

Book:	<i>Ecclesiastes</i>
Series:	<i>Two Ways to Live: Under the Sun or In the Fear of God</i>
Lesson 5:	<i>The Futility of Life, Part 4</i>
Text:	<i>Ecclesiastes 3:1-15</i>
Date:	<i>Sunday, February 10, 2013</i>

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Next Lesson:	<i>Ecclesiastes 3:16-4:16</i>



TEACHING TIP

This lesson will be in more of a “skeletal” format, with the audio supplement fleshing the thoughts out a bit more.

Many of the cross references in this lesson are particularly appropriate and encouraging. You may want to highlight particular references and have people in the class ready to read them when you get to them during the lesson.

Just a reminder of our current context: we’re “exploring the darkness” of chapters 1-6, considering this theme—**life merely lived “under the sun” is futile**. In these chapters, this sobering reality is driven home by:

- the ceaseless cycle of existence (1:1-11)
- the emptiness of pleasure (2:1-11)
- the limitations of wisdom (1:12-18; 2:12-17)
- the frustrations of labor (2:18-26)
- the elusiveness of life (3:1-15)
- the bitterness of misfortune (3:16-4:16)
- the disappointment of wealth (5:10-17; 6:1-9)
- the finiteness of humanity (6:10-12)

*Colonial Hills
Baptist Church*

Key



= Teacher Information

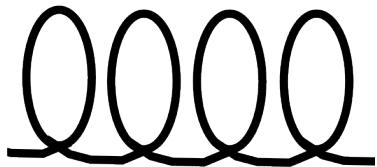


= Discussion Starter

INTRODUCTION

Illustration: In Ecclesiastes 1:1-11, life was portrayed as a repetitious and pointless cycle. In 3:1-8, life is pictured as an endless back-and-forth of activity.

1:1-11 – a ceaseless cycle



3:1-8 – an elusive rhythm



While 3:1-8 sounds more rhythmic to our ears, in the grand scheme of finality, it is no better than the futility of 1:1-11.

Derek Kidner meditates on these verses and concludes that it presents humanity as “dancing to a tune, but not of our own making.”¹ These verses deal with our perception of and planning for the future, and remind us that even our best planning may go haywire, because we may not pick the “right time.”

Illustration: I had a friend who traveled to Europe only to arrive there and receive news that a family member had suddenly died and that he needed to return to the States. We recognize the “bad timing” of his plans, and we frequently express our own frustration with the elusiveness of life in the phrase, “It couldn’t have happened at a worse time.”

And so it is that our perception of and planning for the future further substantiates that **life merely lived “under the sun” is futile**. But, that’s not the only way to live. This passage, like our discussion on labor in 2:18-26, guides us out of the one worldview and into the other. We will be confronted with the elusiveness of life, but we can follow the guidance of this passage to avoid pointlessness and discover peace, even as we plan. This text guides us via three progressive reflections.

EVERY ACTIVITY HAS AN APPOINTED TIME (vv. 1-8).

“Everything” and “every purpose” = every activity “under heaven”


“Season” = “appointed time” (cf. Esther 9:27, 31; Nehemiah 2:6)

“Time” = “appropriate/proper/suitable time” (cf. Deuteronomy 11:14; Ezra 10:13; Job 39:1; Psalm 1:3; 104:27; Ecclesiastes 8:5; 9:12; Ezekiel 30:3)

Illustration: Our use of the word “season” (i.e., baseball season, grilling season, winter season, pollen season, etc.) is being used even more broadly here.

Summary: every activity on earth has an appointed time.

And yet, even as we meditate on that foundation, we notice some disconcerting cracks about this timing.

 What are some frustrations about these “times” in verses 1-8? [open discussion](#)

1. **The timing can seem redundant.**

It inexorably repeats itself, even as we saw in chapter 1. In light of our pursuit for permanence and fulfillment, such redundancy offers little relief.

2. **The timing can seem random.**

It can appear unpredictable, unexpected, and uncontrollable (e.g., we can’t plan when to weep/laugh/go to war).

3. **The timing can seem ruthless.**

It goes back and forth, from the one to its opposite; no sooner do we do something than we have to undo it.

Illustration: So, we “build up” a building, etc. only to “break [it] down” after a little more time; we nurse a baby calf to full health only to slaughter is a few years later; etc.

At other times, the rhythm skips a beat, like a bad heart, and leaves us feeling short of breath.

THAT APPOINTED TIME ELUDES US (vv. 9-11).

“The problem is not that life refuses to keep still, but that we see only a fraction of its movement and of its subtle, intricate design.”²

Illustration: So, a farmer who thinks its time to harvest is confronted by the weather which disagrees; a businessman who awaits the time to “get” and “keep” from a business venture, bitterly experiences instead a time to “lose” and “cast away”; a young couple sadly discovers that the “time of birth” will not follow the “time of conceiving”; the “time to weep” is followed by another “time to weep” and there is no “time to laugh”; etc.

4. *The timing can seem ruling.*

It’s like a dictator, never consulting us. We seem bound by each season, and we can only respond to the march of time. Unbidden change controls us; we do not control it.

Illustration: The historian recognizes the appointed nature of the “times” of life when he says, “History repeats itself.” Our seasonal calendar depicts the appointments of life, for spring follows winter, which follows autumn, which follows summer, which follows spring and always has. Even our daily calendar proves this observation, for the sun rises and sets every 24 hours, and the earth continues her rhythmic rotation and orbit. And every workplace philosopher can organizer his/her life experience into its own seasonal categories as Solomon did in these first 8 verses.

Transition: This sometimes redundant, sometimes random, seemingly ruthless, always ruling march of time never halts. We see enough of a pattern to recognize an appointed time, but whenever we try to schedule it, it eludes us.

1. *Our plans are burdensome (vv. 9-10).*

Solomon repeats the phrase he used in 1:13 when he says in verse 10, “I have seen the travail [lit. business], which God hath given to the sons of men to be exercised in it [lit. troubled by it].” As mankind attempts to labor “under the sun” and find “profit,” the appointed but elusive nature of life frustrates him, and the implied answer to the rhetorical question of verse 9 is that man gains nothing. Instead, it is a burdensome thing for him to plan, when he cannot see what tomorrow holds.

2. *God’s plans are beautiful (v. 11a).*

In stark contrast stand the plans of God. With complete knowledge of the “beginning” and the “end” of all things (cf. Psalm 90:4; Isaiah 46:9-10; 2 Peter 3:8), He has decreed for “everything” to happen at the right time—yes, even “His time.” Therefore, from the Creator’s perspective, life is not elusive, but “beautiful” (Isaiah 55:8-9).

Kidner—“Instead of changelessness, there is something better: a dynamic, divine purpose, with its *beginning* and *end*. Instead of frozen perfection there is the kaleidoscopic movement of innumerable processes, each with its own character and its period of blossoming and ripening, *beautiful in its time* and contributing to the overall masterpiece which is the work of one Creator.”³

3. *God’s plans are blurred (v. 11b).*

Yet, those very plans, beautiful in the eyes of their Originator, are blurred to us. God has “put eternity” (NKJV, NASB, NIV, ESV)⁴ in our hearts, so that we can sense an appropriateness to life’s timing and are convinced that

there is meaning and significance even if it eludes us. However, we are still unable to “find out the work that God maketh [i.e., what God has ordained] from the beginning to the end.” And so, in the vernacular, we wrestle with trying to “figure out what God’s will is” in a particular situation, especially when our previous decisions seemed to go awry.

Kidner—“We catch these brilliant movements, but even apart from the darkness interspersed with them, they leave us unsatisfied for lack of any total meaning that we can grasp.”⁵

Illustration: As we try to discover the right time in life, we are like someone who is nearsighted, inching and feeling our way along a fresco. We are able to see enough to recognize something of its quality, but are never able to stand back enough to view it as its Creator does.⁶



Application: How have you personally felt like life eluded you? *open discussion*

Transition: We know that every activity has an appointed time, and yet that particular time eludes us. So, how do we live with such a difficult tensions? The answer is faith.

THIS TENSION IS SOLVED BY FAITH (vv. 12-15).

With the phrase “I know” (vv. 12, 14) Solomon offers two faith-based solutions that will help us navigate through the evasiveness of life.

1. **Trust God’s goodness (vv. 12-13).**

Three times in verses 12-13, Solomon uses the word “good,” and he also repeats the common phrase “gift of God.” Solomon “knows” that “there is nothing better” (NKJV, NET, ESV, NASB, NIV) for mankind than (1) “to rejoice, and to do good in his life” (v. 12) and (2) “eat and

drink, and enjoy the good of all his labor” (v. 13). Both of these objective clauses (i.e., “I know that [verse 12]...and also that [verse 13]”) teach us how to actively trust in the goodness of God.

a. **By heartily obeying God’s will (v. 12)**

In spite of the elusiveness of life, there is one thing we can count on: God is pleased with the one who does good and blesses his choice of obedience (cf. Ecclesiastes 2:26). The phrase “do good” is repeated in Psalm 34:4 (“Depart from evil and do good”) in conjunction with the fear of God (v. 11) and Psalm 37:3 (“Trust in the Lord and do good”) in conjunction with faith in God (cf. Ecclesiastes 8:12-13; 9:2; 12:14).

The preceding command “to rejoice” and the following qualifier “in his life” (or throughout his lifetime) demonstrate the desired joyfulness and thoroughness of such obedience. In New Testament language, “Whatsoever ye do, do it heartily, as to the Lord and not unto men, knowing that of the Lord ye shall receive the reward of the inheritance; for ye serve the Lord Christ” (Colossians 3:23-24).

b. **By gratefully enjoying God’s gifts (v. 13)**

While life is evasive, God’s goodness is not. As we saw in our previous lesson on labor from 2:18-26, God alone is the Source both of man’s food (i.e., “to eat”) and his fulfillment from that food (i.e., “to enjoy”). So, to the one who is rightly oriented towards Him, living in the fear of God (i.e., the one who is rejoicing and doing good, v. 12), God admonishes, “Eat, drink, and enjoy the good [fruit] of your labors” (v. 13). After all, these fruits are “the gift of God” (Psalm 104:14f) and we should gratefully accept them. As God Himself confirmed in Matthew 7:9-11, our Heavenly Father “loves to give good things to them that ask Him” (cf. James 1:17).

Application: Belief in the goodness of God is a crucial aspect of the fear of God. Without it, we'll interpret the evasiveness of life as divine indifference, at best, or as divine cruelty, at worst. Understanding that God's will, at its most basic level, is to command and honor obedience, we at least have a place to start in making our plans. And when those very plans come crashing down around us, the reality that God is good and giving encourages us to maintain our commitment to obedience and affirm our faith in His purposes (cf. Job 1:8, 21-22; Psalm 84:11-12).

So, believers who have learned to answer all of life's difficulties with "God is good all the time" (Psalm 119:68) are not living in denial, but are truly walking by faith (e.g., consider how Asaph wrestled with that catechismal answer and found it to be sufficient in Psalm 73).



How have you experienced that God "is good and doeth good"? *open discussion*



Discuss how the principle of God's "appointed time" figured in the life of Jesus (Galatians 4:4; John 7:1-9; 7:25-31; 1 Corinthians 4:5). *open discussion*



What does Romans 8:28-30 assure us is the climax of God's goodness even when the elusiveness of life has removed all other (apparent) goodness from a situation (cf. James 1:2-4)? *"being conformed into the image of His Son" or being "glorified"—this is always His best purpose! What goodness, indeed!*



Trace and discuss Asaph's journey from cynicism to confidence in God's goodness throughout Psalm 73. *open discussion (to review, visit <http://ow.ly/1RVkph>)*

2. **Trust God's sovereignty (vv. 14-15).**

Throughout the ages, religious people have analyzed the evasiveness of life and concluded either (1) that God is in control but not good, or (2) God is good but not in control.

In this passage, Solomon rejoices to recognize that both are unchanging realities. God is both good and sovereign, all the time. Notice three details about God's sovereignty.

a. **God's sovereignty is confirmed (v. 14a).**

Solomon writes in verse 14, "I know that whatsoever God doeth, it shall be for ever." The One who knows the beginning from the end (Isaiah 46:10), who inhabits eternity (Isaiah 57:15), has established His will, and it cannot be thwarted (Daniel 4:35). He takes counsel with no one, nor is accountable to any (Ephesians 1:11). Therefore, we know that whatever happens, it has occurred within the omniscience and decree of God (Lamentations 3:37; Amos 3:6).

b. **God's sovereignty is comprehensive (v. 14b).**


Verse 14 also records, "nothing can be put [or added] to it [i.e., what God does], nor any thing taken from it." God has not overlooked any detail or been absent from any situation. As His knowledge is all-inclusive, so His control is all-invasive. Life may elude us, but God's sovereignty does not!

c. **God's sovereignty is comprehensible (vv. 14c-15).**

We can consider this point under two headings. First, we can clearly understand what God's sovereignty is designed to teach us: "God doeth it [i.e., exercises His sovereignty], that men should fear before Him" (v. 14c). When finiteness is confronted with infinity, it can only submit itself in humble fear (Jeremiah 5:22). How kind God is, though, to teach us this response by confronting us with His sovereignty and our insufficiency, because this is the very response that "concludes the whole discussion" (Ecclesiastes 12:13-14).

Second, we also can understand how God's sovereignty teaches us to fear Him: "Whatever exists now has already been, and whatever will be has already been; for God will seek to do again what has occurred in the past" (v. 15).⁷ The idea here seems to be that "the government of God...does not change; His creative as well as His moral ordering of the world produces with the same laws the same phenomena."⁸ As we study history—both personally and earthly—we see that underlying the elusive patterns of life is the unshaken and unimpeded sovereignty of God.

Application: In the New Testament, James 4:13-17 reminds us to make our plans with "God's will" in mind.⁹ If we ignore His sovereign will, the elusiveness of life will frustrate us incessantly. But, when we plan with faith in the constancy of God's will, the failings of our plans become contrasting testimony to the faithfulness of God's plans.

 How does Proverbs 3:5-6; 16:9 harmonize the elusiveness of life and the sovereignty of God in our decision-making and planning? *It encourages us that if we are living rightly oriented to God (i.e., "in the fear of God"—trusting Him fully, leaning not to our own understanding, acknowledging Him in all our decisions), we can simply make the best decisions possible, and God will "direct our steps." Therefore, when the elusiveness of life frustrates our plans, we recognize in that the sovereignty of God directing our steps. Decision-making "in the fear of God," then, can indeed be filled with peace and joy. We don't have to fear making decisions, for the good sovereignty of God is our protection.*

CONCLUSION

In Jeremiah 29:11, the goodness and sovereignty of God converge in beautiful encouragement, "'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 [or hopeful] end.'" So, while life may elude us, the future evade us, and our plans reap the consequences, we have the confidence of knowing that our God is good and sovereign, and we can rest in that assurance.

ENDNOTES

¹ Derek Kidner, *The Wisdom of Proverbs, Job, & Ecclesiastes* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1985), 38.

² *Ibid.*, 38-39.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ “HALOT 799 s.v. עולם 5 and THAT 2:242 suggest that the term refers to an indefinite, unending future: ‘eternity future’ or ‘enduring state referring to past and future’ (see also BDB 762 s.v. III עולם 2.i). In this sense, the noun עולם functions as a metonymy of association: ‘a sense of eternity,’ but not in a philosophical sense (see J. Barr, *Biblical Words for Time* [SBT], 117, n. 4). This approach is supported by three factors: (i) the recurrence of עולם (‘eternity’) in 3:14, (ii) the temporal qualification of the statement in the parallel clause (‘from beginning to end’), and (iii) by the ordinary meaning of the noun as ‘eternity’ (HALOT 798–799 s.v. עולם). The point would be that God has endowed man with an awareness of the extra-temporal significance of himself and his accomplishments (D. R. Glenn, ‘Ecclesiastes,’ *BKCOT*, 984). This is the most frequent approach among English versions: ‘the timeless’ (NAB), ‘eternity’ (RSV, MLB, ASV, NASB, NIV, NJPS), ‘a sense of time past and time future’ (NEB), and ‘a sense of past and future’ (NRSV)” (NET Bible note #14 in 3:11).

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ Summary from *Ibid.*, 39.

⁷ “‘God repeats what has already occurred’: שֶׁבַח functions as a metonymy of effect (i.e., to repeat), and אֲתֵיגְדָלָהּ is a metonymy (i.e., that which has occurred). This fits the context and provides a tight parallel with the preceding line: ‘That which is has already been, and that which will be has already been’ (3:15a) parallels God seeks [to repeat] that which has occurred [in the past].’ This is the most popular approach among English versions: ‘God restores that which has passed’ (Douay), ‘God seeks again that which is passed away’ (ASV), ‘God seeks what has passed by’ (NASB), ‘God seeks what has been driven away’ (RSV), ‘God seeks out what has passed by’ (MLB), ‘God seeks out what has gone by’ (NRSV), and ‘God is ever bringing back what disappears’ (Moffatt).” An alternative option is: “‘God will call the past to account’ [cf. 12:14]: שֶׁבַח functions as a metonymy of cause for effect (i.e., to hold accountable), and אֲתֵיגְדָלָהּ is a metonymy of attribute (i.e., the past). This approach is adopted by several English translations: ‘God requires that which is past’ (KJV), ‘God will call the past to account’ (NIV) and ‘God summons each event back in its turn’ (NEB)” (NET Bible note #27 in verse 15).

⁸ Delitzsch quoted in John F. Walvoord, Roy B. Zuck and Dallas Theological Seminary, *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures* (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1985), Ec 3:14–15.

⁹ Our passage presents a balance here between man doing what God has willed (i.e., God’s sovereignty), and man doing what he pleases nonetheless (i.e., men’s responsibility). Cf. NET Bible notes #2, 4 in 3:1—the phrase “every purpose” refers to an activity that a men “delights in” or “purposes.”