

OpenTheo

May 17th: Ecclesiastes 3 & 1 John 4:7-21

May 16, 2021



Alastair Roberts

A time for every purpose. God is love.

Reflections upon the readings from the ACNA Book of Common Prayer (<http://bcp2019.anglicanchurch.net/>). My reflections are searchable by Bible chapter here: <https://audio.alastairadversaria.com/explore/>.

If you have enjoyed my output, please tell your friends. If you are interested in supporting my videos and podcasts and my research more generally, please consider supporting my work on Patreon (<https://www.patreon.com/zugzwanged>), using my PayPal account (<https://bit.ly/2RLaUcB>), or by buying books for my research on Amazon (https://www.amazon.co.uk/hz/wishlist/ls/36WVSWCK4X33O?ref_=wl_share).

The audio of all of my videos is available on my Soundcloud account: <https://soundcloud.com/alastairadversaria>. You can also listen to the audio of these episodes on iTunes: <https://itunes.apple.com/gb/podcast/alastairs-adversaria/id1416351035?mt=2>.

Transcript

Ecclesiastes chapter 3. For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven, a time to be born, and a time to die, a time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is planted, a time to kill, and a time to heal, a time to break down, and a time to build up, a time to weep, and a time to laugh, a time to mourn, and a time to dance, a time to cast away stones, and a time to gather stones together, a time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing, a time to seek, and a time to lose, a time to keep, and a time to cast away, a time to tear, and a time to sew, a time to keep silence, and a time to speak, a time to love, and a time to hate, a time for war, and a time for peace. 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 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. I perceive that there is nothing better for them than to be joyful and to do good as long as they live, also that everyone should eat and drink and take pleasure in all his toil. This is God's gift to man.

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.

That which is already has been. That which is to be already has been, and God seeks what has been driven away. Moreover I saw under the sun that in the place of justice even there was wickedness, and in the place of righteousness even there was wickedness.

I said in my heart, God will judge the righteous and the wicked, for there is a time for every matter and for every work. I said in my heart with regard to the children of man that God is testing them, that they may see that they themselves are but beasts, for what happens to the children of man and what happens to the beasts is the same. As one dies, so dies the other.

They all have the same breath, and man has no advantage over the beasts, for all is vanity. All go to one place, all are from the dust, and to dust all return. Who knows whether the spirit of man goes upward and the spirit of the beasts goes down into the earth? So I saw that there is nothing better than that a man should rejoice in his work, for that is his lot.

Who can bring him to see what will be after him? Temporality and transitoryness, the vaporous character of life, was the subject matter of chapters 1 and 2 of Ecclesiastes. In Ecclesiastes chapter 3, while temporality remains prominent, it is in the form of seasonality that it most appears. The activities listed in verses 1-8 are all temporary, but they all have the setting of a fitting time.

The pairings of the verses are not contrasts between good and bad things, or even pleasant and unpleasant things. Rather the pairings concern contrasting times to which fitting activities correspond. Killing, war, and even hating are not always wrong, they have their appropriate occasions.

However discerning these occasions is imperative and one of the greatest tasks of human wisdom, as human beings so often give themselves to these things on inappropriate occasions. When the psalmist for instance speaks of hating those who rise up against the Lord with a complete hatred in Psalm 139 verses 21-22, it is imperative that we consider carefully what kind of hatred is and is not in view, and pay attention also to its proper objects. As James Jordan has argued on several occasions, while the law presents its principles as timeless and enduring, wisdom is much more alert to that which is timely, to the right action for the right occasion.

In many respects we could argue that wisdom is timing, it has a musical character, it is like the trained ear of the musician. The wise person has an extensive repertoire of actions and responses. They are able to make war, but they are also able to make peace.

They know when to hold their tongues, but they also know the truth of Proverbs 15 verse 23, to make an apt answer is a joy to a man, and a word in season, how good it is. They are people who can enter fully into the right feelings at the right times. They can weep in times of mourning, they can laugh in times of joy.

They perceive the right times to abandon a cause and the right times to take one up. They are attentive and adaptable. There are people who can only operate, for instance, in the mode of courage and conflict, while there are others who are temperamentally circumspect to the point of paralysis.

The wise person is neither. They know when courageous confrontation is necessary and when cautious restraint and conciliation is the most prudent course of action. They are neither prisoners of their reckless courage or of an over-cautious trepidation, but they perceive the time and act wisely within it.

Wisdom, then, is not just a matter upon reflecting upon what is timelessly good, but also one of deliberating about what is right, about the specific prudent actions that we ought to take in the light of that which is good in our particular situations and times. I know, for instance, that it is good to be generous and charitable, but should I give that person this gift, or should it go to some other cause? Would it be better if I refrained from giving on this occasion and gave on some other occasion instead? These are the sorts of questions of timing that wisdom needs to be concerned with. People often confuse what is good and what is right between those values that should guide me and between what I ought to do in this specific situation.

The preacher returns to this point later in the book, in chapter 8, verses 5-6. Whoever keeps a command will know no evil thing, and the wise heart will know the proper time and the just way. For there is a time and a way for everything, although man's trouble lies heavy on him.

There is a marriage here, as Daniel Fredericks recognises, between divine sovereignty and human responsibility, between God who establishes the times and human beings who must act appropriately within them, discerning what is fitting and when. Human beings need to move well with the variegated seasons of life, rather than trying to overcome life's seasonality in a sort of timeless ethic. The preacher returns to the key question in verses 9-11.

What gain has the worker from his toil? In creation, God established man to be fruitful, to multiply, to fill the earth, to subdue it, and to exercise dominion over all of its creatures. Man was created to till the ground. Man was later cursed with toil and difficulty in that

task, frustrated in his primary endeavour.

God made man for this task, and he also established the seasonality of life, the movements of weeks, months, seasons, years, the various seasons of a person's life, the movements from generation to generation, the life cycle of a great kingdom or empire, the changes in geology and climate over vast spans of time. All of these things were created and established by God, and we dwell within them. We need to move with his providential direction, discerning the times and acting accordingly.

Besides making everything beautiful in its time, God also has placed eternity into man's heart. Even in the changing character of life, we are not merely caught in a flux, we have a sense of what is lasting and enduring. Human beings can have some sense of who God is, a God who is not seasonal, a God who is not transitory, and does not change with the times.

Nevertheless, despite the fact that we can come to some apprehension of God and his works, we can never comprehend him or them completely. God always exceeds our knowledge. He communicates himself truly to us in a way fitted to our limitations.

How ought we to respond to our limitations, the limited duration of our lives, and our greatly constrained capacities? By practising joy and pursuing righteousness within our short life spans. These are modest, creaturely aspirations, but they are good nonetheless. God has given us good gifts to enjoy, and so we should eat, drink, and take pleasure, appreciating the rewards of, and the rest within, the labour that God has committed to us.

Some people reading this instruction of the preacher see it as negative or unwise advice. Eat, drink, and be merry, because tomorrow we die. In the light of our mortality, hedonism is the only way to go.

But this is not what the preacher is saying here. We should note that he talks about doing good. He also talks about eating, drinking, and having pleasure in our toil as God's gift to man.

Eating, drinking, and having pleasure with thanksgiving in one's heart to the Lord was at the very heart of Israel's life. Thanksgiving, contentment, and generosity are the means by which the tenth commandment is fulfilled. And with that, it's the way in which our hearts are set right, postured appropriately towards our neighbour in generosity and avoiding all envy, and related appropriately towards God in thanksgiving for his manifold gifts.

In many respects, the preacher's claim here is that the good of our toil is discovered in the Sabbaths that God has given us. On the Sabbath, we perceive the beauty of things in their time. We also feed the eternity that God has put within our hearts.

It's a time of eating, and drinking, and rejoicing in the presence of the Lord. It's a time of doing good to our neighbours. The meaning and gain for our toil is found in being people of the Sabbath.

Yes, the Sabbath as a single day is transitory, but that does not mean that it's not good. Yes, the musical note is short-lasting, its sound swiftly dying in the air, but the very beauty of the note is discovered in the temporal movement that it serves. So it is with our lives.

God's work contrasts with all of this. God's work can endure forever. Besides the fact that it's enduring, it is absolute.

Nothing can be added to it nor taken away from it. Seeing the character of the work of God should lead human beings to fear him, to honour him, recognising the difference between the creature and the creator. Even mankind's greatest activities are afflicted with limitations and flaws.

In the task of justice, judges and rulers act in the name of the Lord and seek to uphold his righteousness and his governance within the world. Yet in the very place where justice is supposed to be dispensed, wickedness is to be found. Perceiving this, the preacher reflects upon the penultimacy of human justice.

Imperfect human justice anticipates perfect divine justice, which will be enacted upon the righteous and the wicked. There is a day when everything will come into judgment, and all of the failures of human justice will be exposed and rectified. The temporality and seasonality of life is powerfully seen in the beasts.

They pass through cycles of birth, procreation and death. They hibernate, they migrate, they grow new plumage and shed old skins. And the preacher reflects upon the fact that human beings are animals too.

While we are distinguished from the animals in being the image of God, in our bodily existence we have an animal nature. And there is a very great deal about us that is analogous to the animals. If you want to understand why human beings act in the way that they do, often there are lessons to be learned from similar animals.

Their brains, their hormones, their bodies and their various systems work in much the same ways as ours do. They also sleep and eat, they have sex and they give birth, they are born and they die. Like us, they are creatures that live with blood and breath.

When we die, we decompose much as they do, and our whitened bones will not much distinguish us from them. When this fate of death will befall us, we don't know. Verse 21 is not necessarily denying the afterlife, it could be translated who knows when the spirit of man goes upward and the spirit of the beast goes down into the earth, as Frederick suggests.

Later on the preacher will say in chapter 12 verse 7, and the dust returns to the earth as it was, and the spirit returns to God who gave it. It might also be a reference to the limitations of our knowledge of what comes after death. Which of us has any first hand experience of the afterlife, of any horizon beyond our immediate lives? Verse 22 concludes the chapter by reaffirming the point that was made earlier, there is nothing better than that a man should rejoice in his work, for that is his lot.

As he argued in the previous chapter, there is no telling who is going to come after us and what they will do with our life and our sacrifices, so while we may hope to leave a lasting legacy, it is important that we enjoy our Sabbaths now. A question to consider, where else in the wisdom literature are we taught concerning seasonality and the timely character of true wisdom? 1st John chapter 4 verses 7 to 21 Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God, and whoever loves has been born of God and knows God. Anyone who does not love does not know God, because God is love.

In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we have loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins. Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another.

No one has ever seen God. If we love one another, God abides in us, and his love is perfected in us. By this we know that we abide in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit.

And we have seen and testified that the Father has sent his Son to be the Saviour of the world. Whoever confesses that Jesus is the Son of God, God abides in him and he in God. So we have come to know and to believe the love that God has for us.

God is love, and whoever abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him. By this is love perfected with us, so that we may have confidence for the day of judgment, because as he is, so also are we in this world. There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear, for fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not been perfected in love.

We love because he first loved us. If anyone says, I love God, and hates his brother, he is a liar, for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen cannot love God whom he has not seen. And this commandment we have from him, whoever loves God must also love his brother.

John has already argued that love for each other necessarily accompanies being born of God. Now, in the latter half of 1 John chapter 4, he will make another argument for the importance of love, from a somewhat different angle of approach. He now focuses upon the fact that love is from God, and that God is love.

Love is not merely some secondary created reality, it finds its source in God himself. If the devil is the father of lies and a murderer from the beginning, one who seeks to destroy, God is the one from whom love comes. Hence it manifests the spiritual paternity of all who love in truth, as they act in a way that reflects God's own character.

Anyone who does not love cannot have been born of God, because they bear no resemblance to his character. Love is a theological reality. John has previously affirmed in chapter 1 verse 5 that God is light.

Now he affirms that God is love. God doesn't possess qualities in the way that we do as created beings. God is identical to his attributes.

God doesn't just happen to be loving, he is love. This is an important theological statement. This should not be reversed to say that love is God, as our society is often inclined to do.

Nor should we think that love is whatever we feel love to be. By declaring that love is rooted in God, John challenges our belief that love is a human measure by which all things can be assessed according to us. Rather, if we want to know what love really is, we shouldn't look in our own hearts, which are deceitful and twisted, but should look to God instead.

By declaring that God is love, we discover that, in its home country, as it were, love is neither a feeling nor an abstraction. Love is God's very personal nature and existence. We will learn what love is as we learn who God is.

There is no true understanding of love for which the love of God is not the North Star. And what love is has been manifested to us because God has revealed his love to us in Christ. The revelation of love isn't found in our love for God, but in God's astounding love for us, in his sending of his own Son to be the propitiation for our sins.

This theologically grounded love should spur us to love each other. No one has seen God. This is a point that John also makes in John's Gospel, chapter 1, verse 18.

No one has ever seen God, the only God who is at the Father's side. He has made him known. The eternal Word of God, Jesus Christ, has manifested God to us in his incarnation.

However, God is also known to us in the outworking of the love that he has placed within us in our love for others. In our loving of others, we come to know his love in us. John once again turns here to the issue of assurance.

We know that we abide in God and that he abides in us because he has communicated his love to us by his spirit that he has given to us. As we walk in the love of the Spirit, we will be assured of sonship, knowing assurance through our experience. And as the Spirit

bears witness to the Son, so the Spirit, in addition to leading us in the way of God's love, in which we know assurance of sonship, leads us to confess Jesus as the Son of God, the one that the Father sent to be the Saviour of the world.

The Spirit causes us both to look outside of ourselves to Christ and gives us an assurance within as we look to God's revelation of love in his Son and walk in his footsteps. God's love shouldn't just be an abstract thing in our understanding. It is a love for us and we should know it as such.

Love is a two-way, mutual thing. It is God's love for us and it is our answering love that he has produced in us by his Spirit. Our love feeds upon the knowledge of his love and this is the way by which love is perfected.

This gives us assurance and confidence as we face judgement. We know that we do not belong to the world but that we are sons of God in Christ, those who are being conformed to his character by the Holy Spirit which he has given to us. Here we might recall Jesus' high priestly prayer in John 17, verses 14-26, I have given them your word and the world has hated them because they are not of the world, just as I am not of the world.

I do not ask that you take them out of the world, but that you keep them from the evil one. They are not of the world, just as I am not of the world. Sanctify them in the truth.

Your word is truth. As you sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world. And for their sake I consecrate myself, that they also may be sanctified in truth.

I do not ask for these only, but also for those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me and I in you, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. The glory that you have given me I have given to them, that they may be one even as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become perfectly one, so that the world may know that you sent me, and love them even as you loved me. Father, I desire that they also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory that you have given me because you loved me before the foundation of the world.

O righteous Father, even though the world does not know you, I know you, and these know that you have sent me. I made known to them your name, and I will continue to make it known, that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them. In these statements from Jesus' high priestly prayer in John chapter 17, we see something of the meaning of the words, As he is, so also are we in the world, being unpacked.

The perfection of love in us, as it develops from our assurance of God's own love for us, casts out fear, and the terror and apprehension with which we might otherwise relate to

God. We know God as a loving Father, and so are no longer afraid of Him in the way that those who do not know His love are. Fear cowers before the threat of punishment, but as we grow in love we fulfil the great commandment of God, the commandment that sums up all other commandments, and our hearts are set at rest.

True love finds its starting point in God. God's love comes first, before our love for Him. Our love is an answering love, a love that is learned through the experience of God's love for us.

However, love for God has, as its necessary companion, love for neighbour. The person who hates his neighbour lies when he claims to love God. Indeed, it is our love for the brothers that our love for God can be most powerfully seen in.

In the Gospels Jesus declares that the law can be summed up in two commandments, in Matthew 22, verses 35-40, and one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him. Teacher, which is the great commandment in the law? And he said to him, You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment, and a second is like it.

You shall love your neighbour as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the law and the prophets. In 1 John 4, verse 21, we see that these two commandments are inseparable, and that the second follows naturally from the first.

And this commandment we have from him, whoever loves God must also love his brother. The first commandment and the second commandment are two sides of the same coin. A question to consider, what other statements in scripture of the form God is love can you think of? What do such statements teach us about God?