humans of greater value is that they are more than mere creatures of dust, more than just bodies with breath. Each one of us—like our Creator in whose image we are crafted—is a spiritual being ([Jn.4:24](#)). Something else distinguishes people from the rest of God's creatures:

⇒ Our spirit goes upward.

⇒ The spirit of the animal goes down into the earth. When the animal dies, its spirit—breath, existence, being—goes into the ground with its body. Not so with us. Our spirits rise upward, *above the sun*, into the presence of God where we are assigned either to eternity in heaven or eternity in hell. This, of course, is determined by whether or not a person accepts Christ as Savior during his or her life on earth (*under the sun*). So even though humans go through the experience of death as do animals, we do not have the same experience after death. God tests and judges us by sending trials across our path. When we face the trials, we are

made aware of our mortality. We are forced to face the fact that we die just as animals do. Therefore, we are aroused to cry out for God's help, and our hearts long for permanent release from all the trials and afflictions of life.

e. The appeal (v.22).

Solomon reached the following conclusion and offered this counsel to his readers (v.22):

- 1) Enjoy work and life (v.22a). People should rejoice in their lives and labor here on earth. Meaning and satisfaction *could* be found in work because God designed and planned for us to gain a deep sense of fulfillment in our daily labor.
- 2) The reasoning behind Solomon's statement is significant: the future is uncertain and life is a fleeting, one-time opportunity (v.22b).

Thought 1. There are at least three important lessons in this point—lessons that we must heed.

⇒ We should not wait for tomorrow to do something we can do today.
We have no promise of tomorrow.

⇒ We pass this way once and only once, and our journey on earth cannot be relived. We do not receive a second chance to do anything differently or better. Therefore, our eternal destiny and reward are determined in this life.

⇒ We cannot see the future to know what will happen on earth after we are gone, but we can leave behind an admirable legacy—something that will survive and outlast us (Re.14:13). By applying ourselves to wise living, the influence and efforts of our lives can continue to accomplish eternal benefits even after our physical presence on earth has ceased.

In light of all this, we should pray for the Holy Spirit to engrave upon our hearts the reality of facing God in judgment. If we were to stand before God *today* or if Jesus returned *today*, our opportunity to live for Christ would be over. With this in mind, each of us should ask ourselves: “Could I stand before God with confidence based on how I am living *today*? ”

Many of us plan to serve the Lord in the future, when it is more convenient and we have more time. Others of us plan to share Christ with a friend or loved one when the *timing is right* or when the *opportunity presents itself*. But what if death comes for the lost friend before your paths cross? What if Jesus comes?

Paul sounded the alarm for sleeping Christians:

**“And that, knowing the time, that now *it is* high time to awake out of sleep: for now *is* our salvation nearer than when we believed”
(Ro.13:11).**

Opportunities ignored can never be regained. We cannot turn back time nor relive today. We must take seriously the counsel of Holy Scripture:

“For it is written, As I live, saith the Lord, every knee shall bow to me, and every tongue shall confess to God. So then every one of us shall give account of himself to God” (Ro.14:11-12).

“And now, little children, abide in him; that, when he shall appear, we may have confidence, and not be ashamed before him at his coming” (1 Jn.2:28).

“And Enoch also, the seventh from Adam, prophesied of these, saying, Behold, the Lord cometh with ten thousands of his saints, To execute judgment upon all, and to convince all that are ungodly among them of all their ungodly deeds which they have ungodly committed, and of all their hard *speeches* which ungodly sinners have spoken against him” (Jude 14-15).

“That be far from thee to do after this manner, to slay the righteous with the wicked: and that the righteous should be as the wicked, that be far from thee: Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right?” (Ge.18:25).

“Before the Lord: for he cometh, for he cometh to judge the earth: he shall judge the world with righteousness, and the people with his truth” (Ps.96:13).

“I the Lord search the heart, *I* try the reins, even to give every man according to his ways, *and* according to the fruit of his doings” (Jer. 17:10).

“I beheld till the thrones were cast down, and the Ancient of days did sit, whose garment *was* white as snow, and the hair of his head like the pure wool: his throne *was like* the fiery flame, *and* his wheels *as* burning fire. A fiery stream issued and came forth from before him: thousand thousands ministered unto him, and ten thousand times ten thousand stood before him: the judgment was set, and the books were opened” (Da.7:9-10).

(Preacher's Outline and Sermon Bible - Commentary - Ecclesiastes, Song of Solomon.)

Deeper Study #2: (Practical Theology Study)

Read the linked article, “Trials: God’s Pathway to Growth & Grace.”

(<https://wordtruth.org/PDF/Trials%20Gods%20Pathway%20for%20Growth%20and%20Grace.pdf>). Think and reflect as you read the article on your own challenges (trials) with the political and cultural chaos that has recently impacted our Christian/conservative worldview. Make notes on how God’s sovereign work in

these trials should make a difference in reflecting upon biblical Truth. Pay particular attention to the Scriptures noted in the article.

Reflective points:

Deeper Study #3: (Exegetical Study)

3:1-9 Interlude - Is There Any Gain with Regard to Time?

- 1 For everything there is a (certain) season,
and there is a (favorable) time for every matter
under heaven:
- 2 a time to bear and a time to die;
a time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is
planted;
- 3 a time to kill, and a time to heal;
a time to tear down, and a time to build up;
- 4 a time to weep, and a time to laugh;
a time of mourning, and a time of dancing;
- 5 a time to throw away stones, and a time to gather
stones together;
- 6 a time to seek, and a time to leave lost;
a time to embrace, and a time to refrain from
embracing;
a time to keep, and a time to throw away;
- 7 a time to tear up, and a time to sew together;
a time to keep silent, and a time to speak;
- 8 a time to love, and a time to hate;
a time of war, and a time of peace.
- 9 What gain does the one who works have from making a special effort?

The section **3:1-9** is the mirror image, in its structure, of **1:3-9** :

- general assertion **3:1 1:9**
- illustration through -**individual phenomena 3:2-8 1:4-8**

■ concluding question 3:9 1:3

In the course of reading, one may understand this section as a continuation of the comments of King Qoheleth in 1:12-2:26. Verse 9 would then (as a rhetorical question) reinforce his assertion in 2:11 that there is no gain under the sun, and vv. 1-8 could be read as an illustration of his remarks on fate (*מִקְרָה* *miqreh*) in 2:14-15. The king would then be pondering here, in retrospect, the time-bound nature of his undertakings and reflections: Just like the contingencies of fate, death, and God, time also limits his power of disposition over his own life. From the king's perspective, this state of affairs would without doubt be judged negatively (*הֶבֶל* *hebel*).

As in 1:3-11, however, 3:1-9 also lacks any evaluation of the described state of affairs. Then 3:11 lets the time-bound nature of all events appear in a positive light: God “has made everything *beautiful* in its time”! Since 3:10 begins a critical revision of the king’s reflections in 1:12-2:26, it is perhaps more appropriate in the greater compositional context to understand 3:1-9 (in a second reading) as a poetic interlude corresponding to 1:3-11, “a sort of meditative pause” (Lohfink) between the reflections of “King Qoheleth” in 1:12-2:26 and those of the “wise man Qoheleth” in 3:10-4:12. May one perhaps also see in the closing of the “catalog of the times” (vv. 2-8) with “a time for peace” (*תֵּשֶׁלֶם* *et šālōm*) an indication of the end of the “Solomonic” royal travesty?

In terms of content, 3:1-9 can be understood as a continuation and expansion of 1:3-11 : if it was a question there of the possibilities and limits of human activity on the horizon of “distant ages” (*עוֹלָם* / *עוֹלָמִים* *‘olām* / *‘olāmîm*), here we now see the smaller changes of “time” (*עַתָּה* *‘ēt*) within human life. There is also here a repetition of similar things, as expressed in 1:9 : “What has been done (once) is what will be done (again).” If in regard to distant time the question was raised as to what gain people could have from *all* their efforts (1:3), now, in view of the changing of the times, the focus is on the question of what gain can be secured for people through their *toil* (3:9).

■ 1 The introductory thesis is formulated in an artful parallelism of synonyms; its members are related to each other chiastically, and the second line contains an element that goes beyond the first:

- (a) *lakkōl* (b) *zēmān*
(b') *wē ‘ēt* (a') *lēkol-hēpes* (c) *tahat haššāmāyim*

“Everything” ([הַכְלִיל]*[hak]kōl*) in v. 1a is further defined by “every matter under heaven” (*כָּל־הָאָרֶץ* *kol-hēpes tahat haššāmāyim*) in v. 1b : it is not a question here of “world events” in general, but rather, and especially, of “intentional” human activity (*עֲשָׂה* *hēpes* = “pleasure, concern, interest, wish, desire, goal, purpose, matter, business”). Through the preposition *בְּ* *l*, the “most general relationship marker” in the system of Hebrew prepositions, this is connected with its “predetermined” or “appropriate” or “favorable time” (*זֶמֶן* *zēmān* or *עַתָּה* *‘ēt*). Syntactically, in v. 1a and b we have existential statements with prepositionally added precision. They can be read in a double sense. If one accentuates more strongly the *relationship* between the two components

(nominal group and prepositional group), the stress is on the fact that the *realizability* of every plan is *limited* because it requires a favorable time (cf. the frequent translation: “Everything has its time”). If, however, one lays the emphasis more strongly on the element of the *existential* statement (as is clear in vv. 4b, 5a β, 8b), v. 1 means that in the changing of the times, the realization of *every* plan is *possible*, in spite of one’s limited lifetime (“for *everything* there is a favorable time”).

Thus v. 1 first names in a very open way the possibilities and limits of human activity in time. Then the general statements formulated here are illustrated and made more precise in the following vv. 2-8.

■2-8 These verses name 28 (4 x 7) “matters” in 14 (2 x 7) pairs. This could indicate that here “seven, the number of completion, perfection,” is supposed to be developed into “four, the cardinal points of the heavens,” in order that “the fullness of the time at human’s disposal” can be described as ordered “cosmos.” The enumerated “matters” cannot be understood throughout as examples of “advantages and disadvantages, good and bad sides” of life. Not all of the paired actions are mutually exclusive. The (in part) downright trivial character of the named “matters” does not so much reinforce the assumption of a complete “determination” of human life as to make it ironic. By contrast, the aspect of the constant changing of the “times” could play a role in the context as a limit on the durability of a possible “gain” (v. 9). The common denominator of the phenomena named in vv. 2-8 seems, nonetheless, to consist above all in the fact that favorable or unfavorable temporal circumstances both allow and limit the success of human actions. Yet the fulfillment of one’s plans are, in any case, not reliably at one’s disposal solely through one’s own efforts. According to 2:11, however, only such results can be credited as “gain” (v. 9). Yet at the same time, the adduced examples also show that the time-bound nature of human action exhibits wide variations in specific cases, and thus the degree of human freedom to decide and act is defined anew in each individual case.

■2a With “to bear” (or “to procreate”) and “to die,” the first pair of “matters” juxtaposes the highest human possibilities, collaborating in the creation of new life, with human transitoriness. For humankind, procreation and birth are, naturally, not always plannable and at one’s disposal, but they are considerably more so than death (cf. 8:8). In the world of the first readers of the text, the “time to bear” was, at the same time, for women not infrequently also the “time to die.” As a matter of fact, reproduction and death are closely related; one requires the other: “A generation goes, and a generation comes” (1:4).

■2b By contrast, the plucking up of what is planted annihilates in a meaningless way the result of planting. The reference here is probably to hostile actions (perhaps in war?), but hardly to the harvest, which one does not “pluck up,” or the pulling up of weeds that are not “planted.” Even if

the “times” of planting and the plucking up of what is planted are not at one’s disposal, they doubtless still leave one a considerably greater margin for decision and action than, say, the “time to die” (cf., e.g., Deut 20:19-20).

■3 Whereas “to kill” and “to heal” (on the latter cf. Sir 38:13), just like “to plant” and “to pluck up,” are opposite actions in intention and effect, “to break down” and “to build up” can be parts of a comprehensive course of action (say, the building or remodeling of a house), which are meaningfully carried out in succession.

■4 “To weep” and “to laugh,” “to mourn” and “to dance” are to a high degree motivated and provoked by corresponding “causes.” The corresponding “times,” however, do not *force* people to behave in accordance with them (cf. 2:2; 7:2-4, as well as 7:14; 9:8-9).

■5a In line with the *Midrash Rabbah*, the throwing away or gathering of stones is often interpreted as a metaphor for indulgence or nonindulgence in sexual activity. Here, however, one could also think just as well (if not better) of the cultivation and protection of a field (through throwing away stones from the field and then gathering them again for the building of a wall) or its ruining in war and later restoration (cf. 2 Kgs 3:19, 25), of the placing of losing and winning of stones in a board game, or the giving out and gathering in of counting stones by a trader in the buying and selling of wares.

■5b The opposition of “to embrace” and “to refrain from embracing” may express, on the one hand, the trivial state of affairs that one can always do only one of the two things at the same time (but also always does one or the other, whereas one can easily at any given time neither “procreate” [or “bear”] nor “die,” etc.). Or, on the other hand, the idea here is that there are situations in which it is indeed *possible* for a person “to embrace,” but it is *appropriate* “to refrain from embracing” (cf. 2 Sam 11:6ff.). Then here too it would be clear that the time-bound nature of human action does not fully exclude human freedom of decision, but rather challenges it.

■6 The two pairs of actions in v. 6 formulate genuine alternatives: one must either “seek” something or “leave [it] lost,” either “keep” it or “throw [it] away”—*tertium non datur* (whereas one does not necessarily have to either “throw away” or “gather”: v. 5a). The first pair refers to lost objects; the second to those present. Taken together, the two pairs of actions describe all the possibilities of dealing with objects of personal possession. For each of these possibilities, there are favorable or appropriate situations.

- 7 Tearing up (clothes) and remaining silent are sometimes interpreted as signs of mourning (in accordance with the *Midrash Rabbah*). Yet “tearing up” and “sewing together” can simply refer to a process “out of everyday domestic life.” The idea that there is an appropriate and favorable time for “keeping silent” and “speaking” is a theme often treated in the wisdom tradition.
 - 8 Whereas “love” and “hate” are largely withheld from human powers of disposition (and “love” can in time turn into “hate”), certainly for the “little people,” “war” and “peace” are conditions of their lives that are not at their disposal (cf. 8:8). For kings, however, there is a “time” in which they “go out to battle” (2 Sam 11:1), that is, a time (of year) favorable for waging war, in which, however, they are by no means compelled to wage war.
 - 9 The time-bound nature of human activity described in vv. 2-8 limits the possibilities of gain (*תְּרֻזָּה yitrôn*) for human beings (cf. 1:3; 2:11) in two respects. First, the changing of the times sets a limit on the *duration* of any possible gain—and not just in regard to “eternity” (cf. 1:3-11) but already within the limited human life span (cf. Sir 11:19; 18:25-26): “From morning to evening conditions [that is, time (*καιρός*)] change; all things move swiftly before the Lord” (18:26). Second, the *accessibility* of any possible gain is limited when the success of human activity depends on the favor or lack of favor of time and circumstance, against which the effort (*לִמְעֵן ml*) expended in the action cannot (or in any case cannot reliably) prevail.
 - 1-9 When read for itself, Qoh 3:1-9, like 1:3-11, leaves many questions open. The text, for example, still says nothing about whether and to what extent a person is in a position to know if there is or is not a favorable time for a particular project and to predict the changing of the times. Moreover, 3:1-9 reveals nothing about whether and to what degree chance, fate, or the Deity rules in the changing of the times. Finally, the text contains no evaluation of the described states of affairs. In the eyes of the king in 1:12-2:26, they are without doubt a further example of the “futility” (*לֹא־בַּפְּנֵי hebel*) of all human activity and striving. Then, however, 3:10-4:12 shows them in a different light. As a “result” of 1:3-3:9, one can ascertain that in view of time, on both the large and the small scale, it must seem (at the very least) questionable whether human beings alone, through their own efforts, can through careful management achieve a reliably available gain of unlimited duration (1:3; 2:11; 3:9).
- The statements of 3:1-8 correspond completely in their still “by no means fatalistic or deterministic in form ... to the wisdom tradition; for both ancient Near Eastern and OT wisdom teachers, a concern for the recognition of the right moment is fundamental.” It is not only of fundamental importance for agriculture and ships but also for the feast calendar. Here the

boundaries between meteorology and prophecy, astronomy and astrology are (by our present-day understanding) completely fluid.

The “time” theme seems to have had a special virulence in the Hellenistic period as an expression of the feeling of dependence on uncontrollable “fate” or “chance.” Moving against this feeling, it seems, are statements in early Jewish literature close to the time of the book of Qoheleth that point to the ordering of “time” and its determination by God. Thus, for example, Pss 104:27 and 145:15 emphasize the “timeliness” of God’s provisioning of creation with necessary food. Sirach 39:16-35 takes up this idea (cf. vv. 16, 33) and builds it up into a conception of a proper *temporal* order (cf. vv. 28-29 : מִשְׁפָּט mišpāt) of the world, in which everything has importance in its time (v. 21). According to Sirach, this order is revealed both in the realm of daily life and in the area of historical changes (cf. Sir 10:4) and also “eschatology” (cf. 48:10; 51:30 □). *I Enoch* 1-36 and 72-82 emphasize for cosmological processes that they all appear “in their time.” And according to Daniel 2 and 7, God “gives” (בֵּן yhb) the kingdoms of the world “a season and a time” (זְמָן zēman wē’iddān) of their end (7:12) and God “changes” (שְׁנָה shn haphel) the “times and seasons” (עֲדָנָה iddānayyâ wēzimmayyâ), as well as their rulers (2:21).

On this level, Qoh 3:1-8 can be read both as an expression of Hellenistic “contingency consciousness” and as an assertion of a “temporal ordering” of reality in the sense of the named early Jewish conceptions. Independent of this, however, according to v. 9 “time” limits, in any case, a person’s chances of “gain”!

3:10-4:12 Reflections of the Wise Man Qoheleth Happiness as the Highest Good Is Not at Our Disposal

3

I considered the business that God has left the sons of men to be busy with. 11 He has made everything so that it is beautiful in its time. He has put distant time into their minds, yet man cannot comprehend the work that the Deity has done from beginning to end. 12 I 3:10 understood that they bring about nothing better than to be happy and do good as long as they live. 13 And if a man in all his toil eats and drinks and enjoys what is good, this is also a gift of God! 14 I understood that whatever the Deity does is definitive: nothing is to be added to it, nor anything taken from it. The Deity has made it so that man will fear him. What happened (once before) has long since happened (again), and what will happen has 15 long since already happened (once before). And the Deity seeks what has been driven away.

And, furthermore, I saw under the sun: to the place of justice, wickedness (has penetrated), and to the place of righteousness, wickedness! 17 I thought: The Deity will judge the righteous and the wicked. For there is a time for every matter and (so also) for everything 16 that is done there. 18 I thought about human beings: the Deity wanted to set them apart and had to see that they are, for each other, (only) animals. 19 The fate of humans is indeed the same as the fate of animals, and they have one and the same fate. Both must die, and all have one and the same life spirit; and humans have no advantage over animals, for they are

all fleeting: 20 they are all going to the same place. They all come from dust, and they all return to dust. 21 Who knows then whether the life spirit of humans goes upward, and the life spirit of animals goes downward into the earth?

22 So I saw that there is nothing better than for a man to enjoy his work. For that is his portion. For who can bring him to see what will be in the future?

And again I considered the full extent of oppression that is practiced under the sun, and look: the tears of the oppressed—and they have no one who comforts them. And from the hand of their oppressors violence (goes out)—and they have no one who comforts them. 2
4:1 And I counted the dead, who have already died, as more fortunate than the living, who are still alive. 3 But better than both is he who has not yet existed, who has not (yet) seen the evil deeds that are done under the sun.

And I saw that all labor and all skillful work are affected by one person's envy of another.
4 This also is futile and a striving after wind. 5 The fool folds his hands and consumes his (own) flesh. 6 A handful of rest is better than two handfuls of labor and a striving after wind.

And again I saw something futile under the sun: 8 someone all alone, without anyone else, who has neither a son nor a brother. And all his toil has no end. Also "his eye" cannot see enough riches. And for whom am I toiling and depriving myself of the enjoyment of my goods? This also is futile and a bad business. 9 Two (have it) better than one alone, for
7 they have a good wage for their toil. 10 For if they fall, one can help his companion up. But woe to one who is alone and falls, and no one else is there to help him up. 11 Also, two are warm if they lie together (to sleep). Yet one alone—how can he keep warm? 12 And if someone overpowers one who is alone, two can withstand him. And a threefold cord is not quickly broken.

The section 3:10-4:12 offers a "re-vision" (3:10) of the comments of "King Qoheleth" in 1:12-2:26. His thoughts are corrected here above all through two viewpoints that broaden and thereby critically relativize his knowledge perspective:

First, in the investigation of the possibilities and limits of human activity, it is not sufficient to include God only tangentially in one's view (cf. 1:13; 2:24, 26). Rather, his directives must be considered fundamentally and continually (3:10-22). This provides a critical correction to the *secularism* of the king.

Second, human happiness and unhappiness depend not only on a person's own efforts (and on God) but also on relations with other people and on the social structures in which one lives (4:1-12). That they are included in the reflections here calls into question the *individualism* of the king.

This double expansion of one's horizon leads to a new answering of the question, what good can people attain and what are they to strive for in their lives (cf. 2:3)? Pleasure and enjoyment are the highest (3:22), indeed, the only good (3:12), even if they are not reliably attainable by human beings through their own efforts (3:13) and thus represent no "gain" (תִּרְוֹן: yitrōn), but rather a "portion" (חֶלֶק: hēleq: 3:22). Therefore, instead of chasing after individual gain, people should, in

addition to their work, also afford themselves rest (4:6) and enjoyment (4:8) and, together with others, strive for a “good wage” (שָׁכַר טֹב *sākār tōb*; 4:9).

3:10-22 God and the “Good”: Happiness as “Portion”

The reflections in 3:10-22 form a thematic unit, in that they bring into view the God-given conditions for human life and activity (vv. 10-11, 14-15, 17-18) and, in consideration of these conditions, answer the question of the “good” (vv. 12-13, 22). In regard to the expressions in first person singular, which in each case introduce a new step in the train of thought, three reflections or observations or insights (*rā'ah r'ā'ah*) can be distinguished from one another, the first two of which lead to two further recognitions (*yd' yd'*) or considerations (*mr bēlēb* + *bēlēb*):

v. 10 : “I have seen (*rā'ūti*) ...”

v. 12 : “I know (*yāda' tī*) ...”

v. 14 : “I know (*yāda' tī*) ...”

v. 16 : “And, furthermore, I saw (*wē' ḥodrā' ūti*) ...”

v. 17 : “I said to myself (*āmarti' ānī bēlibbi*) ...”

v. 18 : “I said to myself (*āmarti' ānī bēlibbi*) ...”

v. 22 : “So I saw (*wērā' ūti*) ...”

From the presupposition that God has made everything beautiful in its time but granted human beings only a limited understanding of his activity (v. 11), 3:10-15 derives two insights. (1) The only “good” that for humans is attainable and worth striving for consists in pleasure and enjoyment. As God’s “gift” to humankind, these are not fully within the human power of disposition (vv. 12-13). (2) At the same time, God’s work of creation limits their possibilities of changing reality through their own activity. In addition to joy over the possibilities of enjoyment, therefore, the human attitude toward life that is appropriate to creation also includes awe or fear of God, who made everything so definitively beautiful that a profound changing of reality is neither possible nor necessary (vv. 14-15).

Verses 16-21 confront the assertion of a world that is in every respect beautiful and not in need of change with the experience of pervasive injustice that penetrates the core of a righteous order (v. 16). This experience gives rise to two considerations. (1) The changing of the times also gives injustice its place and its limit in reality; it represents at the same time God’s judgment over the righteous and the wicked (v. 17). (2) Wickedness in the world comes from the fact that humans are not equal to the task for which God has “set them apart.” They behave like animals—and thus things do not go for them any different than for animals. A judgment of God over human beings beyond death is, therefore, not necessary and not to be expected (vv. 19-21).

Verse 22 can thus reinforce in closing the insight of vv. 12-13 : enjoyment is the “highest good” and the “portion” that people can attain and are to strive for at any given time in their lives.

3:10-15 God and Time

This section revisits and relates several ideas that were developed or suggested in the foregoing text. Then, in several argumentatively decisive places in the course of the book of Qoheleth, there are references to statements in 3:10-15. That shows that this section is of central and fundamental importance for the whole book.

- 10 Verse 10 quotes 1:13b almost word for word (the differences transliterated in roman type):

הִיא עֲנֵנִי רֹעֶה נָמָן אֱלֹהִים לְבָנִי הָאָדָם לַעֲנוֹת בָּזָן

רָאִיתִי אֶת־הַעֲנֵנִי אֲשֶׁר נָמָן אֱלֹהִים לְבָנִי הָאָדָם לַעֲנוֹת בָּזָן

1:13b hū' 'inyān rā' nātan 'elōhîm libnē hā' ādām la 'ānōt bō

3:10 rā' ītī 'et-hā' inyān 'āšer nātan 'elōhîm libnē hā' ādām la 'ānōt bō

A “bad business” (עֲנֵנִי, ‘inyān rā’) that “God has left … to people to be busy with” is what the “king” in 1:13, at the beginning of his reflections, calls his project “by wisdom to research and to find out all that is done under heaven.” At the end of his comments in 2:26 the “king” then spoke of people whose “life is a failure” and whom God “busies (נָמָן עֲנֵנִי nātan inyān) with gathering and heaping”—and judged not only this business but also, at least implicitly, the behavior of God as meaningless (הַבְּלִי hebel). When now in 3:10 “the business (הַעֲנֵנִי hā' inyān) that God has left [or: given] the sons of men” is again made the object of “consideration” (רָאִיתִי rā' ītī) and at the same time leaves open whether this business is bad or good, meaningless or meaningful, this already signals that what follows concerns a critical revision of the reflections of the “king” in 1:12-2:26.

- 11a The statement that God “has made everything so that it is beautiful in its time” (אֶת־הַכָּל) (עֲשָׂה יְפָה בָּעֵת, ‘et-hakkōl 'āsā yapē bē' ittō) contains two assertions: (1) God made everything, and (2) everything is beautiful in its time.

1. The idea that God “makes everything” (present tense) is also asserted by Isa 44:24 (אָنֹכִי יַהֲוֶה) (עֲשָׂה כָּל־אָלָה, ‘anōkiyahwh 'ōshehkōl; cf. Isa 45:7 : עֲשָׂה כָּל־אָלָה, 'ōsheh kol- 'elleh). Here, as in Qoh 3:11a, the “divine process of creation is … removed from a mere speaking of creation in the beginning. Just as Deutero-Isaiah … can speak of the creation of all things in his own time and even of things to come with the word בָּרָא ‘create,’ Qoheleth speaks with the more general word עָשָׂה 'āsāh ‘make’ of what God also creates and makes happen over the course of time.” In this very spirit then, the Jewish wise men in the “symposium” of the *Letter of Aristeas* (Ep. Arist. 187-294) hold the view “that God constantly effects everything” (210) and “everything is prepared and managed by God according to his will” (234). In contrast to the opinion of Epicurus “that the gods do not concern themselves with the world,” this was also the view of the Stoics: “The world

... is ruled by divine providence, and there is only one god, and that is reason, which is working and shaping in all things.” This was the view, for example, of Cleanthes in his hymn to Zeus: “No work takes place on earth without you, Deity (οὐδέ τι γίγνεται ἔργον ἐπὶ χθονὶ σοῦ δίχα, δαίμον), neither in the divine ethereal sphere nor in the sea” (ll. 15-16). “Cleanthes’ Hymn to Zeus could also have come from the hand of Ben Sira, with some minor alterations,” who is likewise convinced that God has “made all things” (Sir 43:33 : עשה יי' את הכל : 't hkl / 'sh yyy], πάντα γὰρ ἐποίησεν οὐ κύριος), indeed, that God *is* “all” (Sir 43:27 : הוו הכל hw 'hkl, τὸ πᾶν ἐστιν αὐτός).

2. The assertion that everything created by God “is beautiful [or appropriate] in its time” takes up the judgment of the original works of creation as “good” from Genesis 1 (cf. Gen 1:4, 10, 12, 18, 21, 25, and especially v. 31) and expands its frame of reference to creation in its entire temporal extent. The predicate “beautiful” (יפה yāpeh) here is by no means “more detached” than “good” (טוֹב tōb), making Qoh 3:11 “fall short of the positive judgment of Gen 1:31.” Perhaps it is supposed to interpret the “good” from Genesis 1 in the sense of the “Greek-cosmological καλός.” Moreover, perhaps the terminological deviation from Genesis 1 is also supposed to do justice to the fact that according to the primeval biblical story (Genesis 1-11), the original creation, which was “very good” (Gen 1:31) in every respect, became in the course of time “corrupt” (6:11-12) and now also contained “evil” (6:5; 8:21). By contrast, Sirach wants to maintain that even in the present experience, the works of God are all “good” (טוֹבים twbym: Sir 39:16 [: καλὰ σφόδρα], 33 [: ἀγαθά]) and “desirable” (נְחַמֵּד nhmd[ym], ἐπιθυμητά: 42:22) but must himself concede elsewhere that (“because of evildoers”) evil was also created (40:10 : על רשות נבראה רעה 'l rš 'nbr'h r'h).

Thus, with reference back to Genesis 1, Qoh 3:11a offers a theological interpretation of the time-contingent nature of all human actions and suffering, as presented in 3:1-8. Neither this statement nor the corresponding assertions in the book of Sirach exclude the idea that in the framework of what God has made beautiful in its time (1) there is room for human action and (2) for human beings not everything is “good” in the same way. That is clearly to be inferred from the broader context.

1. Qoheleth 3:1-8 shows that the works of God do not deprive human beings of every freedom but rather make available the *relative freedom* to act in changing times and circumstances. With what God creates “in its time” God gives human beings the opportunity to act (“time for ...”), without forcing them to act. The repeated admonitions and warnings in the book of Qoheleth presuppose that human beings have at their disposal a certain amount of freedom to decide and to act. On the basis of their behavior they may die “before [their] time” (כָּלֹא bēlō 'ittekā) (7:17), but also enjoy their lives “always” (הִצְלָצְלָל bēkol 'ēt, 9:8). Accordingly, in spite of its time-contingent nature, which is based on the work of God, human action is not fully “determined.”

2. God makes—for human sensitivity—both “good” and “bad” days (7:14). Within the framework of everything that God has made so that it is “beautiful” in its time (3:11), there is “nothing better than” (3:12, 22) for a man to rejoice and enjoy his life. Thus, if from God’s perspective “everything ... is beautiful in its time,” from the human perspective, nonetheless, not

everything is “good” in its time. Qoheleth 7:14 shows how a man can overcome “bad” experiences by becoming aware of the limits of his own perspective.

When read in connection with 3:1-8, v. 11a asserts that God made the world in such a way that at any given time a certain human action is “beautiful” and “appropriate.” Thus, even what from the human viewpoint is “bad” appears on the horizon of God’s whole creation activity in a “beautiful” light. And when human beings act “appropriately,” they reproduce in their own actions the “beauty” of God’s creation.

■ 11b The difference between the divine and human perspectives on perceiving reality is substantiated in v. 11 b\. On the one hand, God has “put distant time (**הַעֲזָרֶת** *hā ‘olām*) into their minds.” In view of the use of **עֹלָם** *‘olām* in the preceding context (cf. 1:4, 10; 2:16; then also 3:14; 9:6; 12:5), the term may refer here to a concept or idea of a “distant time” that extends far beyond the life of an individual human being in the direction of either the past or the future or both. On the other hand, humankind cannot find out “the work that God has done from beginning to end,” that is, “grasp” and “comprehend” it (cf. 8:16-17; 11:5 and already 1:8-11). Thus human beings can understand the idea that God made everything beautiful in its time, and they can also experience this fragmentarily and at certain points, if they are happy and enjoy their lives (vv. 12-13; cf. 5:17 : **טוֹב אֲשֶׁר יָפֵה** *tōb ‘ăšer-yāpeh*). But they cannot grasp and comprehend in every individual case how and in what sense that which God has made is “beautiful.”

Since God, according to v. 11a, made “everything,” v. 11b hardly means that human beings cannot “find out” *what* God made. Furthermore, since statements about the work of God are possible, according to v. 11a, then v. 11b is also not to be understood in the sense that human beings can know nothing at all about God’s work. Rather, it may mean that people cannot completely comprehend the work of God—if only because, first of all, it goes way beyond the temporal horizon of their possibilities of experience (cf. 1:10-11).

Verse 11b traces the possibilities and limits of human knowledge back to God. According to v. 11a, both are “beautiful” and “appropriate” for human beings. On this basis we cannot expect that God will make it possible for human beings to go beyond the limits of their creaturely knowledge.

If v. 11a can be understood as the reception of Genesis 1 on the level of Hellenistic philosophical thinking, the same could be said for v. 11b in regard to Genesis 2-3. The paradise story would then be understood here in the sense that people *cannot* go beyond the boundaries of knowledge set for them by God: the transgression of the prohibition of eating from the “tree of knowledge” (2:17; 3:3) leads them only to knowledge of their own nakedness (3:7; God’s statement in Gen 3:22 would then be understood as ironic).

In that Qoh 3:11b sets the limits of human knowledge of the work of God in terms of “creation theology,” it at least forms the basis for a strong skepticism about conceptions that assert that God conveys to human beings knowledge of God’s past and future activity in its total temporal

extent. Such conceptions were represented at the time of origin of the book of Qoheleth in the realm of prophetic literature and the continuing formation of tradition. According to Isa 46:10 Yahweh declares “the end from the beginning (מֵרֹאשׁ תִּתְחַדֵּשׁ *mērē šit' ahārīt*) and from ancient times (מִקְדָּם *miqqedem*) things not yet done.” Accordingly, prophetic texts could claim a knowledge of the future activity of God until the “end of time” (אַחֲרִית הַיּוֹם *'ahārīthayyāmîm*). Qoheleth 3:11 makes such claims seem at least questionable. Just as questionable from this standpoint, however, is any attempt to develop a “rational *theodicy*” by showing the “doctrine of the *purposefulness of creation*,” as Sirach, for example, claims for itself. Questionable in the light of Qoh 3:11, finally, is the claim of the “king” in 1:12-2:26 that he had “considered all the works that were done under the sun” (1:13-14) and could allow himself a (negative) judgment on God’s activity (2:24-26). With this claim, however, the results of his investigations also become problematic. They are appropriately revised in 3:12-13.

If human beings cannot fully comprehend the work of God (v. 11b), the statement that God “has made everything so that it is beautiful in its time” (v. 11a) cannot be “empirically verified.” It cannot be derived from experience but rather formulates a perspective—taken from tradition (*Genesis 1*)—that makes the interpretation of experience possible. In this respect there is no qualitative difference between Qoh 3:11 and the eschatological-apocalyptic perspectives of OT prophetic writings or the wisdom-cosmological perspective of the book of Sirach. In comparison with these, however, Qoh 3:11 clearly remains closer to everyday and generally accessible experiences.

■ 12-13 That it is “good” to “be happy and do good” (v. 12) and to eat, drink, and enjoy what is good (v. 13) is self-evident. When the “king” in 1:12-2:26, nevertheless, comes to a devaluation of this (presumed) good, he does so because, first, it was for him not reliably at his disposal (as “gain”) through his own efforts (2:10-11) but came “from the hand of God” (2:24-26), and because, second, it did not survive his death (2:12-23). Under the presuppositions formulated in 3:11, however, this state of affairs no longer offers any cause for a subsequent devaluation of what at first glance seems good, for if every human action and suffering depends on God’s preconditions (vv. 1-8, 11), then the value of a good thing cannot be diminished by the fact that it is not fully and freely at one’s disposal (v. 13). And if God grants a man “his life” as “his time,” then the man can experience and realize something good only in this time; what happens after his death is irrelevant to his happiness (v. 12).

■ 12 Not everything that God made “beautiful” (יפה *yāpeh*) (v. 11a) is regarded by human beings as “good” (טוב *tōb*). For them “something good” can only mean “to be happy” (לִשְׂמֹה *lišmōah*), that is, *passive enjoyment*, and “to do good” (טוב *la 'ăsôt tōb*), the *productive realization* of something good. Because of its tautological sentence structure (there is nothing good except to do [or enjoy] something good), vv. 12-13 offer no real definition of the “good” but presuppose that what is “good” for a human being is self-evident. Yet this contradicts the argumentation of the “king” in 1:12-2:26, the point of which is that what at first seems good to a person proves,

after later reflection, to be “futile” (הָבֵל *hebel*) (cf. 2:24 : ... אַיִן־טוֹב בְּאָדָם 'en-tôb bâ'ādām ... with 3:12 : ... אִין טֻוב בָּם כִּי אָם 'én tôb bâ'm kî'im ...). The argumentation of the “king” is critically relativized further by the fact that according to 3:12 something “good” for a man is achievable exclusively “in his life” (בְּחַיָּיו *bēhayyâyw*). With this presupposition, the fact that for a man neither posthumous fame nor the products of his work are reliably and continually at his disposal after his death presents no problem and gives no cause to also devalue good things achieved in life (cf. 2:12-21). Likewise, however, 3:12 also rejects positive expectations of something “good” after death on the basis of which the good things achievable by human beings in their lives could be relativized (cf. 3:21-22). When God made everything in its time (בְּעֵתֶن *bē'ittō*) beautiful or appropriate (v. 11a), it is also beautiful and appropriate for people in their striving for something good to limit themselves to the time of their life (בְּחַיָּיו *bēhayyâyw*; cf. also 3:2), and *in* their life to take advantage, without delay, of any present opportunities for pleasure and action. Access to the “tree of (eternal) life” is and remains barred for human beings, according to the will of God (cf. Gen 3:22-24).

- 13 No more than by death, however, is the good achievable by human beings devalued by the fact that all human action is dependent on God-given conditions. For these conditions are to be regarded as beautiful and appropriate (v. 11a). In this sense 2:24 is critically corrected in 3:13 :Tables

The fact that a man is not in a position “to let *himself* enjoy something good” (קָרָא אֲתִינְפְּשׁוּ טֻוב (her 'â'et-napšô tôb, 2:24), but can only “enjoy something good” (רָאָה טֻוב *râ'a tôb*, 3:13) that God gives him, is according to 3:11 (in contrast to 2:26) no longer any reason for the man to devalue achievable good as “futile.” For one thing, God-given conditions are, according to 3:11a, “beautiful” and “appropriate,” and, for another, they make the man’s own efforts (עֲמָל *āmâl*) by no means totally meaningless and worthless; rather, they make such efforts possible and set limits to their success (cf. 3:1-9, 11b). Thus the good achievable in life in the form of enjoyment and the realization of good (in the sense of a “gain”) is, to be sure, not completely and reliably at the disposal of human beings, but nonetheless to a greater degree than other goals and purposes.

Both points become noticeable in later statements of the book on enjoyment and the realization of the “good” by human beings. On the one hand, the limits of the availability of the good are recognizable when we read that it may be that God does *not* enable people to enjoy their possessions (6:2), that he makes good and bad days (7:13-14), that in their youth people are possibly in a better position to enjoy their lives than in old age (11:7ff.), and that the success of human activity always remains uncertain (11:6). On the other hand, pleasure and enjoyment can be almost excepted from the time-bound nature of all human activity stated in 3:1-8 (cf. 8:15 : “that can accompany them ... in the time of their lives”; 9:8-9 : “always,” “all the days of your fleeting life”).

If, according to 3:13, *every* person who has opportunities for enjoyment owes these to God, this rejects not only a devaluation of the possession of goods in the sense of the “king” (cf. 2:18ff.) but also any idealization of being without property (cf. 5:11-6:9). Perhaps v. 13 also indicates that actually, according to the conditions resulting from God’s work of creation, *every* person should have the opportunity to eat and to drink and to enjoy something good in all his work and toil.

■ 14 Verse 14 takes up the statements on God’s work (**רָשָׁע** ‘sh) in v. 11. Whereas v. 11 speaks of what God “has done” (perfect), v. 14 speaks of what God “does” (imperfect: general state of affairs). This makes clear that God’s work is not finished, but rather includes past, present, and future. Yet at the same time it is “enduring,” “definitive,” and—at least for human beings—“unchangeable” (**לְעוֹלָם** *lē’ olām*). This is underlined by the statement that regarding what God does, “nothing is to be added to it, nor anything taken from it.” Read in the light of v. 11a, this statement has a thoroughly positive overtone: God’s work is unchangeable because it needs no change (in the sense of improvement). Thus the “awe” of human beings before God, which is evoked by God, in addition to fear of the power and superiority of God (*tremendum*), also includes reverent recognition of the perfection of God’s work (*fascinosum*).

In the context it is clear that this “fear of God” is not the “beginning” of a “wisdom” that leads further, but rather consists precisely in the fact that human beings accept the *limits* of their “wisdom” (cf. Job 28 with v. 28): if the fear of God is the consequence or aim of God’s work, through which human knowledge is both enabled and limited (v. 11), it cannot at the same time be the “beginning” of a “wisdom” that goes beyond these limits of knowledge.

In a way similar to Qoh 3:14, Sirach also speaks of the endurance and unchangeableness of God’s works: “When the Lord created his works from the beginning, and, in making them, determined their boundaries, he arranged his works in an eternal order (εἰς αἰῶνα) and their dominion for all generations (εἰς γενεὰς αὐτῶν)” (Sir 16:26-27 □). “He has set in order the splendors of his wisdom; he is from all eternity one and the same. Nothing can be added or taken away (לֹא נִאַסֵּף וְלֹא נִאַצֵּל) ... How desirable are all his works. ... All things live and remain forever (לִעֲדָה) ...” (Sir 42:21-23 H; cf. 18:6).

If Sirach reveals here the conception of a stable and essentially unchangeable cosmos, texts like Daniel 2; 7 and Tobit 14, by contrast, develop a “universal-historical, eschatological” view of the time-related nature of God’s activity (cf. above on 3:1-9). Already pointing in this direction is the development of the use of **לְעוֹלָם** *lē’ olām* in the realm of prophetic tradition. Whereas in Psalms, for example, the predicate **מֵלֶךְ לְעוֹלָם** *mēlekh lē’ olām* is mainly applied to the activity of God experienceable in the present, in Deutero-Isaiah **עוֹלָם** *olām* becomes “the code word for God’s world and God’s activity that will survive as solely determinative in the eschaton.” “The impact of Deutero-Isaiah is most noticeable in Isa 60:15, 19-21; 61:7f.; also in 35:10; 51:11 ”: **עוֹלָם** *olām* “indicates the finality of the coming salvation or judgment.” “With the increasing development of eschatological concepts in apocalypticism, **olām** became a constant attribute of

the world beyond (cf. Dan 12:2).” By contrast, Qoh 3:14 (like Sirach) holds fast to the endurance and finality of *this* world as the creation of God.

■15 The idea that God’s work is enduring, definitive, and unchangeable does not mean, however, that there can be no changes in the world. This is made clear by v. 15, which takes up the concept of a constant repetition of similar things from 1:4-11 and interprets it theologically (cf. Gen 8:22). If v. 15b is to be understood in the sense of the translation recommended above, that God “seeks what has been driven away” (*וְיִבְקַשׁ אֶת־נִרְדָּף* *yēbaqqēš ’et-nirdāp*)—that is, repeatedly makes sure that what has happened once happens again and again (1:9)—then this sentence summarizes and combines the statements about God’s work in v. 11a and v. 14a: everything that God does is related both to “its time” (*בֶּן־עֵת* *bē ’ittō*) and to “eternity” (*לְעוֹלָם* *lē ’olām*), because, and in the sense that, God repeatedly creates the same things. Also quite sensible in the context, however, would be the interpretation of Levy (cf. Delitzsch), who regards the verbs *בְקַשׁ* *bqš* and *רָדַף* *rdp* as synonyms here and translates: “God strives again for what has (already once) been striven for,” that is, “he brings about nothing new.” Finally, with an eye to the following section, we may also hear in v. 15b the quite concrete meaning that “God seeks what is pursued” (thus □). This could then be understood in the sense that in the changing of the times effected by God, something like a “balance of justice” is realized.

(Hermeneia - Qoheleth.)