

Living the Dash

Finding Meaning . . . Under the Sun, Part 9

Ecclesiastes 3:1-8

Discussion Guide

Main Idea:

God has given each person an allotted time to live. God orchestrates everything, sustains all, and does it all in the right time. King Solomon uses poetry to illustrate and describe the generalities of life. He also points out that this all occurs under heaven. It is all part of God's plan in the time He has gifted you to live.

Discussion Points:

For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven (Ecclesiastes 3:1).

- What does this verse indicate about God's character?
- How does this encourage you as you live through different seasons and experiences in your life?
- How does this verse teach us about God's sovereignty and His authority in our lives?

Solomon uses pairs of polar opposites to illustrate his point in a poetic way. Reread *Ecclesiastes 3:2-8* before answering the following questions.

- Which set or sets of opposites strike you the deepest and why?
- How are God's and life's truths reflected in this poem?
- Why does God allow polar opposites in life?

Your life is full of both appointments with God, as well as filled with unpredictable events.

- Why would God want you to make the best use of your time?
- How does redeeming your time glorify the Lord?
- Knowing that you can't control everything, in what ways does the reality of 'divine security' deliver peace in stressful times?

Discussion Guide Cont.

Gospel Connection:

Having your sins forgiven through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ provides the restoration for a right relationship with God. That relationship is a source of peace through hard times and affords us the means for redeeming our time and living an upright life.

Practical Implications:

Think: Am I living as one who lives for and follows God, the orchestrator and sustainer of all things?

Pray: Ask God to give you peace and guidance as you live through the polar opposites of life, that you may seek Him and please Him in every season.

Do: Don't waste the appointments God made for you and remember that you can't control everything in the unpredictable moments. Trust God through every change.

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Finding Meaning . . . Under the Sun, Part 9

Ecclesiastes 3:1-8

Several months ago I was sent a copy of a poem that I tucked away in my files. The poet was struck by the fact that inscribed on a tombstone is the person's year of birth and then his year of death separated by a little dash, and that brief dash represents his entire life. The poem reads:

I read of a man who stood to speak
At the funeral of a friend
He referred to the dates on the tombstone
From the beginning to the end
He noted that, first came the date of birth
He then spoke of the following date with tears
But he said what mattered most
Was the dash between those years
For that dash represented all the time
His friend had spent on earth
And now those who loved him most
Knew what that little line was worth.
For it mattered not, how much he owned,
The cars, the house, the cash
What matters most was how he lived
And how he spent his dash.ⁱ

That is a pretty insightful thought.

If you will turn to the *Book of Ecclesiastes*, Solomon has written a poem about life as well. He describes in general terms all that can happen in the space of that little dash, which represents your life and mine. In **chapter 3:1**, you are introduced to the world's most famous poem on the subject of time which represents life.ⁱⁱ

For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven
(Ecclesiastes 3:1).

When you hear these opening lines, if you are old enough, you are not thinking about Solomon, you are thinking about Pete Seeger and the Byrds singing, "Turn, Turn, Turn." Their song popularized Solomon's poem whether people knew about Solomon or not. Their song copied all but six words right from ***Ecclesiastes chapter 3***. In fact, Seeger would later send a portion of his royalties to Israel.ⁱⁱⁱ Evidently he acknowledged that it was Israel's former king who wrote the original lyrics.

All about Time

Solomon is obviously focused on the subject of time. The word, ***time***, will appear 28 times, plus once in his opening comment in ***verse 1***.

The poem is composed of fourteen pairs of opposites. This poetic device is called merism, where each phrase couples together polar opposites, such as birth and death, weeping and laughing, sewing and reaping.^{iv} And the idea is to suggest the totality of life, birth and death, sewing and reaping, and everything in between.

But the ultimate goal of Solomon is not pessimistic here. He will write in ***verse 11***, that God is in charge of every season – ***He has made everything beautiful in its time*** (Ecclesiastes 3:11). You could render that word ***beautiful*** as

fitting or suitable. He has made everything suitable for the time; He fits everything together in His ultimately beautiful design.^v It might not suit us at the time, but it is suited for and fitting into His purposes.

You might also notice that Solomon writes in *verse 1* that there is a time for every matter *under heaven*. Instead of writing *under the sun*, this phrase is more positive, in fact, Solomon will write (in chapter 5:2) that *God is in heaven*. It is as if Solomon is letting us know right off the bat that everything that happens in this time-bound universe – including your life – is under the authority and plan of God who rules in and from Heaven. So the title of this poem could be, “God has Designed your Dash”. The good, the bad, the sad, and the ugly - the totality of the life you live is in His control. This includes your first breath in life and your last; that is Solomon’s first couplet. Notice *verse 2*:

A time to be born, and a time to die
(Ecclesiastes 3:2).

These are the bookends of life.^{vi} Your birth certificate and your death certificate. You know the day when you were born, and if you have girls you celebrate that day for an entire month. But you are not exactly sure when you are going to die. But God does. He has already determined the length of your dash. And because of that, the Psalmist made it clear that we should **number our days** – keep alert to the passing of time – *in order to present to God a heart of wisdom* (Psalm 90:12).

I read an advertisement the other day for a Personal Life Clock on which you can set a date and time in the future and it then ticks backwards. You can put in the “target date” for your death, how long you hope to or think you will live, or maybe the date of your retirement and then it simply ticks down the seconds, hours and even shows the days.

So a couple weeks ago I bought this Personal Life Clock to keep me accountable to number my days. It cost less than 20 bucks. I received it in the mail last week, and I followed the

directions, adjusted all the settings, and then typed in my target date of how long I’d hoped to live. I pressed start and it started flashing the word, “Error”. I didn’t know if that was a sign from God. I might’ve stretched that target date a bit too far!

Solomon is not just reminding us that death is an appointment from God, he’s actually reminding us of the amazing truth that you didn’t even choose the date when you were born – that moment when you sucked in your first breath and let out your first cry of absolute frustration for having been so rudely interrupted. You had nothing to do with any of that. In fact, the fertilization of that egg which became you had nothing to do with any decision you made.

Think about it – Solomon reinforces here that you are alive by God’s eternal determination, planning, and design, which means you are not a mistake, you are not a medical experiment; you are not a lucky turn of events; and you are not an accident, an afterthought, or an act of fate. The fact that you are alive is proof that you happen to be a part of His eternal, breathtaking, beautiful plan for the ages and ages to come – and this is just the beginning.

And get this, you happen to be alive because God chose for you to be alive now! In this generation. This is where you fit in. God considers your life to be beautiful – fitting – perfectly suited in His grand scheme. And the plans He has for you are only going to get better!

Now, between your birth and your death there are going to be many different experiences or seasons of time, and Solomon layers them out in this poem.

Notice another couplet in *verse 2*, the last part:

*A time to plant, and a time to pluck up
what is planted* (Ecclesiastes 3:2b).

There are seasons for sewing and seasons for reaping, and we learn to cooperate with God’s designs in nature.

One author suggested that we need to cooperate as well with the seasons of our own lives as God cultivates in us lessons of faith where He wants to see fruit.^{vii}

Now, *verse 3* – the first couplet, reads:

A time to kill, and a time to heal
(Ecclesiastes 3:3).

The word for **kill** is not the typical word for murder, which we are forbidden to do. The word Solomon uses here might refer to capital punishment or self-defense.

Solomon continues in *verse 3*:

A time to break down, and a time to build up (Ecclesiastes 3:3).

There are seasons when you tear down that building and rebuild a new one. Demolition crews arrive and take stuff down, then construction crews arrive to build stuff up. That is all a part of life.

In *verse 4*, Solomon writes, there is:

A time to weep, and a time to laugh
(Ecclesiastes 3:4).

Hopefully, seasons of weeping will be outnumbered by seasons of laughter, but Solomon simply tells us that we will experience plenty of both of them. There is a time to cry – when tears flow freely.^{viii}

Our tears might flow freely just as *Jesus wept* at the graveside of Lazarus (*John 11:35*); just as Job suffered the loss of his children and his health, we read, his *eyes poured out tears to God* (*Job 16:20*).

Solomon is expressing the legitimacy of both crying and laughing, and a wise person doesn't run from either of them.^{ix}

Along that same line, the last couplet in *verse 4* reads:

A time to mourn, and a time to dance
(Ecclesiastes 3:4).

How many Christians have encouraged other Christians to stop mourning over their losses? As if mourning the loss of a loved one or the loss of a dream or the loss of a relationship or the loss of a plan or hope is not an appropriate response, as if mourning must be faithless or even sinful. According to Solomon, there are seasons where mourning is absolutely the correct, God-designed manner of responding.

And then notice, Solomon moves to the polar opposite experience in life and says here that ***there are times to mourn and there are times to dance***. He evidently wasn't a Baptist.

Solomon pictures everything from dancing up and down at the good news someone just told you to weeping at the tragic news you have just heard. This is the wide spectrum of God-given emotions.

In *verse 5* Solomon writes that there is:

A time to cast away stones, and a time to gather stones together (Ecclesiastes 3:5).

During Solomon's day, ancient armies would cover an enemy's field with stones in order to make it unproductive (*1 Kings 3*); and then the gathering of stones from a field would be used in building fences or watchtowers or barns.

Solomon writes next in *verse 5b* that there is:

A time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing (Ecclesiastes 3:5).

Warren Wiersbe writes that while this might refer to marital intimacy, the people in the Near East openly show their affection, kissing one another on the cheek and hugging when they meet and again when they part ways. He paraphrased this to read, "There is a time to say hello and a time to say goodbye."^x

And for all of us here, you know the joy of the seasons when you say to your family and friends, "Hello!", and the pain of having to yet again say, "Goodbye".

Verse 6 continues the theme that there is:

A time to seek/gain, and a time to lose
(Ecclesiastes 3:6).

The word **seek** carries the idea of gaining. There is a time to gain and a time to lose – sounds like my dieting plan . . . especially Thanksgiving – there is a time to gain (amen to that) and a time to lose (I don't know about that).

Actually, the idea here of gaining and losing carry financial implications. There are seasons when you make a profit and there are seasons when you might lose it all.

Again, God is in control of these seasons, specifically for your life, making all things work together for good, so that you will be conformed all the more into the image and character of Christ (*Romans 8:28-29*).

Verse 6 again – there is:

A time to keep, and a time to throw away
(Ecclesiastes 3:6)

You could render this, there is a time to store away things you need and there is a time to throw away or give away things you don't need. In other words and in very practical terms there are times to keep and there are times to throw a yard sale. You people who love to yard sale – here's your new life verse - go for it.

Solomon writes in **verse 7**, there is:

A time to tear, and a time to sew
(Ecclesiastes 3:7)

In Solomon's day, as you read often in scripture, when someone experienced a setback or a tragedy they would tear their garments, tearing from the collar of their gown down toward their heart to communicate their hearts are broken. There is a season of dealing with tragedy, difficulty, and pain.

One author wisely commends that we ask God for wisdom and move through these seasons. He writes that there is a season where it is time to tear, and there is a time to get out

your needle and thread and start sewing things up.^{xi}

Further, in **verse 7**, there is:

A time to keep silence, and a time to speak (Ecclesiastes 3:7).

This needs no explanation. *We need to be swift to hear and slow to speak* (James 1:19). We have been given two ears and two eyes and only one mouth for a good reason.

My mother could quote that famous statement by Abraham Lincoln where he said, "I have often regretted my speech, never my silence." She encouraged me to memorize that quote. I have no idea why.

Solomon writes in **verse 8**, there is:

A time to love, and a time to hate
(Ecclesiastes 3:8).

We get the part about loving, but what is this we are supposed to hate? The Psalmist wrote, *Hate evil, you who love the Lord* (Psalm 97:10). Solomon wrote, *The fear of the Lord is hatred of evil* (Proverbs 8:13).

In fact, Solomon, recorded by the Spirit's inspiring influence this self-revelation from God, wrote:

There are six things that the Lord hates, seven that are an abomination to him; haughty eyes, a lying tongue, hands that shed innocent blood, a heart that devises wicked plans feet that make haste to run to evil, a false witness who breathes out lies, and one who sows discord among brothers (Proverbs 6:17-19).

Solomon is essentially reminding us to love and cling to what God loves and hate and turn from what God hates.

Finally, Solomon ends his poem by writing (**verse 8b**) that there is:

A time for war, and a time for peace
(Ecclesiastes 3:8).

This is a national response, perhaps of self-defense or an effort to eliminate tyranny in the world or to act on behalf of another nation for the sake of justice. There are never-ending seasons of war and of peace. Our world is a mixture of battlefields and peace treaties.^{xii} And it is not going to change until Jesus creates a new earth and new heavens where He, the Prince of Peace, and His redeemed followers will never be distracted or engaged by the winds of war (*Revelation 21*).

Let me attempt to summarize this inspired poem on the subject of time. You are a dash through life. You have heard about the 100 yard dash, the 200 meter dash, but what about the 20 year dash? The 40 year dash? The 90 year dash? What about the time God has allotted for your life?

Here are two principles Solomon would have us consider as we run our dash in life:

First, your ‘dash’ is filled with appointments from God – you don’t want to waste them.

The Apostle Paul tells us to *redeem the time*, make use of the time, for God’s glory (Ephesians 5:16). So make the most of His gift of life and these seasons of time.

Jonathan Edwards, the leader of the great spiritual awakening in the 1700’s, recorded in his journal at age of 19 these words, “I often hear persons in old age say how they would live, if they were to live their lives over again; resolved, that I will live just as I wish I had done, supposing I live to an old age.”^{xiii}

Second, your ‘dash’ is filled with unpredictable events – you can’t control everything about them.

That sense of peace as you live out your dash is not the absence of stressful times, it is the reality of divine security.

Newspapers called it the “Dance of Danger”, bridge construction was death-defying for men

who walked on top of swaying beams sometimes hundreds of feet in the air. This dance even had a calculated fatality rate: For every one million dollars spent, one life was expected to be lost.

In 1932, engineers on the Golden Gate Bridge believed the risks could be lowered. When construction began, numerous safety measures were put into place and enforced, like mandatory use of hard hats, prescription filtered eye glasses, and even an on-site hospital for the injured. The most effective safety device, which was brand new, although it had been used for years in the circus, was the use of a trapeze net. It was draped sixty feet below the bridge, extending ten feet on either side. The newspapers began running box scores of the men who had fallen but kept from certain death. One headline read, “Score on the Safety Net to Date: 8 Lives Saved!” After four years of construction and \$20 million spent, only one worker had died.

But what they didn’t expect was the morale change of the construction crews. That net freed them from frequent episodes of paralyzing fear. It freed them to work more productively and focus more on their task, knowing that net was down below.^{xiv}

What an analogy to the Christian life. We may not understand the fitting beauty of everything that is happening at times in our lives or in our world, but we join with David who wrote about that divine safety net underneath his life: *I trust in you, O Lord . . . my times are in your hands.* (Psalm 31:14-1). Deuteronomy 33:27 also reminds of the same message: *The eternal God is your refuge, and underneath are the everlasting arms.*

This is not a cop-out or an easy way out. Life is still hard. And it is not fatalism either. It is not *que sera sera*, whatever will be will be. Solomon’s poem is not fatalism, it is faith. It is not about giving up, it is about growing up in our deepening faith and sense of trust in the perfect, wise plan of God through the seasons of life. This is coming to an understanding, as Solomon has put in poetic form here. In fact, if

I could summarize it all in only one sentence it would be this –

As you live out our dash through life,

*God orchestrates everything
and holds everything
and He will accomplish everything,
at just the right time.*

This manuscript is from a sermon preached on 11/3/2019 by Stephen Davey.

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i Edited from Linda Ellis, *The Dash* (copyright 1996)

ii Philip Graham Ryken, *Ecclesiastes: Why Everything Matters* (Crossway, 2010), p. 78

iii Daniel L. Akin & Jonathan Akin, *Exalting Jesus in Ecclesiastes* (Holman Reference, 2016), p. 35

iv Adapted from Charles R. Swindoll, *Living on the Ragged Edge* (Insight for Living, 1983), p. 24

v Adapted from Don Givens, *Storms of Life: Ecclesiastes Explained* (Xulon Press, 2008), p. 54

vi Adapted from Ryken, p. 80

vii Adapted from Swindoll, p. 24

viii David Jeremiah, *Searching for Heaven on Earth* (Integrity Publishing, 2004), p. 51

ix Ed Young, *Been There. Done That. Now What?* (Broadman & Holman, 1994), p. 59

x Warren W. Wiersbe, *Ecclesiastes: Be Satisfied* (Victor Books, 1990), p. 46

xi Ibid

xii Swindoll, p. 24

xiii Max Anders, ed; *Holman Old Testament Commentary: Volume 14* (Holman, 2003), p. 41

xiv Adapted from Robert Lewis, *The Church of Irresistible Influence* (Zondervan, 2001), p.140xiv