

To Everything, Turn! Turn! Turn!

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

² a time to be born, and a time to die; a time to plant, and a time to **pluck up** what is planted;

³ a time to kill, and a time to heal; a time to break down, and a time to build up;

⁴ a time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to **mourn**, and a time to dance;

⁵ a time to cast away stones, and a time to gather stones together; a time to **embrace**, and a time to refrain from embracing;

⁶ a time to seek, and a time to lose; a time to keep, and a time to **cast away**;

⁷ a time to **tear**, and a time to **sew**; a time to keep silence, and a time to speak;

⁸ a time to **love**, and a time to hate; a time for war, and a time for peace.

⁹ What gain has the worker from his toil?

¹⁰ I have seen the business that God has given to the children of man to be busy with.

¹¹ He has made everything beautiful in its time. Also, he has put eternity into man's heart, yet so that he cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end.

(Ecclesiastes 3:1-11)

Turn, Turn, Turn

One upon a time ... there was the '60s. It was a time of great cultural upheaval the likes of which the West had never before seen. It was a time of hate. It began with hatred of those horrific worldwide events that had taken place in the beginning and middle of the 20th century and what those things those had done to families. It turned into hatred of tradition, of traditional values, of objective morality, God himself. It was a time of love-ins. The sexual revolution (divorce, swinging, living with each other, public orgies, and more) began sweeping through America. It was a time of embracing—the new and untried. Illegal substances were the rage, especially those that took you to another dimension, music that took you to another dimension, meditation that took you to another dimension. It was a time of breaking down. Institutionalism, governmental structures, corporate interests, Christianity, old ways of educating and doing business were all under attack. It was a time of peace symbols—the index and middle fingers held up and apart, usually by long-haired unbathed hippies or the conspiratorial “upside-down broken cross” (which is

actually the semaphore or flag symbols of the letters N and D which stood for nuclear disarmament), often printed on tie-dye shirts. The peace talk was because it was a time of **killing**. Presidents, senators, preachers, civil rights leaders were all being assassinated. And it was **a time of war**. After the two World Wars and Korea, the never-ending wars turned into the incredibly controversial Vietnam War in which 58,000 Americans would die, and that's not counting those who would perish from the after effects of agent orange, suicide, homelessness, and other means.

It was into this anti-war counter-culture that **one of the best-known Christian songs** ever recorded, a song that was not recorded *by Christians*, and some would have no idea was even a religious song at all(!), would make its way to the top of the charts on December 4, 1965,¹ ironically just 3 days before the 24th anniversary of the attack on Pearl Harbor. This is something that in our own culture, so very far removed even from the rebellion of the 60s, could never happen today. How can you come so far from something that was itself coming so far from what it was?

¹ **The Byrds**. "Turn! Turn! Turn! (To Everything There is a Season)," *Turn! Turn! Turn!*, Columbia, 1965.

It was the band *The Byrds* (deliberately misspelled to echo the misspelling of The Beatles), the most famous two of whom were probably David Crosby and Roger McGuinn, who made “Turn! Turn! Turn!” so popular with their incredible harmonies, samba beat, and ringing guitars. But *The Byrds* didn’t write this song. It had already been recorded by McGuinn and his 1962 folk group called *The Limelitters*² and then a year later by Judy Collins for whom he rearranged it.³ But just a few months after the Limeliter’s version, it would finally be recorded by the man who wrote it back in 1959, a folk singer named Pete Seeger.⁴

Seeger had made it big earlier in 1950 when his own folk band *The Weavers* covered “Goodnight, Irene,”⁵ a song that lasted 13 weeks at #1. He had subsequently been writing a different kind of song, songs that caused him to be called “the rabble-rousing troubadour”⁶ and the great Protest

² **The Limelitters**, “To Everything There is a Season,” *Folk Matinee*, RCA Victor, 1962.

³ **Judy Collins**, “Turn! Turn! Turn! (To Everything There is a Season),” *Judy Collins #3*, Elektra, 1963.

⁴ **Pete Seeger**, “Turn! Turn! Turn! (To Everything There is a Season),” *The Bitter and the Sweet*, Columbia, 1962.

⁵ **The Weavers**, “Goodnight, Irene,” Decca. 1950.

⁶ This title and the story as follows comes from **Nick Keppler**, “Turn! Turn! Turn! – The Byrds’ 1965 hit used lyrics that dated back more than 2,000 years,” *Financial Times* (Oct 29, 2018), <https://ig.ft.com/life-of-a-song/turn-turn-turn.html#:~:text=Pete%20Seeger%20composed%20%E2%80%9CTurn!,a%20letter%20from%20his%20publisher.>

Singer.⁷ The story goes that in 1959, in response to a letter from his publisher which read, “Pete, can’t you write another song like ‘Goodnight, Irene’? I can’t sell or promote these protest songs.” Pete responded, “You better find another songwriter. This is the only kind of song I know how to write.”

But then he turned to his pocket and a notebook he had been carrying and he started jotting down bits of text he had taken from “a bearded fellow with sandals, a tough-minded fellow called Ecclesiastes.” That bearded fellow was not Jesus, but Solomon, whom I’m pretty wasn’t the forerunner of the 1960s hippie, but that’s how he envisioned him. And what came out was a very close approximation of **Ecclesiastes 3:1-8**, making it one of the longest texts of Scripture to become popular on the radio.

Ecclesiastes 3:1-11 – Context and Structure

Getting to know a *biblical text*, especially one so familiar because of a song like this, can be an important exercise. Today we are looking at **Ecclesiastes 3:1-11**. The choice to do this block was rather difficult. **Ecc 3:1** ends the larger unit of **1:12-3:1** in the Hebrew Bible. But few have taken 3:1

⁷ This was the title of the biography of Seeger written by Alec Wilkinson in 2010.

apart from 3:2ff. In fact, while it does nicely frame what comes before it, it even more so provides the context for what comes after.

What comes after forms the content of the Seeger's song and one of the great poems of the ancient world: Ecc 3:2-8. We'll look more at the poem in a moment. Often, we will find 1-8 being discussed all by itself. Sometimes people will go all the way through vs. 15 and other times through vs. 22. There are certainly themes in these later verses that match up with some parts of the poem. I've chosen to go through vs. 11, because it nicely ends on the meaning of the poem by concluding with its central point: time, yet, there is enough to cover here in one sermon that adding more is something we can do another next time.

Putting this together, the most general way summarizing these eleven verses is that vs. 1 gives us an introduction to the poem of vv. 2-8 and this is followed by a short reflection in vv. 9-11, which also continue to lead us further into the rest of the Preacher's sermon. If we don't have at least some reflection from the Scripture itself on the poem, then we do injustice to what God is trying to tell us through it.

I want to spend a few minutes thinking about **the first eight verses** (including vs. 1), because they reflect **deep and careful thought** about their subject matter, both theologically and literarily. The subject matter is abundantly obvious by the word “**time**” (*et*) which is repeated **28 times** which are separated into **14 pairs** cut across over **7 verses** (the numerology there is significant), along with once in **vv. 1 and 11 each**.

Since this is a poem about time, I might ask, **if you could catch time in a bottle** and then open it up and pour it out in the form of words on paper, what might you want it to say theologically? Even more artsy, what would you want it to look like? What I mean is, do you think it could be possible to craft **the structure so that it could reflect your subject matter**? Could you do it in a way that your structure could convey anything theologically about time itself? I believe that the Preacher has put *structure* and *theology* together so that they each convey meaning in the poem.

That theology conveys meaning seems self-evident and we are used to this and we will come to it in due time. But can structure convey meaning? Jacob Milgrom said in his

commentary on Leviticus, that “**structure is theology.**”⁸ Milgrom and others have been convinced that the structure of Leviticus is as important as the words themselves, for the structure of the book is literarily patterned to look like the tabernacle.⁹ When you understand this, it **brings a very difficult book to life** as those words are meant to match up with various parts of the tabernacle. Leviticus is too tricky to get into today, so let’s think of something more easily grasped.

Ancient poets would sometimes write poetry to look like the subject of the poem, such as in Dosiadas’ “The First Altar.” These are called **pattern poems**.



ΔΟΣΙΑΔΑΣ ΔΩΡΙΕΩΣ
ΒΟΜΟΣ
Εἰ μάρσενός με στήσας
πόσις, μέροφ' ἑσσαβος,
τεῖξ', οὐ σποδείνας ἴσις Ἑμπούσας μόρος
Τεῖκροισι βούτα καὶ κυνὸς τεκνώματος,
χρυσᾶς δ' ἄλτας, ἄμος ἐψάνδρα
τὸν γυιόχαλκον οὐδρον ἔρραισεν,
ὄν ἀπάταρ δίστεινος
μόρησε ματρίρριπτος
ἐμὸν δὲ τεύγμ' ἀθήσας
Θεοκρίτοιον κτάντας
τριεσπέροιο καύστας
θάουξεν αὐτ' ἰύξας³
χάλειψε γάρ νιν ἰψ³
σύργαστρος ἐκδυγῆρας³
τὸν δ' ἀλινεύτ' ⁴ ἐν ἀμφικλύσφ
Πανός τε ματρός εύνετας φῶρ
δύξρος ἴσις τ' ἀνδροβρώτος Ἰλοραιστᾶν⁸
ἦρ' ἀρδίον ἐς Τευκρίδ' ἀγαγον τρίπορθον.

DOSIADAS
THE FIRST ALTAR

This puzzle is written in the Iambic metre and composed of two pairs of complete lines, five pairs of half-lines, and two pairs of three-quarter lines, arranged in the form of an altar. Of the writer nothing is known; he was obviously acquainted with the Pipe and also with Lycophron's Alexandra. The poem is mentioned by Lucian (Lexiph. 25), but metrical considerations point to its being of considerably later date than the Pipe. Moreover, the idea of making an altar of verses presupposes a change in the conception of what a poem is. It was now a thing of ink and paper; and Dosiadas seems to have interpreted the Pipe in the light of the pipes of his own time, as representing the outward appearance of an actual pipe.

Fig. 1AB.3. “The First Altar.” By Dosiadas. In M. M. Edmonds, *The Greek Bucolic Poets* (1912), 506.

⁸ E.g. **Jacob Milgrom**, *Leviticus 23–27: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, AB 3B (New York: Doubleday, 2001), 2129–30. This was first pointed out to me by my friend Moshe Kline who was Milgrom’s pupil. See **Moshe Kline**, “Structure Is Theology: The Composition of Leviticus,” in *Current Issues in Priestly and Related Literature: The Legacy of Jacob Milgrom and Beyond*, ed. Roy E. Gane and Ada Taggar-Cohen, RBS 82 (Atlanta: SBL, 2015): 225–64.

⁹ See the forthcoming “Chapter 1 Appendix B: Genesis as a Weave,” in my *Genesis 1–3: Creation, Invisible Touch* vol. 1 (Dacono, CO: Waters of Creation Publishing, 2022), 25–37.

Ecclesiastes 3:1-8 very much appears to be a **pattern poem** about “**time.**” One person has said, “**The physical structure of the poem gives a picture of the structuring which God actually works out in the word,**”¹⁰ and he in fact likens it to the altar poem.

But how might you write such a thing? Writing a poem to look like a tangible thing like an altar is one thing, but time is something completely different. It’s so abstract. To help us see what Ecclesiastes has done, I want to return to Seegar’s song and compare it, because it is very clear that he did not understand this about our poem. His famous song is close to the original, but **it departs at some very important places.**

Of course, one is that he has **a chorus** (“Turn! Turn! Turn!”), and that’s fine, that’s makes the song work. He also adds his own line to the last line of the poem, “**A time for peace, I swear it’s not too late.**” That last bit is **Seeger’s protest line**, and it is not found in Ecclesiastes. Again, he said this was **for artistic reasons**. He also repeats a couple of lines (A time of love, a time of hate x2; A time for peace x2). Yet, he still has fourteen lines, just like the poem. To

¹⁰ **Edward Wilde**, “Ecclesiastes 3:1-8.c,” *Memoirandremains* (Aug 5, 2012), <https://memoirandremains.com/2012/08/05/ecclesiastes-31-8-c/>. This is the place that got me thinking about the Altar poem again.

get this he has dropped keeping and casting away (**Ecc 3:6b**) and keeping silent and speaking (**7b**). I tell you these things so that you know what you are listening to is a creative reappropriation of the poem, not the identical poem. And to me, that's fine.

I'm more interested in the much lesser noticed changes, because they are very informative for understanding what *Qoheleth* is doing with his poem. Seeger reverses the order of “a time to break down and time to build up,” “a time to weep and a time to laugh,” and “a time to mourn and a time to dance.” He admits that he “... rearranged it very slightly so it rhymed better. A time of war time of *peace*, a time you may *embrace*, ‘embrace’ and ‘peace.’ A time of love a time of *hate* ... a time of *peace*, I swear it's not too *late*.”¹¹ Again, the creative license is fine. However, these subtle changes that you might find meaningless actually matter very much to the way Ecclesiastes is written. The Preacher puts his words in his order for a reason and when you see what the Preacher is doing, it is a wonder.

¹¹ Pete Seeger, “Pete Seeger on The Byrds and “Turn! Turn! Turn!,” *You Tube* (Apr 28, 2009), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i2OYfmiysWo>.

KJV Original: Intro + 14 Pairs	Seeger Moved to Line Up with Ecclesiastes	Seeger's Poem
To every <i>thing</i> there is a season, and a time to every purpose under the heaven:	To everything (turn, turn, turn) There is a season (turn, turn, turn) And a time to every purpose, under heaven	To everything (turn, turn, turn) There is a season (turn, turn, turn) And a time to every purpose, under heaven
1 A time to be born, and a time to die;	1 A time to be born, a time to die	1 A time to be born, a time to die
2 a time to plant, and a time to pluck up <i>that which is</i> planted;	2 A time to plant, a time to reap	2 A time to plant, a time to reap
3 A time to kill, and a time to heal;	3 A time to kill, a time to heal	3 A time to kill, a time to heal
4 a time to break down, and a time to build up;	5 A time to build up , a time to break down	4 A time to laugh, a time to weep (chorus)
5 A time to weep, and a time to laugh;	4 A time to laugh , a time to weep	5 A time to build up, a time to break down
6 a time to mourn, and a time to dance;	6 A time to dance , a time to mourn	6 A time to dance, a time to mourn
7 A time to cast away stones, and a time to gather stones together;	7 A time to cast away stones, a time to gather stones together	7 A time to cast away stones, a time to gather stones together (chorus)
8 a time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing;	10 A time you may embrace, a time to refrain from embracing	8 A time of love, a time of hate
9 A time to get, and a time to lose;	11 A time to gain, a time to lose	9 A time of war, a time of peace
10 a time to keep, and a time to cast away;		10 A time you may embrace, a time to refrain from embracing (chorus)
11 A time to rend, and a time to sew;	12 A time to rend, a time to sew	11 A time to gain, a time to lose
12 a time to keep silence, and a time to speak;		12 A time to rend, a time to sew
13 A time to love, and a time to hate;	8 A time of love, a time of hate 13 A time for love, a time for hate	13 A time for love, a time for hate
14 a time of war, and a time of peace.	9 A time of war, a time of peace 14 A time for peace, I swear it's not too late	14 A time for peace, I swear it's not too late

The poem has been shown to be **chiastic**, but not the way most of these structures are developed.¹² Rather than being

¹² Originally in **Wilfred G. E. Watson**, “Chiastic Patterns in Biblical Hebrew Poetry,” in *Chiasmus in Antiquity: Structures, Analyses, Exegesis*, ed. John W. Welch (Eugene, OR: Wipf

organized by words (these follow different forms of Hebrew poetry like antithetical and synonymous parallelism, see below), they are **developed by theme and word order**. So let's look at the verses.

First, though it fits into the overall structure, **vs. 1** is quite different from the other verses in the poem, which is obvious on the surface when you read it. But vs. 1 is doing something vv. 2-7 do not do. It forms a very simple chiasm:

ESV

- A. For everything
- B. There is a season
- B'. And a time
- A'. For every matter under heaven

Literally

- A. For everything
- B. There is **an appointed time**
- B'. And a time
- A'. For every event under the heavens

Vv. 2-8 form the meat of the poem. They are brilliantly simple and yet profoundly complex. No single verse is chiasmic. Instead, they form pairs of opposites. These pairs take us through many different aspects of life. They are formed out of what we call **merisms**, a literary device that

& Stock, 1981), 144-45. This has since been refined by **William D. Barrick**, "Ecclesiastes: The Philippians of the Old Testament. Chapter 3: The Hours, Days, and Years of Our Lives," Bereans Adult Bible Fellowship (Placerita Baptist Church, 2010), <http://drbarrick.org/files//studynotes/Ecclesiastes/Ecclesiastes03PBC.pdf>. This has since been turned into a book which I do not have. See **William D. Barrick**, *Ecclesiastes: The Philippians of the Old Testament*, Focus on the Bible Series (Geanies House, Ross-shire, Scotland: Christian Focus Publications, 2015).

mentions extremes in some category in order to portray it as a totality.¹³ Interestingly, they cannot be done at the same time.¹⁴

As opposites, many think of the pairs as **positive (+) vs. negative (-)** or perhaps **desirable vs. undesirable**. Since some deny this is true for all of them,¹⁵ perhaps something like **construction vs. destruction** is better. Some are clearly destructive (death, plucking up, killing, breaking down, losing, tearing, casting away (x2), rending, hating, war), while the rest are *the result of* something destructive (weeping, mourning, keeping silent). And their matching opposites work the same way.

Very incredibly, if we take those positives and negatives and map them out, we find that the word order does something amazing. It does something that Seeger's rendition, as beautiful as it is, destroys. **Vs. 2** begins with **two positives** (birth, planting) followed by their opposite negatives (death, uprooting). **Vv. 3-4** then reverse the order, giving us **four negatives** (killing, tearing down, weeping,

¹³ See **William W. Klein**, Craig L. Blomberg, Robert L. Hubbard, Jr., *Introduction to Biblical Interpretation* (Dallas: Word Publishing, 1993), 239.

¹⁴ See **Wilde**.

¹⁵ Some deny this. E.g. **Jesse M. Peterson**, "Times as Task, Not Timing: reconsidering Qoheleth's Catalogue of the Times," *Vetus Testamentum* (Nov 2021), <https://brill.com/view/journals/vt/aop/article-10.1163-15685330-bja10039/article-10.1163-15685330-bja10039.xml#FN000053/>.

mourning) followed by their opposite positives (healing, building up, laughing, dancing). **Vv. 5-6** reverse it again, now giving us **four positives** (casting away stones,¹⁶ embracing, seeking, keeping) followed by their four negatives (gathering stones, refraining from embracing, losing, throwing away). Again, this is reversed in **vs. 7**, but now with just **two negatives** (tearing apart, being silent) followed by their opposite positives (sewing together, speaking). This is identical to what we saw in **vs. 2**, only reversed. This gives you the following extremely well-ordered structure:¹⁷

<i>verse 2</i>	+ giving birth + planting	> >	- dying - uprooting
<i>verse 3</i>	- killing - tearing down	< <	+ healing + building up
<i>verse 4</i>	- weeping - mourning	< <	+ laughing + dancing
<i>verse 5</i>	+ throwing stones + embracing	> >	- gathering stones - refraining from embracing
<i>verse 6</i>	+ searching + keeping	> >	- giving up searching - throwing away
<i>verse 7</i>	- tearing apart - being silent	< <	+ sewing together + speaking

¹⁶ This one is debated (see below).

¹⁷ This chart is taken from **Barrick**, “Ecclesiastes,” 20.

Thus, vv. 2-7 form a chiasm not of words, but of word *order*:

A. Positive-Negative (x2) (v. 2)	2	6
B. Negative-Positive (x4) (vv. 3-4)	4	
B'. Positive Negative (x4) (vv. 5-6)	4	6
A'. Negative Positive (x2) (v. 7)	2	

This seems to leave **vs. 8** out in the cold. It isn't. So far it fits 12 of the 14 pairs together into **two interlocking sets of six**. Leaving one set of pairs remaining. This emulates Gen 1 creation with its 6+1 pattern and Gen 2 pairs (male/female). Genesis 1, of course, is the great opening chapter on "time" in the Bible. Modeling a poem on time after the opening chapter on time builds a powerful theology of time into fabric of the structure of the poem itself! So how does vs. 8 fit in?

Vs. 8 follows **the same simple structure as vs. 1** in that it forms a of words:

Ecc 3:1	Ecc 3:8
A. For everything	A. A time to love
B. There is an appointed time	B. A time to hate
B'. And a time	B'. A time for war
A'. For every event under the heavens	A'. And a time for peace

This matches the beginning of the poem up with the end in a way that the opening line of Genesis 1:1 acts as an introduction, while the seventh day is set apart as a unique day that concludes Creation.

Ecclesiastes 3:1-8: A Poem about Time	
To every <i>thing</i> <i>there is a season,</i> and a time to every purpose under the heaven:	
1 A time to be born, and a time to die;	7 A time to cast away stones, and a time to gather stones together;
2 a time to plant, and a time to pluck up <i>that which is planted</i> ;	8 a time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing;
3 A time to kill, and a time to heal;	9 A time to get, and a time to lose;
4 a time to break down, and a time to build up;	10 a time to keep, and a time to cast away;
5 A time to weep, and a time to laugh;	11 A time to rend, and a time to sew;
6 a time to mourn, and a time to dance;	12 a time to keep silence, and a time to speak;
13 A time to love, and a time to hate;	
14 a time of war, and a time of peace.	

Genesis 1:1-2:3: "In the Beginning" (Time)	
God Created The heavens And the earth And the earth The Deep God's Spirit	
Day 1	Day 4
Light (day and night)	Lights in heaven
Day 2	Day 5
Water and sky	Fish and birds
Day 3	Day 6
Land and vegetation	Animals and humans
The heavens and earth were finished On the seventh day God ended his work He rested on the seventh day God blessed the seventh day He rested from his work which he created	

The structure of Ecclesiastes emulates the structure of **creation** and gives you a theology that time belongs to God (vs. 1 in both). He made it. The words with their perfect 28, 14, and 7 “times” (also emulating Genesis 1) teach that life is full of different events, some good and some bad, some positive and some negative, some desirable and some undesirable.¹⁸ They always intertangle and they always

¹⁸ **Going Deeper.** Besides the 6+1 and opposite pairing ideas that emulate Genesis 1-2, the 7, 14, 28 pattern of 7x x is deeply embedded in Genesis 1. See my sermon “Temple Building,” 7-9. <https://uploads.documents.cimpress.io/v1/uploads/1160f2b9-23e5-4a2d-96a1-277b3077f554~110/original?tenant=vbu-digital>.

But there may be even more still. Someone demonstrates that the literary genre called “generic introduction” is what some scholars believe is going on in both this poem and

come around and around again, moving from one to another, shifting to extremes, but always working towards an equilibrium. Some you can't wait to come and some you can't wait for them to be over. But **none are haphazard or random**. Even if we don't like them, they are orderly, like the poem in which they are found, reflecting the God who controls them. And so, as Barrick says, "**The structure provides organization for the theme of time.**"¹⁹ Like the poem itself, these times that come to us are ordered and ordained by God. As in the word of God, so in the world.

But most people do not think this way about such events. Some even deny that this is the way of it in the Preacher's poem!²⁰ And yet, this is the way the poem explicitly begins. What do I mean? Let's turn to the verses and their theology.

A Season? (Ecclesiastes 3:1)

Many translations, including the ESV and KJV render the first line of the first verse as something like, for

Genesis 1:1ff. Thus, the very pattern of Ecc 3:1-8 emulates that of Genesis 1:1-2:3 from beginning to end. See the **Olalekan Bamidele**, "Literary Forms and Interpretation of Ecclesiastes 3:1-8," *Academia*, 7, https://www.academia.edu/10745032/LITERARY_FORMS_AND_INTERPRETATION_OF_ECCLESIASTES_3_1_8.

¹⁹ **Barrick**, *Ecclesiastes* (book), 64.

²⁰ This is the case with **Peterson**, though I think his proposal works as a complement rather than a mutually exclusive theory to the one here. I'll talk more about this next time.

everything “there is a *season...*” I think this is the most important word of our passage. Everything hinges on its meaning. The word (*zeman*) appears only seven times in the OT (Ezra 10:14; Neh 2:6; 10:35; 13:31; Est 9:27, 31). In every other instance, it clearly refers to a very specific, *predesignated* time. Hence, a different translation is “appointed time” (NAS). The word “season” is OK in that it is God who appoints the seasons of the year, and that is how our minds first think of the word. But this critical word is being put in chiasmic parallel with the other word for “time” that is used thirty times in the poem. This highlights that the “appointed time” comes before all other “times.” It is what gives all the other “times” their ultimate significance.²¹ There is an appointed time for all other times. This appointed time provides order. And, like the poem itself, it provides structure to the times we live in.

This appointed time stands in contrast to the second “time” in the verse. It is in this second time (and for some, also the first) that some want to force the poem into an either/or. “And a time to every purpose under heaven” (vs.

²¹ The LXX is fascinating here in that it uses *chronos* to translate *zeman*, but *kairos* to translate the 30 instances of *et*. *Chronos*, of course, is the word chosen to identify that god of Time (Kronos) in Greek mythology, hence at the very least, some kind of supernatural meaning as opposed to the mundane meaning of *kairos* which is never identified with a god.

1). **Who is doing the purposing here?** There are two options. God. Us.²² So the either/or dilemma is being forced to choose between one or the other in terms of who is “purposing.” When you read through the list of pairs in the poem, you see that there are many things that we do that God does not do. We **weep**. We **laugh**. We **mourn**. We **dance**. For this reason, some see the poem as helping us see that there is a “**proper, appropriate, or opportune time at which to act.**”²³ The point being, if you aren’t wise, you will act improperly and miss the moment or even make a fool out of yourself.

On the other hand, there are things in the poem that you have no control whatsoever over. The day of your **birth**. The day of your **death**. The **seasons** that bring the proper time to plant and reap, and so on. Thus, others see a totally different purpose of the poem, which is not to describe the

²² The word translated here as “purpose” (KJV, GNV, etc.) is *chephets*. Other translations are “delight” (YLT), “event” (NAS), “matter” (ESV), “*pragma*” (LXX), “experience” (TNK), “intention” (CJB). The normal rendering in other places is any of these other words, words having more to do with our involvement. However, “Purpose” is a possible translation, and makes sense of the rare “**under heaven**” as opposed to “**under the sun.**” “Under heaven” must involve the entire created order, not just things down here, and given the parallel with 1:3-11, things outside of our own control are certainly at the very least implied by the word. Thus, both God and humans are implied by the word. On the relationship of 1:3-11 to 3:1-11 see the chiasm in **Naoto Kamano**, *Cosmology and Character: Qoheleth’s Pedagogy from a Rhetorical-Critical Perspective* (Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft. New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2002), 32.

²³ Peterson, 2.

proper times the wise person should act, but to describe the fact that God has ordained all of the times that occur.²⁴

Many take this second idea in a fatalistic direction, a direction that leads to some rather hopeless places. The way I understand fatalism, it isn't that all things are *foreordained* and *predetermined*, which takes an intelligent mind, but that there is no rhyme or reason behind it. It just is. The old Jewish orientalist and librarian Morris Jastrow wrote,

The happenings of this world are preordained by God and take place in the order and at the time determined by the great Power who governs all things ... Is Koheleth then a fatalist? Surely ... The time when a man is to be born is fixed as is the time of his death (3:2)—fixed as definitely as the time for sewing seeds and for pulling up the ripened plant. If everything is preordained, it is idle to make the effort to change things. Koheleth's conclusion from his fatalistic outlook upon life is to discourage those who believe that the aim of life is to work for reforms and improvement, to leave the world better than they found it, even though it be only a trifle better.²⁵

Is that why our poem is here? You might be able to get something like that from vs. 9, “What gain has the worker

²⁴ Peterson, 4.

²⁵ Morris Jastrow, *A Gentle Cynic* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1919), 141.

from his toil?” But this is reading into the passage things that aren’t stated. If anything, this verse takes us back to 1:3, “What does man gain by all the toil at which he toils under the sun?” And as such, the poem may in fact end up being used as a kind of “‘job description’ of the things we undergo on this earth that are allotted to humankind”²⁶ that results in the conclusion that because engaging in them does not give us anymore “gain” than anything else he has investigated, they do not bring us any closer to finding the meaning of life.²⁷

But that hardly means he is discouraging us from doing anything to improve the things around us. That’s what fatalism does. It takes responsibility off us, because the universe is just some clockwork of parts and gears that do what they are going to do. Like Doris Day sang, “*Que sura sura. Whatever will be, will be,*”²⁸ or as Paul McCartney sang, “*Live and let die.*”²⁹ There’s nothing you can do anyway, so who cares?

Better, is to take the biblical view that it is not fate or some inert “power” like karma that does these things, but it is the God of the universe who holds all things in his

²⁶ Peterson, 19.

²⁷ My summary of Peterson found on p. 25 (first full sentence).

²⁸ Doris Day, “Que Sera, Sera (Whatever Will Be, Will Be),” Columbia, 1956.

²⁹ Paul McCartney and Wings, “Live and Let Die,” *Live and Let Die*, Apple, 1972.

sovereign, providential hands. John Barrick said, “Time operates under God’s creative fiat. He ordained the sun, moon, and stars in their courses for the purpose of measuring off seasons, months, days, and years (Gen 1:14). The orderliness of time reflects the Creator’s orderliness,”³⁰ an order that we’ve seen is encoded in the structure of the poem itself. Thus, Reformed pastors rightly conclude the opposite of fatalist. We should “redeem the time” by “waiting for God’s timing,” “living your whole life knowing there is a time for you to die,” and “make good use of whatever time you have.”³¹ This means that there is a biblical antimony (paradox, puzzle) at work in vs. 1, that in the events of the poem, God is sovereign lord of all that comes to pass and we are responsible for how we react in his world.

A Time (Ecclesiastes 3:2-8)

Let’s think now on the fourteen opposites, specifically, focusing on both individual lines as well as the linked pairs.³²

³⁰ Barrick, “Ecclesiastes” (paper), 20-21.

³¹ Philip Graham Ryken, *Ecclesiastes: Why Everything Matters*, Preaching the Word (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2010), 84-86.

³² While it goes beyond what we can do here, it may or may not be that the pairs (especially those of the same color above) can be thought about together. Birth and death, planting (seed) and plucking may be related to the sexual overtones (see below) in casting/gathering stones and embracing/refraining. Weeping and laughing, mourning and dancing may be related to rending and sewing garments for funerals, along with keeping silent and speaking, especially in the face of disaster (see below). And so on. Apparently, Loader did some of this. See James A. Loader, *Polar Structures in the Book of Qohelet*, BZAW 152 (New York: de Gruyter, 1979).

The first is that there is *a time to be born, and a time to die* (Ecc 3:2). Like the other 13 that follow, these are opposites. The beginning and the end. The beginning and the end of all life on this planet. As such, it is an appropriate way to begin.

Being born is associated with the positive, desirable, and constructive set. Death is associated with the negative, undesirable, deconstructive set. They happen to all of us, even the Lord Jesus was born and died (*but was raised again*). Now, while both of these happen to us as individuals, we are personally in control of, at best, only one of them, and that is only when we are violating the commandment (You shall not murder) through unlawful murder or suicide. Even then, it is the Lord who opens the womb (Gen 29:31; 1Sam 1:5; Isa 66:9). It is the Lord who numbers our days (Job 14:5-6; Ps 139:16). Some people do not want a God who controls the day of their death. These people need to contemplate long and hard on this poem. I find it comforting. No murderer is subtracting from the time God has appointed for a person to die, though they are guilty for what they do. As Luther said, “You cannot live any longer than the Lord has prescribed, nor die any sooner.”³³

³³ Martin Luther, “Notes on Ecclesiastes,” in *Luther’s Works*, trans. and ed. Jaroslav Pelikan, 56 vols. (St. Louis: Concordia, 1972), 15:51.

The second is related. *A time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is planted* (2b), or as Seeger put it, a time to reap. Some think that this is proof that there is **no negative** to be seen in this pairing and hence the whole idea of a chiasm is just silly. For what do we do when we reap? Do we not gain? Do we not eat? Do we not celebrate? But think about this **from the plant's perspective!** The planting of a seed is the beginning of a plant's life. The plucking it up or reaping is its end. **I don't think that makes the plant particularly happy.** It is a deconstruction, *death* to the plant. This is therefore parallel to the first pair, as both refer to a beginning and ending (Longman calls them cycles of life). This is called synonymous parallelism, where plant answers birth and pluck answers die.

While these are things that we do to plants, it is also important to remember that **you can only plant and reap anything if you do it at the right time**, the time God has ordained. It is a fool who tries to plant his tomato seed in late November in Colorado. It is the even bigger fool who tries to go out and reap his ripe, juicy, red tomato in February. In this case, there truly is a "season" for every purpose under heaven and God has ordained it to be that way. He has made

time orderly, predicable, knowable, helpful. This is a truly amazing creation.

The third is *a time to kill, and a time to heal* (3a). Obviously, killing is the negative, while healing is the positive, and thus it has reversed the order. Many people have no problem with there being a time to heal. Thank God there is! But *a time to kill*? How can there ever be a time to kill? Well, we just killed the plant, though hopefully it was also “mostly dead” because it was ready to give us its food. We kill an animal to eat and live. Death produces life. Sometimes, it is appropriate to kill other humans, for that is what God’s law teaches us about justice in the *lex talionis* (an eye for an eye). If someone breaks into your house and tries to torture, rape, and kill your family before your eyes, there is a time to kill. It is *the fool, worse, the sociopath* who would just sit there and watch it unfold like some kind of altruistic pacifist. Imagine this scenario and the Bible saying “there is never a time to kill under any circumstances.” It doesn’t. There is.

The fourth is related, but expansive. *A time to break down, and a time to build up* (3b). War is a breaking down. Healing is a building up. Again, the negative comes first. Deconstruction. But it goes beyond war and healing. We tear a structure down if it is unlivable or if we want

something totally new (only the rich do that). We build it to house what we desire. Our founding fathers built a nation to house eternal, unchanging principles and rights. Some are in the process of tearing it down because they hate those rights and the One who gave them. In whatever the case, both normally belong to the realm of **deconstruction and construction**.³⁴

The fifth pair is *a time to weep, and a time to laugh* (4a). If you've ever known anyone who only knows how to make jokes, they do not understand this. Ours is a culture running as fast as we can away from weeping, mostly because we are running away from reality. This matches with **the sixth** which is *a time to mourn, and a time to dance* (4b). They both deal with emotions. We see a ton of death on TV and in the movies, but not in real life. To many live only in virtual reality. We've lost what it is to mourn. We want our funerals to be "celebrations" of life, not times of mourning. There is a time to mourn. That is not the time to dance. A wedding is the time to dance. God has made each one for its own ordained season. Both pairs of opposites are necessarily for understanding the fulness of life on this earth.

³⁴ Tremper Longman, *The Book of Ecclesiastes*, The New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1998), 115.

The seventh pair is *a time to cast away stones, and a time to gather stones together* (5a). This is by far the most difficult to understand, but I think recognizing the structure goes a long way in proper interpretation. Seeing a continuation of the parallels with the next (eighth) pair, *a time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing* (5b),³⁵ a Jewish Midrash interprets the former symbolically, as the time when a wife is ritually clean and the latter as when she is unclean (i.e. menstruating), which another sees it as *having or abstaining from intercourse*. Both match embracing or refraining.³⁶ Those at least fit the structure's positive first switch. It may be better that casting away stones removing stones from a field (cp. Isa 5:2) to prepare it for cultivation gathering stones as ruining someone else's field (as in a time of war; cf. 2Kgs 3:19, 25),³⁷ which also fit embracing or refraining from it.

The ninth pair is *a time to seek, and a time to lose* (6a). Again, this seems to match in some ways the tenth pair, *a time to keep, and a time to cast away* (6b) in that both deal with

³⁵ **The Testament of the Twelve Patriarchs** (T.Naph 8:8) interprets this as a time for a man to embrace his wife, and a season to abstain from embrace for his prayer.

³⁶ **Michael V. Fox**, *Ecclesiastes*, The JPS Bible Commentary (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2004), 21.

³⁷ **Iain Provan**, *Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*, NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 2001), 88.

possessions. If you seek something and find it, you want to keep it. You can lose both that which you have sought or cast away what you have kept. In an illustrated children's picture book of this song, the authors depict the fisherman keeping their big fish and casting away the small fish to go free.³⁸ The whole idea of the mundane, ordinary life we humans live is captured well and it is a major thrust of the poem.

The eleventh pair is *a time to tear, and a time to sew* (7a). This does not at first glance seem related to the twelfth pair, *a time to keep silence, and a time to speak* (7b). However, it may very well be that the tearing refers to the tearing of clothes in a mourning ceremony (1Sam 4:12; etc.). When the period of mourning was over, they would sew it back up again. Similarly, when Job's friends came to him, they were silent for seven days (Job 2:13). Only then they did begin to speak. But, of course, there are more times than these to be silent and to speak, and so like others, the second pair expands upon the first.

³⁸ Diane Dillon and Leo Dillon, *To Every Thing There Is A Season* (NY: Blue Sky Press, 1998). You can watch the whole thing read here (it is a very multi-culture take inspired by millennia of artwork found across the globe).

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=He9qqjDkwC8&ab_channel=SylviaMiller-Mutia.

The thirteenth is *a time to love, and a time to hate* (8a). Like killing and healing, some might think that there could never be a time to hate, only a time for “love, man” (insert peace sign). That’s only what those who hide their hate want others to think though. Everyone hates certain things and there are times to hate. God says he hates when people devise evil in their hearts (Zech 8:17). He says he hates the assembly of evildoers (Ps 26:5). David says he hates those who hate the LORD, in fact he says he does this with “complete hatred” (Ps 139:21-22). Paul says he hates his sin (Rom 7:15). And yet in all this he says, “In your anger, do not sin” (Eph 4:26).

Of course, love is its opposite, or perhaps maybe we could think of the fact that because we love one thing so much, we hate that which stands in its way. God is love, and so those things that defile his Name, he hates. Far too many people are simply dishonest about love vs. hatred. As I said, everyone hates, and often, those same people do not know how to show true love—unconditional love of another person.

Corporately speaking, the fourteenth pair is a specific manifestation of love and hate in a community or country: *a time for war, and a time for peace* (8b). Like killing and hatred,

there are **sometimes times for war**. When great enemies arise in the name of evil, in the name of counterfeit gods, doing much wickedness, forcing others do to the same or die, or just killing them for no reason other than pure evil, that may be a time for war. The OT has much to say about this, both in terms of his rousing the Assyrian and Babylonian to take his people captive for their sins, and for his sovereign hand bringing about the destruction of those very nations for their own. And yet, he has **flipped the order here** at the end so that peace comes last. Of course, Seeger adds that line, “**A time for peace, I swear it’s not too late.**” This demonstrates well that war is not the state of things that any rational, sane person wants. Peace is a state of well-being between parties, and the greatest well-being anyone can have is peace with God, for we are all born at enmity, that is at war with him.

More than Turn! Turn! Turn!

This is how the Preacher ends. There is much here to contemplate. Probably a lifetime’s worth. Allow me to return one more time to the song and the main addition Seeger has. “**Turn! Turn! Turn!**” is the main addition so that the song would have a chorus. Written out, those are each

followed by exclamation points, not commas. The idea is that this is the way of the world. It must keep on like this. Though things move between opposites, it just keeps turning.

In his own words he reflected on this saying, “This is an extraordinary poem with its world full of opposites intertwined, good and bad untangling up all the time. And that is something worth considering, even though only God knows³⁹” He acknowledges it has something to do with God. By itself, **Ecclesiastes 3:1-8** has only an inkling of supernatural in it. This is in the first verse, where everything “*under heaven*” has been given *an ordained time*. But just hearing these verses alone can easily make for simply a nice, secular poem about the world. Many people take this poem just this way, as this is just kind of the circle of life. But when we add the Preacher’s own reflections in the verses that follow, we are forced to much deeper thoughts than just the world turning. What a wonder it is!

Those reflections begin in **vs. 9**, but we will only look at **vv. 9-11**. “What gain has the worker from his toil? I have seen the business that God has given to the children of man to be busy with. He has made everything beautiful in its

³⁹ Seeger, *YouTube*.

time. Also, he has put eternity into man's heart, yet so that he cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end.” The ending here makes it clear *that it is God* who has “established periods, moments, or times for a wide diversity of emotions and activities.”⁴⁰ This puts us on spiritual ground now. Indeed, it puts us on extremely solid ground, not the ground of fatalism, but of divine sovereignty—God's total control. I'll return to this in a moment.

Rather than dwelling on this, the preacher does what he has done and will do throughout his sermon. At first, he continues where he left off before the poem. His rhetorical question is that *there is no gain for the worker for his toil*. This seems to imply that his poem must be understood as our toiling through all of these opposites as the world turns, turns, turns. **Vs. 10** seems to only reinforce this point. *He has seen everything* that God has given us to be busy with. We might conclude, then *what's the point?*

Ending on **vs. 11** can give a much bigger perspective. First, not only has God made all this so orderly as the works of his creation, *he has made everything beautiful in its time*. It isn't that everything is always beautiful. We wreck many

⁴⁰ Longman, *Ecclesiastes*, 118.

things. We laugh when we should be crying. We speak when we should shut up. We scatter when we should gather. But **in its time**, even hatred and killing and war are beautiful, if you understand why they are necessary. How much more those things that we already recognize as such?

If all things have been made beautiful in their time, then as he ended the last chapter, **why would we not want to enjoy this life he has given to us?** There is no other place in the universe like it, and as someone says, “**God has ... assigned to each individually his appointed place in history.**”⁴¹ So why would anyone look at all this and draw any other conclusion? In fact, this is where **vs. 12** takes us, “**I perceived that there is nothing better for them than to be joyful and to do good as long as they live...**” It takes us back to the theme of joy.

But second, **we don't always enjoy life** now. Some never do. And this leads to the second half of **vs. 11**. First, “**he has put eternity into man's heart, yet so that he cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end.**” “**Eternity**” is an extremely difficult word to translate, and

⁴¹ **Carl Friedrich Keil** and Franz Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Old Testament*, vol. 6 (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1996), 687.

no less than 10 options have been proposed,⁴² not the least of which is because this book seems obsessed with precisely not talking about **eternity** at all. But for the moment, let's go with this very well-known and quite possible translation.

A famous missionary/missiologist wrote a book based on this verse called *Eternity in Their Hearts*,⁴³ in which he gives several stories from the mission field of how belief in the one true God is still darkly and often perversely reflected enough even in the worst pagan cultures that **God has prepared them** to be able to hear and receive the Gospel. Carl Keil put it this way,

God has not only assigned to each individually his appointed place in history ... but that He has also established in man an impulse leading him beyond that which is temporal toward the eternal: it lies in his nature not to be contented with the temporal, but to break through the limits which it draws around him, to escape from the bondage and the disquietude within which he is held, and amid the ceaseless changes of

⁴² **Brian P. Gault**, "A Reexamination of 'Eternity' in Ecclesiastes 3:11," *BibSac* 165 (Jan-Mar 2008): 40-42.

https://www.academia.edu/3770261/A_Reexamination_of_Eternity_in_Ecclesiastes_3_11.

Other discussion on this verse that follows is inspired by this paper. 39-57. One of these options that I will not get into is instead of "eternity" it should be "toil." This fits with vv. 9-10. The idea is that God puts toil in our hearts similar to 8:17, "Then I saw all the work of God, that man cannot find out the work that is done under the sun. However much man may toil in seeking, he will not find it out. Even though a wise man claims to know, he cannot find it out."

⁴³ **Don Richardson**, *Eternity in their Hearts* (Ventura, CA: Regal, 1981).

time to console himself by directing his thoughts to eternity ... the impulse of man shows that his innermost wants cannot be satisfied by that which is temporal. He is a being limited by time, but as to his innermost nature he is related to eternity. That which is transient yields him no support, it carries him on like a rushing stream, and constrains him to save himself by laying hold on eternity.⁴⁴

There have been a lot of reflections over the years given about this verse, and I'm going to look at some of those more **next time**. But there is a second translation of "eternity" that I want to make you aware of. It is the word **darkness**. It would read, "God has put *darkness* into man's heart, so that he cannot find out what God has done from **beginning to the end**." "In this reading God has intentionally obscured people's knowledge so that they cannot discover certain features of His program."⁴⁵ Why?

It is out of this darkness, this inability of man to figure out the meaning of life, that so many secular people read this marvelous poem and are thus never moved from their unbelief. The brilliant poet and musician **Van Morrison** has a song that feels very much like it comes out of Ecclesiastes

⁴⁴ **Keil** and Delitzsch, 687-88.

⁴⁵ **Gault**, 57.

3 (the whole chapter). It's called "Precious Time." In the song, he takes that fatalistic view of life that we've spoken about. And it's incredibly dark (to a great upbeat jazz tune!):

*It doesn't matter what route you take
Sooner or later the hearts going to break
NO rhyme or reason, no master plan
No Nirvana, no promised land
Because, precious time is slipping away
You know you're only king for a day
It doesn't matter to which God you pray
Precious time is slipping away⁴⁶*

But we've seen here that this is expressly **not true**. Yes, time is slipping away. And yes, it is precious. But the times have been **ordained by God**. And if they are ordained, then *there is* a master plan. And if God has done all this, then it very much matters to which God to you pray. Clearly, Morrison is in the dark.

Knowing the truth about God is the light that shines in our own darkness, and in the world around us that these extremes show can also be so dark. Someone writes, "**In times of tragedy many people ask, 'How could a good God**

⁴⁶ Van Morrison, "Precious Time," *Back on Top*, Point Blank/Virgin, 1999.

allow this to happen?’ However, people are asking the wrong question. While God has created all the ‘times’ of life (3:2–8), each appropriate in its time (v. 10), He has obscured humanity’s knowledge, placing darkness in their hearts, so that they cannot discover His divine program (v. 11). But why?”⁴⁷

Remember, the Preacher returned to this idea of work immediately after giving us this great poem about time. Apparently, all of **these times of our lives are our work!** And God wants us to enjoy the work He has given us (**vv. 12–13**). But much more basic, God wants us to trust in His sovereignty and fear Him. This will come out in **vs. 14**, but it is clearly implied even in **vs. 11**, indeed, in **vs. 1**!

Those who do not fear the Lord can never know what it means to truly enjoy the life that he has given to them. The world will ever only just Turn! Turn! Turn! And their darkened minds will never find the true answers they need. But God has put eternity into our hearts so that we might seek him and find him, for he is not far from any of us. In fact, right now, he is as near as his word. And he bids you to come to him and to stay near to him so that you might know

⁴⁷ Gault, *ibid.*

how to properly discern the times he gives you and so that you might say with another poet,

For EVERYTHING there is a season.

It IS so by God's design.

God is with us in every second! Thanks be to God!⁴⁸

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