

Experiencing the Word - Change

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Have you noticed that Ecclesiastes 3 is read at New Year, and at funerals, and then, only 3:1–8. At these moments of beginning and ending, we seek comfort, perhaps, in remembering that change is the one of very few constants in life, and that resisting change is futile, or vanity. Here is a reading of Ecclesiastes 3:1–8, the most familiar part of this enigmatic book, through the lens of 'change'. It is not an exhaustive study, more an imaginative wondering. In a book known for its fatalistic cry that 'all is vanity', human effort a chasing after the wind, I search for hope, for optimism. I think I have found some, but I am willing to accept that it might not be the Teachers', it may be that I brought my own. Come wonder with me.

'For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven' (Eccl 3:1). Humans must therefore discern what time it is, now. Whether we take the pairs in Ecclesiastes 3:1–8 at face value or as symbolic, metaphoric, allegoric, humans must discern what time it is, now, and determine an appropriate response.



The list starts with birth and death. The literal birth and death of each of us is out of our control, birth especially. Figuratively, however, births, deaths, beginnings, endings, life instigated or terminated – how many situations came to mind for you in the seconds it took to read that sentence? Births and deaths meet us in many ways, every day. We are called on by life to discern whether now is a time for starting something new, or a time for bringing something to an end. Hebrew poetry names two things in order to conjure up for the audience all things between them ('heaven and earth' means 'everything'). So the further question of this first pair might be: are we in a time for sustaining life as it is? Because 'birth and death' doesn't only mean start or finish, it means the breadth of life in between.

Births and deaths are profound moments of change. But the sustaining of life as it is, is not a choice for the static, or stationary: even sustaining life is movement, is change. This list is a reminder of the dynamic nature of life, always changing. Humans must, in each moment, discern what time it is now, what change is taking

place, and how will we respond, for resistance is vanity, is chasing after the wind.

Before we even get to our response, however, how does one discern what time it is, now? That may be a question only answered in the living. But if you follow the prose that surrounds this reflection on time in Ecclesiastes, the Teacher may seem to suggest that it doesn't really matter. It seems to some scholars that the Teacher (the name given to the author of this book) has little faith in human capacity to discern the time or season, let alone determine the appropriate response¹. Further, if God has set the times and seasons in motion, to play out as they will, does a human even have a choice to make on their moral, ethical, response to life?

The Teacher is quite persistent in the rest of chapter 3:

- 'whatever God does endures forever', and nothing can be added or taken away (3:14)
- 'that which is, already has been; that which is to be, already is' (3:15)
- 'the fate of humans and the fate of animals is the same; as one dies, so dies the other', thus 'humans have no advantage' (3:19)
- 'all are from the dust, and all turn to dust again' (3:19)
- there is nothing better for humans to do but to enjoy your work; to eat, drink, be merry (3:22, 13)

Is, then, Ecclesiastes fatalistic, pessimistic, at best brutally realistic, as scholars have found the book to be? Or is there more to Ecclesiastes than a negative picture of humanity?

I am going to skip to the end of the list of pairs now: there is:

**'a time to love, and a time to hate;
a time for war, and a time for peace' (3:8).**

This pair of pairs seems to list a positive, a negative, a negative, a positive, with a reversal in which some have found a punchline drawing attention to 'peace'.²

I am more interested in the way the structure establishes a frame for the entire list with 'birth' at the beginning and 'peace' at the end. As Towner observes³, this may be a profoundly hopeful statement that their opposites, 'death' and 'war' do not have the last word, in the end. Ecclesiastes with an element of optimism, then? And allowing for some hope and optimism might shape our reading of the whole with nuance not allowed when treating the book as nothing but 'vanity'.

1 John J. Collins. Introduction to the Hebrew Bible. MN: Fortress Press, 2004, 522.

2 W. Sibley Towner. 'The Book of Ecclesiastes', New Interpreter's Bible Commentary Volume V, Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1997 (265–360), 306.

3 Towner, 'Ecclesiastes', 306.

Ecclesiastes does return again and again to 'vanity', to the idea that humans may as well eat, drink, and be merry, because what else is there but 'chasing after the wind'? The Teacher does appear to take an intentionally alternative stance to the Hebrew Wisdom presented in the book of Proverbs.

Proverbs praises wisdom, and the personified Wisdom. With hope, Proverbs encourages humans to learn, to seek understanding, with faith in their capacity to understand. To learn, to grow, to move with change.

But if all is vanity, a chasing after the wind, why bother learning anything, why seek to grow – why change anything? Is that really what the Teacher intends their audience to take from Ecclesiastes?

I wonder if this meditation on time and season and its glimpse of hope, is a window to the Teacher's purpose. I wonder if Ecclesiastes in fact asks us not to give up self-determination and the attempt to discern a moral response to our current circumstances? Does Ecclesiastes exhort humans to trust in time and season as a gift, to trust in change and look for the sign of life that change inherently is?

Of course Ecclesiastes is pushing back at the Proverbs perspective. But remember I mentioned Hebrew poetry's presentation of two so as to present a whole breadth? What if, together, Proverbs and Ecclesiastes provide balance and breadth in the teaching of wisdom? Both an affirmation to seek wisdom, knowledge, understanding, and also not to think you know it all, because who is God? Only God. The wise see, fools walk in darkness, and all die, in the end. So, eat, drink, enjoy what life has to offer, and for the rest – trust God.

Is this a profound call to trust in the seasons, in the times, in life's dynamic flow, growth, and change as a gift that keeps us alive? Consider 'planting' and 'plucking up', for example. Is 'plucking up' reaping what is sown? They're not opposites, then, are they, but both part of the natural, dynamic, process of change that is life. Both plucking and planting are hopeful, life-sustaining actions.

Or consider 'a time to kill, a time to heal'. It might be that this refers to capital punishment and medical intervention, as some scholars suggest ⁴. Or could 'kill' be slaughter for food? Self-defence or defence of others – taking life to preserve it? I wonder. ⁴

I mentioned the so-called 'reversal' in structure that we find in verse 8, placing peace last in the list, to complete the bookends with 'birth' at the beginning, to hold the collection of pairs between them. For this to be considered a 'reversal', however, we must categorise the elements of the pairs as opposites, as either

4 Towner, 'Ecclesiastes', 305.

good or bad.⁵ And that imposes judgements the Teacher does not include.

If 'love' is good, 'hate' is bad; 'war' is bad, 'peace' is good, the order in which they are listed reverses from one pair to the second. But is this list as simple as pairs of good and bad, opposites between which a spectrum is held? If we are to categorise the items in the list as 'good' and 'bad', the ordering within the pairs changes at several points, which takes the sting out of the supposed 'reversal.' The order does not matter, if the items are not, after all, the point.

Further, before the final two pairs, we have one pair that is ambiguous on the question of good and bad. 'Silence' and 'speaking out' (3:7) can each in their use be helpful or harmful choices: for each of these, most clearly and least controversially of all the items in the list, there is an appropriate time. Does this pair, with the lack of judgement for any item on the list from the Teacher, suggest that a 'good / bad' dichotomy is a false imposition on this passage?

Is the list instead not so much about the alternatives themselves, but a reminder of, and an invitation to trust, the constantly changing circumstances of life as held (not controlled) by God? The movement, the dynamic growth of life requires change, and our response to that change, so why resist? Why not simply live?

The refrains of 'all is vanity' and 'chasing after the wind' might then remind us not of the inability of humans to discern a morally appropriate response, but rather the inability of humans to control the circumstances, to stop the movement of time and season. This is how, the Teacher reminds their audience, God has set life in motion,⁶ with times, seasons, constant change.

You may have come across the sayings, the ones that go something like, yesterday I was clever and sought to change the world, but today I am wise and seek to change myself. The world, life, will always be changing, that is its nature. We cannot resist, for that is vanity, that is the chasing after the wind. We can, however, change ourselves. I think the Teacher might after all hope that humans can discern what time it is now, and respond. We can't stop death, or war, but we can trust that, as all is held within the embrace of God, it is life and peace that have the first and final word. And although we cannot understand how that will be, it is not ours to know. That is God's. The wisdom of Ecclesiastes, the realistic and perhaps, after all, hopeful, teaching of Ecclesiastes, is the reminder of who is God and the liberation humans experience when we acknowledge it isn't us. Rather than a fatalistic resignation,⁷ could the Teacher be suggesting it is liberating to eat, drink, enjoy life's moments, as they change, and we grow through the changes?

5 As Collins situates them, Introduction, 522.

6 Though Towner (304) finds that the Teacher does not make such a claim for God, I am reading it as an implication of the Teacher's claim, for example, of 'what God does' as enduring for ever.

7 Collins, Introduction, 522-3.

A prayer for New Year, inspired by Ecclesiastes 3

'Present for every season'⁸

Ecclesiastes 3:1–13

as one year ends and a new one begins,
we mark the turning of time and season with thanks and remembering

we give thanks for the lives born this year,
and pray for your presence with parents and carers of children

we remember the people who died this year,
and pray for your presence with the sick and dying

we give thanks for all kinds of seeds planted this year,
for your presence with those who plant and nurture, sow and reap

we remember all that came to an end this year,
in good time or too soon; and we pray for healing and peace

we give thanks for things built – homes, businesses, communities, relationships,
and we pray for your presence with those who build

we remember the things that were dismantled this year,
and we pray for your presence with all who feel bereft

we give thanks for the good times this year,
and for those with whom we laughed, rejoiced, delighted

we remember the times we wept this year,
and those who comforted us, and let us comfort them

we give thanks for the songs, the dances, the poems, of this year,
and for the artists who enrich our community, showing us who we are

we remember the laments of this year,
and we pray for your presence with all who mourn

we give thanks for our bodies, with which we embrace life and each other,
and pray for wholeness and strength for each other and ourselves

we remember the times we've had to hold back this year,
and we pray with hope for our coming together again

we give thanks for curiosity and wonder, for all we've learned this year,
and pray for your presence with teachers in every guise

we remember the things we've had to let go this year,
and pray for courage to endure cocoons so as to grow new wings
and fly

we give thanks for the menders, repairers, restorers,
and pray for your presence with wounds and stitches still healing

we remember the rips, tears,
breaks of this year, and we
pray for forgiveness all round

we give thanks for silence that has helped us to hear,
we pray for no more of the silence that exacerbates injustice

we give thanks for the stories, wisdom,
experience we hold, and we pray for
discernment in using our voice

we give thanks for love,
to give and receive, and
we pray for friends for
the lonely

we remember the times we've hated this year,
righteous rejection of injustice and unhelpful blaming and shaming

we give thanks for your peace that we do not
fully understand, so must keep learning by living it

we remember the battles we have fought this year,
and pray for your presence as we continue the struggles
of climate change, for Black Lives – which matter –
with responses to the Covid, and with recovery
from fire and flood, storms and drought*

in every season,
with every
turning, you are
with us, you are
listening; Thank
you for your

presence
through this
year that has
ended, thank
you for your
presence
into the year just beginning. Amen.

*please adapt these final concerns to specifics of time and place when
you pray this prayer

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