

I Intro. (Sept. 23, 2007)

Here we arrive at one of the most familiar poetical sections of the OT. This portion was popularized in music in October of 1965 in a song entitled, “Turn! Turn! Turn! (To Everything There Is a Season).” It was written and composed by Pete Seeger in the 1950s and recorded by him in 1962. He reportedly was a communist. However it was the folk-rock band, The Byrds, who eventually recorded it in 1965 when it made the popular charts, and this recording is considered by many to be one of the defining records of the entire decade. “The lyrics are taken almost verbatim from the King James version of the Bible (Ecclesiastes 3, verses 1–8). The Biblical text posits there being a time and place for all things: laughter and sorrow, healing and killing, war and peace, and so on...but as a song (it was) commonly performed as a plea for world peace, with stress on the closing line: ‘a time for peace, I swear it’s not too late,’ the latter phrase being the only part of the lyric written by Seeger himself.”<sup>1</sup> This was so in spite of the fact that we were not at war at that time except the cold war. Incidentally, Seeger is still active at age 88, having been born in 1919.

Solomon began by saying that there was a specific time for everything (Ecc. 3:1). He then specified what he had in mind by naming various contrasting couplets (vv. 2-8). In light of these truths, he reiterated the profitlessness of man’s lot, while pointing to man’s innate awareness of eternity (vv. 9-11).

## II An Appointed Time for Everything (Ecc. 3:1-11)

### A. Solomon stated his thesis (3:1).

1. (vs. 1) Note that Solomon does not say *generally* that there is a time for everything, but *particularly* that “There is an appointed time for everything,” meaning that there is “a proper time for God to act”<sup>2</sup> regarding these matters. “See now that I, I am He, and there is no god besides Me; it is I who put to death and give life. I have wounded, and it is I who heal; and there is no one who can deliver from My hand” (Deut. 32:39). “Blind fate would be a terrible consolation, but how comforting it is to know that

the events of the universe are ordered by a compassionate, gracious, longsuffering, faithful God.”<sup>3</sup>

More specifically, “there is a time for every event under heaven.” “Event” could be translated “delight” and has the meaning, “*that in which one takes delight, his business (late), or matter...time for every matter, affair.*”<sup>4</sup> By this term, “Solomon meant people’s deliberate, willful acts. The Hebrew word...always used of people, literally means ‘desire,’ and then by metonymy ‘what one desires’ (cf. Isa. 58:13). For these willful acts people are held accountable (cf. Ecc. 3:17).”<sup>5</sup> Such “pursuits are no doubt lawful in their proper time and order (Ec 3:1–8), but unprofitable when out of time and place; as for instance, when pursued as the solid and chief good (Ec 3:9, 10); whereas God makes everything beautiful in its season, which man obscurely comprehends (Ec 3:11). God allows man to enjoy moderately and virtuously His earthly gifts (Ec 3:12, 13).”<sup>6</sup>

B. He then specified what he had in mind by naming various contrasting couplets (vv. 2-8).

1. (vs. 2) Here Solomon illustrated his thesis “with a poem on 14 opposites, each of which happens in its time. The fact that Solomon utilized polar opposites in a multiple of seven and began his list with birth and death is highly significant. The number seven suggests the idea of completeness and the use of polar opposites—a well-known poetical device called merism—suggests totality (cf. Ps. 139:2-3).”<sup>7</sup> Further, “history is filled with cyclical patterns, and these recur with unchangeable regularity. So man is locked into a pattern of behavior which is determined by certain inflexible laws or principles.”<sup>8</sup> “The poem on time begins with personal events, birth and death, and concludes with public events, war and peace. The chiasmic form permits the poem to end on a favorable note (vv. 1, 8: birth, death, war, peace; v. 8: love, hate, war, peace).”<sup>9</sup> “The significance of this section is

3New Geneva Study Bible. electronic ed. Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1997, c1995. Ec 3:1.

4Francis Brown, Samuel Rolles Driver and Charles Augustus Briggs, Enhanced Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon, electronic ed. (Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, 2000). 343.

5Walvoord, John F., Roy B. Zuck and Dallas Theological Seminary. The Bible Knowledge Commentary : An Exposition of the Scriptures. Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1983-c1985. 983.

6Jamieson, Robert, A. R. Fausset, A. R. Fausset, David Brown and David Brown. A Commentary, Critical and Explanatory, on the Old and New Testaments. Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 1997. Ec 3:1.

7Walvoord, John F., Roy B. Zuck and Dallas Theological Seminary. The Bible Knowledge Commentary : An Exposition of the Scriptures. Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1983-c1985. 983.

8MacDonald, William and Arthur Farstad. Believer's Bible Commentary : Old and New Testaments. electronic ed. Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1997, c1995. Ec 3:1.

9Mays, James Luther, Publishers Harper & Row and Society of Biblical Literature. Harper's Bible Commentary. San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988. Ec 3:1.

<sup>1</sup>[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Turn%21\\_Turn%21\\_Turn%21\\_%28song%29](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Turn%21_Turn%21_Turn%21_%28song%29)

<sup>2</sup>W.A. Criswell. *Believer's study Bible [computer file]*, electronic ed., Logos Library System, (Nashville: Thomas Nelson) 1997, c1991 by the Criswell Center for Biblical Studies.

that man is responsible to discern the right times for the right actions; and when he does the right action according to God's time, the result is 'beautiful' (v. 11).<sup>36,10</sup>

There are some things over which man has utterly no control whatever. For example take the first of our contrasting couplets, "A time to give birth," which has at least in some part the sense "a time to be born" (cf. NKJV, lit., "to bear"), as a natural contrast to its opposite, "a time to die." Even from the mother's perspective, she has no control over the date of her child's birth, but it will happen. It is inevitable as Paul's use of the event as an illustration of end times judgment shows in 1Th. 5:3. We have nothing to say about the date of our birth. Otherwise I might have chosen not to be born on Halloween! We have no final say about our date of death either, God does. Generally we get seventy years, eighty if due to strength: "As for the days of our life, they contain seventy years, or if due to strength, eighty years, yet their pride is *but* labor and sorrow; for soon it is gone and we fly away" (Ps. 90:10). Hb. 9:27 assumes that "it is appointed for men to die once." The Psalmist said, "And in Your book were all written the days that were ordained *for me*, when as yet there was not one of them."<sup>11</sup> Job concurred saying, "Since his days are determined, the number of his months is with You; and his limits You have set so that he cannot pass."<sup>12</sup> Obviously both these previous passages make it plain that God has determined our birth date and our death date, and we cannot ultimately change either one.

It follows that naturally that there is "A time to plant, and a time to uproot what is planted." It would be absurd for man to attempt to change that. If a man does not plant in the divinely appointed season for it, he will have nothing to uproot when it comes time for that. Calamity awaits the foolhardy person who dares think he can reverse the order of these things.

2. (vs. 3) Solomon further observed that there is "A time to kill, and a time to heal." As far as the killing side is concerned, some say that it is judicial killing in view, namely, "criminals; or, in wars of self-defense; not in malice. Out of this

time and order, killing is murder."<sup>13</sup> Does Solomon exclude murder? The BBC says, "we must remember that Solomon's observations were based on his knowledge under the sun. Without divine revelation, it seemed to him that life was either a slaughterhouse or a hospital, a battlefield or a first-aid station."<sup>14</sup> The fact that there is a time for killing would not necessarily be limited to divinely *approved* killing, it could include *allowed* killings of all kinds, since they must be included in the decree in one sense or another. Healing lends itself to life, so it is the opposite of killing. For if one is not healed, he will likely die sooner than he might have. History is replete with times of killing and times of healing. No one can deny it.

Correspondingly there is "A time to tear down, and a time to build up." The Clark Bridge across the Mississippi River was completed in July of 1928 with the grand opening held on July 16. It cost \$1.8 million to construct.

<sup>36</sup> 36. J. S. Wright, "Ecclesiastes," p. 1160. Cf. Eph. 2:10.

<sup>10</sup> Tom Constable, Tom Constable's Expository Notes on the Bible (Galaxie Software, 2003; 2003). Ec 3:1.  
<sup>11</sup> New American Standard Bible : 1995 Update. LaHabra, CA: The Lockman Foundation, 1995. Ps 139:16.  
<sup>12</sup> New American Standard Bible : 1995 Update. LaHabra, CA: The Lockman Foundation, 1995. Job 14:5.

<sup>13</sup> Jamieson, Robert, A. R. Fausset, A. R. Fausset, David Brown and David Brown. A Commentary, Critical and Explanatory, on the Old and New Testaments. Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 1997. Ec 3:3.

<sup>14</sup> MacDonald, William and Arthur Farstad. Believer's Bible Commentary : Old and New Testaments. electronic ed. Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1997, c1995. Ec 3:3.

This is how it appeared in the mid 1950's:



Sixty-five plus years later, the new bridge was dedicated in January of 1994 at a cost of \$118 million, which included the cost of the demolition of the old bridge, which looked like this:



Here is how the new bridge looks today:



Here are both bridges standing at the same time:



I will not soon forget what one of the engineers said about the new bridge, which is a brilliant example of spectacular modern architecture. He said the he and the other engineers were under no illusions. They know that their bridge will only be there for a while. One day somebody will come and build a new bridge and demolish theirs. That is life. There is indeed a time to tear down, and a time to build up. If we hope to escape vanity by the permanence of what we build, we will not do so.

3. (vs. 4) Still more there is “A time to weep, and a time to laugh.” Even though laughter is madness (Ecc. 2:2), and weeping is more realistic than laughing (Ecc. 7:1-2), yet we prefer laughing. Who wants to weep? At times it is advisable (Jm. 4:9) and even unavoidable.

Of course, there is “A time to mourn, and a time to dance,” indicating its opposite emotion of sheer joy. To mourn is “feel or express grief or sorrow”<sup>15</sup> and to dance is to “move rhythmically usually to music, (or) to leap or skip about excitedly.”<sup>16</sup> Concerning the idea of mourning, “By far most of the references in which this root and its derivative are found deal with the mourning rites at someone’s death (e.g. Gen 23:2; 50:10; I Sam 25:1; 28:3; II Sam 1:12; 3:31; 11:26; I Kgs 13:29f.; cf. Eccl 12:5). A such times, all who sensed the loss of the departed would come to share their grief with the members of the family.

<sup>15</sup>The American Heritage® Dictionary of the English Language, Third Edition copyright © 1992 by Houghton Mifflin Company. Electronic version licensed from InfoSoft International, Inc. All rights reserved.

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Their grief could be demonstrated in many ways: going barefoot, stripping off one's clothes, cutting one's beard or body, fasting (or banqueting), scattering ashes, or beating some part of the body. Some of these rituals were proscribed for the Israelite, doubtless because of pagan association (Lev 19:28). Shrill cries or loud wailing often accompanied the mourning, which in time became stereotyped and structured into formal laments. Of course, weeping, especially by the women, was greatly in evidence as the combination of *sapad* with its set parallel *bakâ* ('weep') attests. The growth of funerary ritual led to the employment of professional mourners, again, usually women.

Mourning for the dead began immediately at death, went on as the body was carried to the tomb, was observed at the tomb and lasted at least seven days after the burial."<sup>17</sup>

The previous verses give reasons for both these emotions, birth and death, planting and uprooting, killing and healing, etc. Life presents these things in the cases of all of us.

4. (vs. 5) Here we have a curious couplet: "A time to throw stones, and a time to gather stones." "Many interpretations have been suggested for the meaning"<sup>18</sup> here. "Taken at face value, this means that there is a time to clear land for cultivation (Isa. 5:2), then to gather the stones for building houses, walls, or other projects. If we take the words figuratively, as most modern commentators do, there may be a reference to the marriage act. Thus, TEV paraphrases, 'The time for having sex and the time for not having it.'"<sup>19</sup> So also another commentator says that "the parallelism with 'embrace' suggests that this verse is a euphemism for marital intercourse,"<sup>20</sup> thus "the reference to throwing and gathering stones may be erotic, as rabbinic interpreters insisted."<sup>21</sup> Others see it as punitive: "The casting of stones...probably refers to the ancient custom of destroying a farmer's field by throwing stones on it. The gathering of stones describes the clearing of

stones from a field."<sup>22</sup> The reference to a sexual experience seems remote, but the actual meaning remains obscure.

This couplet is much easier to grasp; "A time to embrace, and a time to shun embracing." The reference is to "the display of affections (v. 5b), probably of a man to a woman and perhaps also of a woman to a man."<sup>23</sup> It seems likely that awareness of when embracing is appropriate is almost self-evident.

5. (vs. 6) There is also "A time to search, and a time to give up as lost." At some point, one must conclude that the item is not worth any more investment of one's time. The NKJV says, "A time to gain, and a time to lose." If so, then the sense would be "to gain honestly a livelihood...(and) when God wills losses to us, then is our time to be content."<sup>24</sup>

It follows that there is "A time to keep, and a time to throw away," but if we could only tell exactly what that point is! Most of us are piling up too much stuff, but a few have a keen sense of when it is time to throw a few things overboard. Many of us need to have that "burst of housecleaning zeal,"<sup>25</sup> when we clear things "out and call some local charity to cart the gathered items away."<sup>26</sup>

"All the opposites in verses 5-6 seem to involve man's interest in things or affection for persons."<sup>27</sup>

6. (vs. 7) Then there is "A time to tear apart, and a time to sew together." Some say the reference is to "garments, in mourning (Joe 2:13); figuratively, nations, as Israel from Judah, already foretold, in Solomon's time (1Ki 11:30, 31), to be "sewed" together hereafter (Ez 37:15, 22)."<sup>28</sup> So also say BK, "This verse may refer to actions associated with mourning (tearing one's clothes and remaining silent; cf. Job 2:12-13), and its end (sewing one's clothes and speaking out). If so, it would relate to the mourning in Ecclesiastes

<sup>17</sup>Harris, R. Laird, Robert Laird Harris, Gleason Leonard Archer and Bruce K. Waltke. Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament. electronic ed. Chicago: Moody Press, 1999. c1980. 630.

<sup>18</sup>Walvoord, John F., Roy B. Zuck and Dallas Theological Seminary. The Bible Knowledge Commentary : An Exposition of the Scriptures. Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1983-c1985. 984.

<sup>19</sup>MacDonald, William and Arthur Farstad. Believer's Bible Commentary : Old and New Testaments. electronic ed. Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1997. c1995. Ec 3:5.

<sup>20</sup>Brown, Raymond Edward, Joseph A. Fitzmyer and Roland Edmund Murphy. The Jerome Biblical Commentary. electronic ed. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1968]. Published in electronic form by Logos Research Systems, 1996. 1:536.

<sup>21</sup>Mays, James Luther, Publishers Harper & Row and Society of Biblical Literature. Harper's Bible Commentary. San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988. Ec 3:1.

<sup>22</sup>Tom Constable. Tom Constable's Expository Notes on the Bible. Galaxie Software, 2003; 2003. Ec 3:1.

<sup>23</sup>Walvoord, John F., Roy B. Zuck and Dallas Theological Seminary. The Bible Knowledge Commentary : An Exposition of the Scriptures. Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1983-c1985. 984.

<sup>24</sup>Jamieson, Robert, A. R. Fausset, A. R. Fausset, David Brown and David Brown. A Commentary, Critical and Explanatory, on the Old and New Testaments. Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 1997. Ec 3:6.

<sup>25</sup>MacDonald, William and Arthur Farstad. Believer's Bible Commentary : Old and New Testaments. electronic ed. Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1997. c1995. Ec 3:6.

<sup>26</sup>MacDonald, William and Arthur Farstad. Believer's Bible Commentary : Old and New Testaments. electronic ed. Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1997. c1995. Ec 3:6.

<sup>27</sup>Walvoord, John F., Roy B. Zuck and Dallas Theological Seminary. The Bible Knowledge Commentary : An Exposition of the Scriptures. Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1983-c1985. 984.

<sup>28</sup>Jamieson, Robert, A. R. Fausset, A. R. Fausset, David Brown and David Brown. A Commentary, Critical and Explanatory, on the Old and New Testaments. Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 1997. Ec 3:7.

3:4.”<sup>29</sup> Others say the reference could be to something as mundane as fashion; “Some noted fashion designer dictates a new trend, and all over the world, hems are let out or shortened. Today the fashions are daring and attention-getting. Tomorrow they revert to the quaint styles of grandmother’s day.”<sup>30</sup> In either case, tearing and sewing happens.

Obviously there is “A time to be silent, and a time to speak,” but since no man can tame the tongue (Jm. 3:8a), we have a real problem on our hands here. Of course, it can be tamed with divine assistance (cp. vs. 2 w/ vs. 17). “The time to keep silence is when we are criticized unjustly, when we are tempted to criticize others, or to say things that are untrue, unkind, or unedifying.”<sup>31</sup> Paul said, “Let no unwholesome word proceed from your mouth, but only such a word as is good for edification according to the need of the moment, that it may give grace to those who hear.”<sup>32</sup> There is a time to speak. It is when it edifies and gives grace to the hearer.

If the context of the first part of the verse is to mourning, then the second half would be understood in that context as silence and controlled, quiet speech in the presence of the mourners.

7. (vs. 8) These couplets are fairly well known: “A time to love, and a time to hate; a time for war, and a time for peace.” This is what Solomon has observed in life. “It seemed to him that human behavior fluctuated between periods of love and periods of hate.”<sup>33</sup> However we do not need to see hate in the context of emotional rage, but as a definite decision against people whose actions are opposed to God and His will. The reference is to a choice, not an emotion of animosity. In ancient Israel, this choice expressed itself in war against surrounding nations who rejected God and His purposed for themselves. There were times when this happened and times when it did not, times of war and peace respectively.

C. In light of these truths, he reiterated the profitlessness of man’s lot (vv. 9-11).

1. (vs. 9) Man’s ability to affect the effects of the preceding “schedule” was nil. So we are back to the same essential question: “What profit is there to the worker from that in which he toils?” Answer: none whatsoever. “For every constructive activity there is a destructive one. For every plus a minus. The fourteen positive works are cancelled out by fourteen negatives. So the mathematical formula of life is fourteen minus fourteen equals zero. Man has nothing but a zero at the end of it all.”<sup>34</sup>

2. (vs. 10) Solomon reiterated that he knew what he was talking about based on the experience of his own accurate observations: “I have seen the task which God has given the sons of men with which to occupy themselves.”

3. (vs. 11) Nevertheless God “has made everything appropriate,” literally, “beautiful,” “in its time.” “God in His providential plans and control has an appropriate time for every activity.”<sup>35</sup> Then follows this profound and sublime assertion that “has also set eternity in their heart,” that is, “People have a longing or desire to know the extratemporal significance of themselves and their deeds or activities.”<sup>36</sup> “Though living in a world of time, man has intimations of eternity. Instinctively he thinks of ‘forever,’ and though he cannot understand the concept, he realizes that beyond this life there is the possibility of a shoreless ocean of time.”<sup>37</sup>

Finally Solomon said: “yet so that man will not find out the work which God has done from the beginning even to the end.” The first phrase, “yet so that man,” may be translated “*without which man,*” i.e., if man does not bring eternity’s perspective to this life, nothing will ever make sense or have meaning. Even so, our understanding of the “work which God has done” remains somewhat limited. Paul said, “Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and unfathomable His ways! For WHO HAS KNOWN THE MIND OF THE LORD, OR WHO

<sup>29</sup>Walvoord, John F., Roy B. Zuck and Dallas Theological Seminary. The Bible Knowledge Commentary : An Exposition of the Scriptures. Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1983-c1985. 984.

<sup>30</sup>MacDonald, William and Arthur Farstad. Believer’s Bible Commentary : Old and New Testaments. electronic ed. Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1997, c1995. Ec 3:7.

<sup>31</sup>MacDonald, William and Arthur Farstad. Believer’s Bible Commentary : Old and New Testaments. electronic ed. Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1997, c1995. Ec 3:7.

<sup>32</sup>The New American Standard Bible, (La Habra, California: The Lockman Foundation) 1977.

<sup>33</sup>MacDonald, William and Arthur Farstad. Believer’s Bible Commentary : Old and New Testaments. electronic ed. Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1997, c1995. Ec 3:8.

<sup>34</sup>MacDonald, William and Arthur Farstad. Believer’s Bible Commentary : Old and New Testaments. electronic ed. Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1997, c1995. Ec 3:9.

<sup>35</sup>Walvoord, John F., Roy B. Zuck and Dallas Theological Seminary. The Bible Knowledge Commentary : An Exposition of the Scriptures. Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1983-c1985. 984.

<sup>36</sup>Walvoord, John F., Roy B. Zuck and Dallas Theological Seminary. The Bible Knowledge Commentary : An Exposition of the Scriptures. Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1983-c1985. 984.

<sup>37</sup>MacDonald, William and Arthur Farstad. Believer’s Bible Commentary : Old and New Testaments. electronic ed. Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1997, c1995. Ec 3:11.

BECAME HIS COUNSELOR? Or WHO HAS FIRST GIVEN TO HIM THAT IT MIGHT BE PAID BACK TO HIM AGAIN? For from Him and through Him and to Him are all things. To Him *be* the glory forever. Amen” (Rm. 11:33-36). Therefore when certain things make no sense, we must fall back on Rm. 8:28, “And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to *His* purpose.”

### III Conc.

Solomon asserted his thesis Ecc. 3:1, supported it very well indeed (vv. 2-9), and then showed us the implications for this life. Without eternity’s perspective, life is utterly devoid of any meaning. It cannot be otherwise.