

The Book of Ecclesiastes, Teacher's Guide

Lesson 3: A Time for Everything Under Heaven

Ecclesiastes 3:1-22

Teaching Aim (Teacher Orientation)

Help the class see that the poem of times (3:1-8) and the statement that God has set eternity in the heart (3:11) belong together: because God sovereignly orders time and made us for more than time, life 'under the sun' can never finally satisfy, and the right response is reverent fear of God and grateful enjoyment of His daily gifts.

Equip the class to handle 3:18-22 with care, reading Solomon's honest 'under the sun' observation in light of the fuller New Testament revelation of the soul, the resurrection, and final judgment, so that no one mistakes his question for a doctrine of soul sleep or annihilation.

Press every member toward Christ, who alone answers the longing for eternity and secures the judgment and resurrection Solomon could only glimpse, so that the class walks through their seasons trusting His timing.

Question 1

Student Question:

In 3:1-8 Solomon lists fourteen pairs of 'times' that come to every life. What does this poem teach us about God's sovereign ordering of time, and how is that different from saying life is random or merely up to us (compare Psalm 31:15; Acts 17:26)?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Chapter 3 opens with one of the best known passages in all of Scripture, the poem of 'a time for everything.' The key word in 3:1 is 'season,' a fixed or appointed time. Solomon is not merely observing that life has variety; he is confessing that life has order, and that the order is not ours to set. There is a time appointed for every matter under heaven.

The fourteen pairs in 3:2-8 are deliberately comprehensive, sweeping from birth to death, from building to tearing down, from love to hate, from war to peace. By pairing opposites Solomon covers the whole of human experience. Nothing in our lives falls outside the reach of God's appointing. The poem is a quiet rebuke to the modern illusion that we are the masters of our own calendars.

Notice that this poem is not fatalism. Fatalism shrugs and says nothing matters because all is fixed. Solomon's point is the opposite: because God has appointed the seasons, our task is to

discern the time and act wisely within it (compare 8:5–6). There is a time to keep silence and a time to speak; wisdom is knowing which is which.

We should let this poem comfort us. The same God who set the sun on its course and the stars in their places (Psalm 104:19) has not lost track of your seasons. Psalm 31:15 says, 'My times are in your hand.' What looks to us like a tangle of unpredictable events is, to God, a woven design.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- God's sovereignty over time does not erase human responsibility; Scripture holds both together (Acts 17:26–27).
- This poem is descriptive of the seasons all people face; it does not endorse every action as morally right (for example, hatred and war are not commended, only acknowledged as realities of a fallen world).
- Guard against fatalism: 'it is all fixed so nothing I do matters' is a misreading; wisdom acts rightly within God's appointed times.
- Avoid the opposite error of practical atheism that imagines we control everything; Solomon humbles that pride.

Discussion Prompts

- Walk slowly through 3:2–8 and ask the class to name a recent season from their own lives that matches one of the pairs.
- Discuss the difference between fatalism and faith: how does believing God appoints the seasons lead to action rather than passivity?
- How does Psalm 31:15, 'my times are in your hand,' change the way we face a season we did not choose?

Question 2

Student Question:

Look honestly at the pairs in 3:1–8. Which 'time' have you handled poorly in the past, speaking when you should have stayed silent, holding on when you should have let go, and what did you learn?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This self-examination question turns the poem inward. Solomon's pairs are not abstractions; each of us has lived them, and each of us has at times misjudged the moment, speaking when we should have been silent, clinging when we should have released, fighting when we should have made peace.

Wisdom literature is meant to be applied, not merely admired (Romans 15:4). The point of recalling a past failure is not to wallow in regret but to grow in discernment for the seasons still ahead.

Encourage honesty here. Most of us can name a funeral where we said too much, a relationship we gripped too tightly, or a conflict we prolonged. Naming it without shame is how the wisdom of this chapter takes root in real life.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Application of wisdom requires honest self-examination, not self-condemnation (2 Corinthians 13:5).
- Discernment of 'the right time' is a learned skill; James 1:5 invites us to ask God for wisdom.
- Personal accountability matters: we answer for how we steward our seasons (Ezekiel 18:20 affirms each bears his own responsibility).
- Past failures, brought to God, become teachers rather than tormentors.

Discussion Prompts

- Invite one or two members to share a 'wrong time' moment and what they learned, modeling vulnerability first.
- How can we grow in reading the season we are actually in rather than the one we wish we were in?
- What practical habit helps you pause before you speak or act so you choose the right time?

Question 3

Student Question:

Ecclesiastes 3:11 says God 'has put eternity into man's heart.' What does that phrase mean, and how does it explain why nothing 'under the sun' ever finally satisfies us?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Verse 11 is the theological heart of the chapter and arguably of the whole book: '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.' Two great truths sit side by side here.

First, God makes things beautiful 'in its time.' The seasons we cannot control are nonetheless being woven into something fitting and good by the hand of God. We see fragments; He sees the finished tapestry. This is not a promise that every event feels good, but that God is fitting all things into His good purpose (compare Romans 8:28).

Second, and most striking, God has set 'eternity' in the human heart. Unlike the beasts, human beings carry an awareness of forever, a hunger that no earthly thing can fill. We are made in

God's image (Genesis 1:27), built with a horizon larger than this world. That is precisely why 'under the sun' living always leaves us restless.

Yet the verse adds a humbling limit: we cannot find out the whole of God's work from beginning to end. We sense eternity, but we cannot map it on our own. That longing is meant to drive us not to despair but to the God who alone spans the eternity He set within us. The New Testament names what Solomon could only ache for: Christ, who brought 'life and immortality to light' (2 Timothy 1:10).

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- 'Eternity in the heart' explains universal human longing and the religious impulse across all cultures (Acts 17:26–27).
- Nothing 'under the sun' can satisfy an eternity-shaped hunger; this is the book's diagnosis of restless materialism.
- Being made in God's image (Genesis 1:27) sets humanity apart from the animals, directly relevant to 3:18–21 later.
- The longing is a signpost pointing to God, not proof we can comprehend Him fully; humility and faith are required.
- Christ is the answer the longing points to (John 4:13–14; 2 Timothy 1:10).

Discussion Prompts

- Ask: what experiences in your life have stirred that ache for 'more,' and where did you take it?
- How does 'eternity in the heart' help explain why wealth, success, and pleasure never finally satisfy?
- If God put the longing there, what does that suggest about where He intends it to lead?

Question 4

Student Question:

When have you most strongly felt that ache for 'eternity,' the sense that this world is not enough, and how have you typically tried to fill it?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question presses the truth of 3:11 into personal experience. Almost everyone has felt the ache, the lump in the throat at a sunset, the homesickness for a place they cannot name, the sense after some achievement that 'this still is not it.'

The danger is in how we try to fill that ache. Many pour it into the very things 'under the sun' that can never hold it: another purchase, another relationship, another thrill, another

distraction. The hunger is good and God-given; the misdirected attempts to satisfy it are where so much heartache comes from.

Help the class see that recognizing the ache for what it is, a longing for God and eternity, is the first step toward rest. As Augustine famously confessed, our hearts are restless until they rest in Him. The ache is not a defect to be silenced but a compass to be followed home.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Naming the longing rightly keeps us from idolatry, from asking finite things to do an infinite job.
- Distraction and consumption are common but failing strategies for an eternity-shaped hunger.
- The Lord's Supper, the assembly, prayer, and the Word feed the soul in ways earthly substitutes cannot.
- Honest discussion guards the class from the despair that comes when we expect the world to satisfy us.

Discussion Prompts

- Ask members to describe a moment that stirred the longing for eternity; resist the urge to fix it too quickly.
- What 'under the sun' things have you asked to satisfy a hunger only God can fill?
- What spiritual practices actually feed the deeper hunger, and how can we lean into them this week?

Question 5

Student Question:

In 3:12–13 Solomon calls the ability to eat, drink, and find enjoyment in our work a 'gift of God.' How does receiving daily life as a gift differ from chasing pleasure as an idol (compare 1 Timothy 6:17)?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Verses 12–13 give Solomon's first positive counsel in the book: there is nothing better than to be joyful and do good as long as we live, and that everyone should eat, drink, and take pleasure in his toil, for 'this is God's gift to man.' This is not hedonism. It is the grateful reception of ordinary life as a gift from a generous Creator.

Note carefully the word 'gift.' Solomon is not telling us to grab pleasure as a way to numb the emptiness. He is telling us to receive our daily bread and our daily work from the hand of God with thanksgiving. The same point appears again in 5:18–20 and 9:7. Joy in the ordinary is a sign of trust, not escape.

Paul echoes this in 1 Timothy 6:17, where God 'richly provides us with everything to enjoy,' and where the rich are warned not to set their hope on uncertain riches but on God. The difference between enjoying a gift and worshipping it is the difference between gratitude and idolatry.

This counsel keeps Ecclesiastes from sliding into pure gloom. Even in a world that 'passes away,' the simple table, honest labor, and shared bread are graces to be savored before God. To refuse to enjoy them is its own kind of ingratitude.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Enjoyment of daily life is commanded as a gift, not condemned as worldliness; gratitude is the posture.
- The line between receiving a gift and idolizing it is set by whether God is thanked and trusted (1 Timothy 4:4-5).
- Work itself, not just leisure, is presented as a sphere of God-given joy (compare Colossians 3:23-24).
- This guards against an unbiblical asceticism that despises God's good creation.
- Contentment with daily provision is godliness with great gain (1 Timothy 6:6-8).

Discussion Prompts

- What is the difference between enjoying a meal as a gift and using food, drink, or pleasure to escape?
- How can we 'do good' and be 'joyful' (3:12) even in a difficult season?
- Name one ordinary daily gift you tend to overlook, and how could you receive it with thanks this week?

Question 6

Student Question:

Think about your ordinary work and daily routine this past week. Did you receive it as a gift from God's hand, or merely endure it? What would change if you saw it as a gift?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question moves from doctrine to the dinner table and the time clock. Much of life is ordinary: the commute, the dishes, the meetings, the chores. Solomon insists these are not obstacles to the spiritual life but the very arena where God's gifts are received.

When we merely endure our work and routine, we treat the bulk of our waking hours as something to be survived. When we receive it as a gift, the same hours become an offering and a grace. The change is not in the tasks but in the heart that meets them.

Colossians 3:23 lifts this even higher for the Christian: 'Whatever you do, work heartily, as for the Lord and not for men.' The believer's ordinary labor, done unto Christ, is transformed from

drudgery into worship. Help the class imagine how Monday morning looks different when it is received from God's hand.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The sacred and the secular are not as separate as we assume; daily work is a sphere of obedience and gift.
- Gratitude is a discipline that reframes ordinary tasks; it can be practiced deliberately.
- Discontent often springs from comparison; receiving 'my' work as gift cures the comparison.
- Christ as the audience of our labor (Colossians 3:23–24) dignifies even the humblest task.

Discussion Prompts

- Did you receive last week's work as a gift or merely endure it? Be honest.
- What would change in your attitude tomorrow morning if you truly believed your work is a gift from God?
- How might working 'as for the Lord' reshape a task you currently dread?

Question 7

Student Question:

Ecclesiastes 3:14 says whatever God does endures forever and that He works 'so that people fear before him.' What is the difference between this reverent fear of God and being merely afraid of Him, and how should it shape our worship and obedience?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Verse 14 lifts our eyes from our brief lives to the permanence of God's work: 'I perceive that whatever God does endures forever; nothing can be added to it, nor anything taken from it. God has done it, so that people fear before him.' Here Solomon contrasts our fleeting labors with God's unchangeable work.

The purpose clause is crucial: God works in this enduring way 'so that people fear before him.' The fear of God is not the trembling dread of a slave before a tyrant. It is the reverent awe of a creature before the Creator, the worshipful seriousness that bends the knee and orders the life. The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom (Proverbs 9:10), and it is the conclusion to which all of Ecclesiastes drives (12:13).

Because God's work is unchangeable and ours is not, we are humbled into our proper place. We are not the architects of eternity; we are creatures invited to revere the One who is. This reverence is meant to shape our worship, our obedience, and our whole approach to life.

This fear is not opposed to love; it is the soil in which true love and obedience grow. To fear God rightly is to take Him seriously enough to trust Him, obey Him, and worship Him as He has directed. It is the steadying anchor of a life that otherwise drifts in vanity.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Reverent fear is the proper creaturely response to the eternal, unchangeable God; it is awe, not terror (Hebrews 12:28–29).
- The fear of God is the beginning of wisdom and the conclusion of Ecclesiastes (Proverbs 9:10; Ecclesiastes 12:13).
- God's unchangeable work humbles human pride and steadies human anxiety.
- Reverent fear expresses itself in worship offered God's way and in glad obedience, not in self-chosen religion.
- This fear and the love of God are not rivals; loving God includes taking Him seriously.

Discussion Prompts

- How is the biblical 'fear of God' different from simply being scared of Him?
- How should the permanence of God's work shape the way we worship and obey?
- Where has reverent fear of God been missing in our culture, and even in our own hearts?

Question 8

Student Question:

When you consider that God's work 'endures forever' and your works often do not, how does that humble you and yet also give you peace?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question lets the contrast of 3:14 do its quiet, humbling work in the heart. Our projects fade; our names are forgotten within a generation or two; even our greatest achievements erode. God's work endures forever.

At first this might feel discouraging, a reminder of how small we are. But there is deep peace in it. We are not asked to be eternal; we are asked to trust the One who is. The pressure to make our lives permanent and significant by our own striving is lifted when we rest in the enduring work of God.

Encourage the class to feel both edges of this truth. It humbles us, and that is good; pride is exhausting. And it comforts us, for the God whose work cannot be added to or taken from holds our small, fleeting lives in His unfailing hands. Our labor 'in the Lord is not in vain' (1 Corinthians 15:58) precisely because it is joined to His enduring work.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Humility before God's permanence frees us from the crushing pressure of self-made significance.
- Our work matters when it is joined to God's enduring purpose (1 Corinthians 15:58).
- Peace comes from resting in God's unchangeable faithfulness, not our own legacy.

- Recognizing our smallness rightly leads to worship, not despair.

Discussion Prompts

- When you consider that God's work endures and yours fades, do you feel more humbled or more at peace, and why?
- How does resting in God's permanence relieve the pressure to make your own life 'count' by striving?
- How does joining our labor to the Lord's work (1 Corinthians 15:58) give it lasting meaning?

Question 9

Student Question:

Solomon makes two observations that must be held together: in 3:17 he says 'God will judge the righteous and the wicked,' and in 3:18–21 he notes that, to the eye under the sun, man and beast seem to share one breath and return to one dust. How do we read 3:18–21 rightly without turning it into a denial of the soul, the resurrection, or final judgment, and how does the fuller revelation of Christ answer the question Solomon could only raise (compare John 5:28–29; 2 Corinthians 5:1–10; Hebrews 9:27)?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This is the heaviest and most carefully handled question in the lesson, because 3:18–21 is among the most misread passages in the book. We must read it the way Solomon wrote it: as an honest observation of what the eye can see 'under the sun,' not as the final word of God on the destiny of the soul. The structure of the chapter itself protects us, because just one verse earlier, in 3:17, Solomon has already declared, 'God will judge the righteous and the wicked, for there is a time for every matter and for every work.' Final judgment is affirmed before the hard observation begins.

In 3:18–21 Solomon notes that, to mere observation, man and beast share a common experience: both breathe, both die, both return to the dust (Genesis 3:19). 'Who knows whether the spirit of man goes upward and the spirit of the beast goes down?' (3:21) is not a denial of the human spirit's destiny; it is the limit of what can be known by looking only at the visible world. From a grave-side, with no revelation, the bodies of man and beast do look alike in death. That is precisely Solomon's point: 'under the sun' you cannot see past the dust.

We must not build a doctrine of soul sleep or annihilation out of these verses. To do so would set Solomon against the rest of Scripture and even against himself, for 3:17 affirms judgment, 12:7 says the dust returns to the earth and 'the spirit returns to God who gave it,' and 12:14 declares that 'God will bring every deed into judgment.' Solomon is raising the question that only fuller revelation can answer; he is not closing the door on the soul.

The New Testament throws the doors wide open. Jesus says plainly in John 5:28–29 that all who are in the tombs will hear His voice and come out, 'those who have done good to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil to the resurrection of judgment.' Paul, in 2 Corinthians 5:1–10, looks past the tent of the body to a building from God, eternal in the heavens, and reminds us that we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ. Hebrews 9:27 settles it: 'it is appointed for man to die once, and after that comes judgment.' What Solomon could only see as far as the dust, Christ has illuminated all the way to resurrection and judgment.

So the pastoral point is this. Ecclesiastes 3:18–21 is meant to strip away every false hope that this life 'under the sun' is all there is or that man, left to himself, is anything more than dust. It drives the honest reader to look up, beyond the sun, to the God who has set eternity in the heart and who has now spoken decisively in His Son. Far from teaching that we perish like animals, the passage exposes how desperately we need the resurrection that only Christ provides.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- 'Under the sun' is the interpretive key: Solomon describes what observation alone can see, not the whole counsel of God.
- Do NOT read soul sleep or annihilation here; 3:17, 12:7, and 12:14 within the same book affirm the spirit's return to God and final judgment.
- Genesis 3:19 (dust to dust) describes the body's fate, not the spirit's destiny; man is made in God's image and is more than an animal (Genesis 1:27).
- The New Testament answers Solomon's open question: John 5:28–29 (two resurrections), 2 Corinthians 5:1–10 (judgment seat of Christ), Hebrews 9:27 (death then judgment).
- Christ 'brought life and immortality to light through the gospel' (2 Timothy 1:10); progressive revelation, not contradiction, explains the difference between Solomon's limited view and the New Testament's clarity.
- The passage humbles human pride and drives us to seek hope beyond 'the sun,' which is exactly where the gospel meets us.
- Old Testament wisdom written before Christ still teaches us today (Romans 15:4); we read it in the light He has since given.

Discussion Prompts

- Have someone read 3:17 aloud before 3:18–21, and ask how that earlier verse guards us from misreading what follows.
- Why is the phrase 'under the sun' the key to reading 3:18–21 correctly?
- Walk through John 5:28–29, 2 Corinthians 5:1–10, and Hebrews 9:27, and ask how Christ answers the very question Solomon could only raise.

Question 10

Student Question:

Name one specific way this chapter is forming you to walk with Christ this week, whether it is trusting His timing in a hard season, receiving an ordinary day as His gift, or living now in light of the judgment and resurrection He has secured.

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This capstone question gathers the whole chapter and asks each member to name one concrete way Christ is forming them through it. Ecclesiastes 3 has handed us three great handles: trust God's timing in our seasons (3:1–8), receive ordinary days as His gift (3:12–13), and live now in the light of judgment and resurrection (3:17–22 read through the gospel).

Solomon could only point toward the eternity he felt in his heart; Jesus is the One who fills it. He is Lord of every season, having walked through birth and death, weeping and joy, silence and speech, and now reigning at God's right hand. To follow Him is to walk through our own seasons with our hand in His.

Press for specificity. Not 'I want to trust God more' in the abstract, but 'I will receive this hard season of caregiving as a time God has appointed,' or 'I will thank God for my ordinary work this week,' or 'I will live this week soberly, knowing I will stand before Christ.' Wisdom becomes transformation only when it lands on a concrete next step (James 1:22–25).

Close by lifting eyes to Christ. The longing for eternity, the question raised by the dust, the hope of judgment turning out well, all of it finds its answer in the Lord who died, rose, and will raise His own. In Him our seasons are not vanity but are being woven into something beautiful in its time.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Transformation requires a specific, named next step, not vague good intentions (James 1:22–25).
- Christ is Lord of our seasons and the answer to the eternity set in our hearts (John 4:13–14).
- Living in light of the judgment seat motivates holy, hopeful living now (2 Corinthians 5:9–11).
- Discipleship is walking through every season trusting the One who appointed it.

Discussion Prompts

- Ask each member to complete the sentence: 'Because of this chapter, this week I will...'
- How does knowing Christ is Lord of every season change the way you face the one you are in now?
- What is one ordinary gift you will deliberately receive with thanks, and one way you will live in light of the resurrection?