

Ecclesiastes

"Look up, Look in, Look ahead" - 3:1-22

I. Introduction

- A. "Turn! Turn! Turn! (To Everything There Is a Season)" is a song written by Pete Seeger in the late 50s and first recorded in 1959.
1. The lyrics – except for the title, which is repeated throughout the song, and the final two lines – consist of the first eight verses of the third chapter of the Book of Ecclesiastes. The song has been covered 14 times by groups all over the world, the latest in 2017.
 2. The song is special as one of a few times in pop music that a large portion of the Bible was set to music - without additional lyrics. Pop music generally ignores the Bible as words that won't "sell" - even though this song reached #1 on those same pop charts in Dec. 1965.
- B. Solomon, in addition to these words, presents three factors for his readers to consider before calling life monotonous and/or meaningless.
1. First, he saw something above (**Look up**) mankind - a God who is in control of time and who balances life's experiences - vv 1-8.
 2. Then he saw something within (**Look in**) our humanity linking us to God - He has placed eternity in our hearts - vv 9-14.
 3. Third, Solomon saw something ahead (**Look ahead**) of us - the absolute, unavoidable certainty of death - vv 15-22.

II. Look up, look in, look ahead - 3:1-22.

- A. Solomon first looks **up** and sees God orders time - vv 1-8. Without God's natural laws science & daily life would be chaotic if not impossible. In 14 statements, Solomon affirms God is working and life is **not** meaningless.
1. Birth and death; planting and plucking - v 2.
 - a) Abortion, birth control, mercy killing, and even surrogate parenthood makes humanity believe they are in control of birth and death. Solomon says otherwise. Birth and death are not accidents; they are divine appointments. God alone is in control of the timing.
 - (1) Ps. 139:13-16: God's involvement in our lives - before birth - makes us perfectly prepared for what He has for us - Eph. 2:10.
 - (2) We can't hurry or prevent our death. It is in God's time, according to His will. "*All my days are written in Your book*" - Ps. 139:16.
 - b) Jews respected the seasons; basing their calendar on it. "Plucking" = reaping or pulling up unproductive plants. Successful farmers know nature works for them only if they work with nature. "Secret of life" = learn God's principles; cooperate with and follow them.
 2. Killing and healing - v 3a.
 - a) This refers to sickness and plague, not just war or self-defense. God sovereignly permits some to die while others are healed & live.
 - b) This doesn't imply we should refuse medical aid. God uses human means and supernatural miracles to accomplish His purposes.
 3. Breaking down & building up; weeping & laughing; mourning & dancing - vv 3b-4.
 - a) All these are a regular part of life, forming a rhythm for our existence during the years God gives us. Covid has upset this rhythm!
 4. Casting away and gathering stones; Embracing and refraining from embracing - v 5.
 - a) Israeli tour guides say God gave stones to an angel, told him to toss them all over the world but he tripped over Palestine! Farmers in Israel have to clear their fields before plowing or planting. To hurt an enemy, you would fill up his field with stones.
 - b) Stones aren't good or bad; it depends on what you do with them. If your land has rocks, don't throw them away. Build something!
 - c) Embracing/not embracing = "... time to say hello or goodbye..." It can also refer to ebb and flow of husband & wife's relationship!
 5. Getting & losing, keeping & casting away - v 6.
 - a) This gives some what they believe is biblical authority for garage sales: a time to keep & a time to "cast away" = clean the house!
 6. Tearing and mending; silence and speech -v 7a.
 - a) This may refer to Jews practice of tearing one's garment during a time of grief or repentance. Most only had one, so it was big deal!
 - b) God expects us to sorrow, but not like unbelievers (1 Th. 4:13-18). We must be ready get out needle & thread & sew things back up!
 7. Loving and hating; war and peace - v 8.
 - a) Are God's people allowed to hate? The fact the next phrase mentions "war & peace" suggests Solomon had the nation in mind.
 - b) It seems there are things even Christians ought to hate - (*Rev. 2:6 - I hate the work of the Nicolaitans!*)
 8. Life is something like prescription medicine: taken alone, the ingredients may kill you; properly blended, they may bring healing.
 - a) God is sovereignly in control and has His time and purpose for everything under the sun (Rom. 8:28).
 - b) To believe this isn't fatalism. Nor does it take our freedom or responsibility. It's the **inhumanly** wise providence of a loving Father.
- B. Solomon next looks **within** and finds God placed eternity in our human hearts - vv 9-14.
1. He brings God into the picture and gains a new perspective. He asks again, "*Is this really worth it?*" He gives 3 answers to this question.
 - a) **First**, man's life is a gift from God (v. 10). In view of the trials we experience, life may seem a strange gift, but it is God's gift just the same. We wear ourselves out trying to explain life, but we never succeed. If we accept life as a gift and thank God for it, we'll have a better attitude towards anything. If we see life as a burden, we'll miss the gifts He sends our way. Outlook determines outcome!

- b) **Second**, man's life is linked to eternity (v. 11). God's plan is unfathomable. Nevertheless, God has an appropriate time for every activity. The meaning is not, "beautiful in its own way," as the song goes. Instead, *"A harmony of purpose and a beneficial supremacy of control pervade all issues of life to such an extent that they rightly challenge our admiration."*
- (1) Mankind was created in the image of God, and was given dominion over creation so we're different than His creation.
 - (2) We have "eternity (a sense of something eternal and a desire to know that significance). This explains why nobody (including Solomon) can be satisfied with his or her endeavors and achievements, or is able to explain life's mysteries.
 - (3) God accomplishes His purposes in His time, but it will not be until eternity that we **may** begin to comprehend His total plan.
- c) **Third**, our life can be enjoyable now (vv. 12-14). Solomon tells us the enjoyment of life is the gift of God. This is an important theme in Ecclesiastes & is mentioned again in chs. 3-10. He is not encouraging self-indulgence, but enjoyment of God's gifts as the fruit of our labor, no matter how difficult life may be. Life is transitory, but what God does is forever, so when we live for Him & let Him have His way, life becomes meaningful & manageable. Instead of complaining we should enjoy life & thank God for His part in it.
2. On the other hand, Solomon is not mindlessly saying, *"Don't worry, be happy!"*
 - a) He promotes faith in God, not "faith in faith" or "pie in the sky by and by."
 - b) Faith is only as good as the object of faith, and the greatest object of faith is the God. *Only He can be trusted with our lives.*
 3. Life will not be meaningless or monotonous for you if God makes you part of His eternal plan of salvation in Christ.
 - a) If you are a believer (Romans 10:9-10), you are a child of God destined for eternity with Him.
 - b) Puritan Pastor Thomas Watson said, *"Eternity to the godly is a day that has no sunset; to the wicked it is night that has no sunrise."*
 - c) The proper attitude for us is the fear of the Lord (v. 14), which is not cringing as a slave before a cruel master, but the submission of an obedient child to a loving parent. If we fear (give Him the proper place in our lives) God, we need not fear anything else!
- C. Third, Solomon looks **ahead** and sees death comes to all - vv 15-22.
1. Solomon mentioned the certainty of death in 2:12-23 and will bring the subject up several more times before the end of the book. Life, death, time, and eternity are the "ingredients" that make up our brief experience in this world, and they must not be ignored.
 - a) V.15 helps us recall 1:9-11 and gives the assurance God is in control of the "circle of life."
 - (1) The past repeats itself so "there is nothing new under the sun." But God breaks into history & does as He sovereignly pleases.
 - (2) His Son broke into our history through a miraculous birth. He died on a cross and rose again, thus conquering the "life-death circle." Because He destroyed the circle, Jesus can make believers part of a new creation that overcomes time and death.
 - b) Solomon adds a new thought here: *"God will call the past into account."* This literally says *"God seeks what hurries along."*
 - (1) Time goes by & gets away from us; but God keeps track of it & will, at the end of time, call all into account.
 - (2) This ties in with vv 16-17 where Solomon witnesses the injustices of his day and wonders why Divine judgment is delayed.
 2. Question: *How is God "in control" when there's so much evil in our world? The wicked **prosper** in sin; the righteous **suffer** for obedience.*
 - a) He is not the first to raise that question, nor will he be the last. Solomon comforts himself with two assurances:
 - (1) God has a time and He takes time for everything, including judgment. He doesn't do anything in a rush.
 - (2) God is working out His eternal purposes in and through every one of the actions of humanity, even those of the wicked.
 - b) God will judge when history has run its course, but God also is judging now.
 - (1) In the experiences of life, God is testing (sifting/winnowing) mankind. God is revealing what we are really like apart from Him!
 - (2) When we leave God out of our lives, we become animals (Ps. 32:9) who live like beasts and die like beasts. Lovely!
 - (a) He isn't saying we're on the same level. We do have two things in common: we both die & our bodies both return to dust.
 - (b) In God's image, we have an advantage in life, but in death, our advantage disappears. Except for believers (1 Cor. 15:35ff).
 - c) The Bible tells us death occurs when the spirit leaves the body (James 2:26). In v 21 He writes men and animals do not have the same experience at death. Human spirits go to God (12:7), while an animal's spirit simply ceases to exist.
 3. Solomon closes this section by reminding us to accept life from God's hand and enjoy it while we can (v. 22).
 - a) Why? Nobody knows what the future holds; and even if we did know, we can't return to life after we've died and enjoy it again.
 - b) Knowing God is in sovereign control of life (3:1), we can submit to Him and gain the *"peace that passes understanding."*

III. Conclusions

- A. Only God holds the key to all the unknown. Faith learns to live with seeming inconsistencies and absurdities, for we live by promises and faith, not by "reasonable" explanations. While we can't explain life, we all experience it, either enduring it or enjoying it.
1. Solomon calls us to accept life, enjoy it a day at a time for the number of days God has ordained you to live.
 2. We must never be satisfied with ourselves apart from God, but we must be satisfied with what God gives us to enjoy in this life.
 3. If we grow in character and godliness, and if we live by faith, then we will be able to say with Paul, *"I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances"* (Phil. 4:11). Only then will the words and thoughts of Ecclesiastes 3 in the song, Turn, Turn, Turn finally make sense.