

LifeWay Bible Studies for Life Series for January 10: Wrestling with time

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God's grace provides to all humans life and opportunity to live in proper relationship with him through salvation. He also provides time. We need to see time not as a burden but as opportunities to complete the divinely-intended tasks of service and witness. Christians should strive to discover how they can most wisely use time that God gives.

God provides time for everything (Ecclesiastes 3:1-8)

While the word "time" means literally "delight," in this verse, the term emphasizes necessary efforts not only pleasurable matters. Through his provision of time, God provides opportunities for many activities—the author lists 28 activities in opposing pairs.

These activities, beginning with birth and death, cover most of the experiences of life. These activities include experiences that bring joy—birth, healing, laughing, dancing, embracing, loving and making peace. The activities also, however, include those that involve sorrow and difficulty—death, killing, tearing down, weeping, mourning, loss, hating and war.

Most of the activities are self-evident but some demand explanation. Christians should not understand these verses to mean they are justified in killing, war and hating. Christians love others, even those who practice evil and negative behavior. Christians might be forced into killing, war and hatred (dislike) as "lessers of evil." These activities are directed toward the

evil they must oppose and not the people involved. These activities often can involve evil, and Christians must exert care in allowing them into their lives.

The phrases “a time to throw stones” and “a time to gather stones” might refer to activities during war. More likely, these words speak of gathering and casting stones in preparing a field for cultivation.

The primary teaching for today is that time is a gift to be used properly and in ways to bless humankind. Perhaps the emphasis also is that God will provide time for us to accomplish his will in this life. Since time is limited we must seek God’s guidance for how we use this provision.

The perspective of eternity (Ecclesiastes 3:9-11)

Qoheleth asks the penetrating question, “What advantages do workers receive from labors or efforts?” The word “struggles” refers primarily to activities not just to sorrows. People can engage in work (struggles) more easily and happily when they see these efforts from the eternal viewpoint; that is, they see their labors as having eternal significance.

The words in verse 10 do not suggest resignation or the idea that our activities on earth are only to keep us busy. This verse points to the conclusion that our activities are not simply repeating meaningless efforts.

Christians view all their efforts (struggles) as having meaning. Christians live and work to reach the purpose of God for them and those they serve. The term “task” is sometimes translated “travail” and might point to suffering with a view to a significant outcome—as travail that leads to birth.

God makes all activities and experience appropriate (not beautiful as in some translations). In the face of seeming meaningless and difficult experiences, Christians have the assurance God will produce significance. I think the translation “in his time” is better than “in its time.”

Verse 11, sets another truth to make life's experience significant. God has "put eternity into their hearts." God placed within humans the capacity to look beyond human limitations to see events as part of God's loving plan for life. The word, "Olam," means "world" but here emphasizes everything. Humans can see beyond the here and now to the eternal plan of God.

In the final phrase, the author acknowledges that humans cannot perfectly discover (learn by thought and searching) the fullest of God's plan and working. We trust God even when we cannot find the total answer. Things happen, and Christians often are forced to accept the power of God to bring all to a significant conclusion even though the believer cannot not see the entire picture.

A godly deacon once said to me after I had shared with him a difficult decision I had just reached. He said, "The great thing about being a Christian is that you can pray and come to what you think it God's will, do it, and then years later look back and see it was the right way to go."

Standing in awe of God (Ecclesiastes 3:12-14)

The author comes to a tremendous conclusion. Believers will have questions and concerns about life's experience. He/she will accept many of these experiences only with difficulty. Believers will, however, rejoice in the opportunities of life, live righteously in these experiences, and trust God to bring about the meaningful. Christians remain in awe of God.

Christians rejoice in the "good life," that is, in the good things that come in his/her life. Believers trust God to bring good from all they do—eating, drinking and all efforts. All Christians do can be used of God to bring about his will (v. 13).

The believer's faith in the processes of life is based on the conviction that what God accomplishes lasts forever. The term "forever" is the same word

'Olam as in verse 11. Christians live in trusting submission to God knowing he will bring to pass what is needed. We stand in awe of God as we trust him to bring significance out of even those things we do not fully understand the reasons for some events.