

Reflections on Ecclesiastes 3 – A Spiritual Road Trip

Prologue

It was some 15 years ago when a very close friend shared this verse in Ecclesiastes 3: 1 with me and had it even printed on a photo frame that was later given to me as a birthday gift. The frame still sits on the dressing table next to my bed. I must say that I was not too particularly fond of the verse at that time as it served only to reinforce the idea that good times do not last. However, as unforeseen as they are, I was able to overcome the vicissitudes of life that followed in a way I never thought possible. It seems that every 'season' or 'time' had added something valuable to my life, making me a more complete person than ever. This all happened as I learned to embrace change, give thanks for everything and keep my eye on the beautiful end. For this reason, I thought the circuit breaker would be an opportune time to revisit this great passage in Ecclesiastes 3, especially verses 1 - 11. Hence, the decision to embark on this 7 - day spiritual road trip using the S.O.A.P route.

Day 1

S. Read Eccl 3: 1 - 11 (verse 1)

O. There is a season for everything under the heavens - the good, the bad, the expected and the unexpected. Like the seasons, which go in cycles, and come to an end as another comes on. Some of them, we'd surely face in this life. Some, probably not. Some of them, we wish they'd never end and some, we cannot wait for the days to be over.

A. We need to know what time it is. Or what season of life we are in? Don't expect them to stay the same always. As the saying goes, 'Change is the only constant.' We can either complain about the change, or ride out the storm of change. If so, we need to tell ourselves that change begins with us.

P. Lord, help us discern the times we are in. Whether riding on the crest of change, or riding out the storm of change, we know that you are with us. Give us a right perspective and lead us with the right approach to life's challenges and changes this season.

Day 2

S. Read Eccl 3: 1 - 11 (verse 2)

O. It is a fact, which we have seen with our very eyes. Every day, many are born and, many return to dust. Some of them would rather not have been born. Some of them would have met with an 'untimely' end, as what is happening to a percentage of COVID patients. Even so, we are told that there is a time for both of these events in life. Along with that, we see too the polarity of life's experiences and the finiteness of our own existence.

A. Is there an engineered arrangement when it comes to time? When we try to hasten or prolong time for whatever reason, are we not tempering with its natural arrangement? For no matter what we do, life and death remain an inescapable fact. Therefore, seek the Lord instead. Ask for wisdom knowing that life is finite, even fleeting. Commit everything to the Lord and trust him in all things. Be thankful also for the life we have. For we have not come into being by chance. There is a plan, a hope and a future. Learn also to approach life's contrasting and extreme situations like the way we welcome both summer and winter. Learn even from nature how to thrive and survive in the harshest of

conditions while waiting for the return of favourable times. Recall what the Scripture says about looking at the birds of the air.

P. Lord, may we rejoice always; pray (seek you) without ceasing; give thanks in all circumstances (at all times) for this is your will for us. And in doing so, may we know the plan, the hope and the future you have for us.

Day 3

S. Read Eccl 3: 1 - 11 (verse 5)

O. The Scripture can be surprisingly relevant to the times we live in to a tee. The line in this passage 'a time to refrain from embracing' is clearly understood by almost everyone in this COVID - 19 pandemic generation. Startling relevance aside, the passage is also telling us that withholding something that is socially encouraged, appropriate or even needed can sometimes be the order of the day.

A. Living in this time of COVID-19 pandemic, we can readily appreciate the preventive or protective intention behind this instruction. Extrapolating this truth, we can assuredly say that every instruction in Scripture is for our benefit in the sense that it protects us from harm and danger. Another applicable truth is that there is a time and place for observing social restraint. Many a time, we follow what others do in order to fit into the social norms and group dynamics. We are afraid to stand up for our conscience, or a better word, conviction, thinking that if we don't do the way that others would approve of, we could end up losing their acceptance and support.

Of course, in today's context, refraining from embracing is a mutually understood and practiced social stance but it still brings a level of discomfort to us who are social creatures at heart. Whatever it is, every discomfort is a test of our self - control and discipline, for which we are told that we have been given such a spirit.

P. Lord, as we get schooled in your holy word, may we not only pay close attention to the trusted words of your promise but also take heed of the wise words of your advice. In witness and ministry, may we not only stand out for you in the crowd but also be just like you with the crowd.

Day 4

S. Read Eccl 3: 1 - 11 (verse 7)

O. The silent man speaks, though not literally. There is a language of silence. Silence speaks when words fail. Or the sound of silence. Silence is golden, they say. For too much chatter is pure noise. There is a time to be silent, not be quick with words. Worse still, meaningless words. The silent man thinks, again and again. He does not let slip what is on his heart and mind. Silence also means consent. That is when the silent man should speak up. As much as there is a time to be silent, there is also a time to speak. This is not about a season but about the right time to do one or the other.

A. Sign up for silent retreat. Spend regular moments of quiet reflection. Journal instead of speaking. Being still, taking a pause from

the clatter. Enjoy a walk alone in the garden, or along the beach. Run alone, or do a solo drive, even road trip. Say nothing for nothing that we can say has not been said, or should be said at the point in time. This does not mean that we do not speak up when the time is right. We tend to speak up only when the matter concerns us. Remember that we are to act justly, love mercy and walk humbly. In speech and words, therefore, may we do justice to what is required of us.

P. Lord, we thank you for this time of enforced break from the busyness of life. May this time of solitude and silence increase the capacity in us for deeper things, things that truly matter and where each of us can say in the process, 'in quietness and trust is my strength'. Lord, even when we speak or sing, may the words and songs from our mouth be not like a loud gong or noise to you. May they come from a humble heart, which really cares and acts justly, lest our worship and deeds be in vain.

Day 5

S. Read Eccl 3: 1 - 11 (verses 3 and 8)

O. What does a time to kill, a time to hate, and a time for war mean in this New Testament age? In the New Testament age, we fight against spiritual forces, not physical armies. We are told to love our enemies but love not (hate) the world and the things of the world. We are urged to crucify our old self, in other words, kill our old self. We are warned that the days are evil. It speaks, therefore, of a

radical change and spiritual warfare. And during this pandemic, we see a unified war against the coronavirus and the radical steps the world is taking to combat COVID - 19.

A. Take a leaf from this war against the virus ravaging lives around the world. Look at the steps being taken, incremental as well as drastic, mostly targeted though some are radical, or even unprecedented, but always preventive and curative in approach even while the search for a vaccine continues. In spiritual warfare, the 'virus' is also known. However, the 'vaccine' in this case is already found, which is the blood of Christ. And just as there are face masks and personal protective equipment used in this fight against the virus, the armour of God is the equivalent in our fight against the powers and principalities of this world and the dark spiritual forces. Furthermore, like the measures taken as a form of personal checklist such as temperature taking and looking out for signs of feeling unwell, there is also a constant need to watch over our inner self, to crucify and deny the self when necessary. For the war is fought with a two prong approach, both from within and without.

P. Lord, remind us to take up our cross and put on your armour in this war against the powers and principalities of this world and the dark spiritual forces. Though the war has already been won by you, by your precious blood on the cross, it is not over yet. Until that day, there will be a trail of upheavals, chaos and destruction in its wake. May we

stand with you on this; watch and pray with you during these remaining days lest we, too, be sucked too into this world: the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eye and the pride of life. And by doing so, redeem the time and save what is lost for you.

Day 6

S. Read Eccl 3: 1 - 11 (verses 9, 10)

O. It seems that life, with its ups and downs, is taking a toll on us. It leaves an uncomfortable weight on our shoulders. Even with the circuit breaker, we do not find the rest that we so desperately need. The question always on our mind is 'What's next?' We may have gone through a long difficult period or rounds of life's varied seasons. The respite is often too brief for our liking. A time to laugh, a time to dance, and a time to keep are soon over before we know it. And we find ourselves back in the familiar throes of life's winter once again. No man is spared from this, no one living on this earth.

A. Focus on being an overcomer. Do away with the victim mentality. Verses to memorise and apply to our hard - pressed daily living: John 16: 33; 1 John 4: 4; 1 John 5: 4, 5. There's a song written that 'without' God, we will fail, drift and die, and that things will not be possible and life will be worthless. All is good for the reminder and acknowledgment of the importance of God in our life except that we should be focusing on 'with' God instead. For example, 'With' God, all things are possible. If we endure, we will also reign 'with' him. Or 'I am 'with' you always to the

close of the age', 'when you pass through the waters, I will be 'with' you', says the Lord. We need a more vivid experience of our time with the Lord. We need to grow deeper in relationship with him. In 1 John 5: 3, we are told that our love for God will cause his commandments to be non - burdensome. Will it be right to say too that our love for God will cause the burdens of this life to feel as light as a feather? Solomon, with all the wisdom and splendour, on his musings on life in Ecclesiastes unfortunately had a divided heart for God unlike David, his father, who was, therefore, able to say: Teach us to number our days... that we may sing for joy and be glad all our days (Psalm 90: 12 - 14).

P. Lord, teach us to number our days. Give us not just wisdom but a true heart for you. So that we can say with the Psalmist, 'Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life.' Lord, you came to give us life, life more abundantly. Not just that, you have also overcome the world so that we may have peace, not as the world gives.

Day 7

S. Read Eccl 3: 1 - 11 (verse 11)

O. We read this in fairy tales, 'And they lived happily ever after.' That is the sense one gets from reading verse 11. At last, a happy ending after having gone through much. Like in the movies, a lovely back profile of the protagonists walking off into the sunset when good has finally triumphed, peace is restored and true love has been tested. This whole imagery conjures the notion of

eternal bliss. It speaks also of our yearning for such an ending.

A. Our God is a master story teller. He is not writing a fiction nor fairy tale. In fact, a fairy tale could be seen as art imitating life that is created by the Master of all time. In verse 11, we see the true reality of life, of what life, a composite of the various times, will be like at the end, which is nothing short of beautiful. What we need is a pair of long view glasses, or eternity glasses. We may still not have fully understood the beginning and the end. Even Solomon with his vast wisdom could not wrap his head around this mystery. But what we cannot understand will be revealed to us in parts like a jigsaw slowly taking shape.

P. Lord, we thank you that life is beautiful. Give us a pair of eternity glasses to see it. As for the mystery of life, though we know now only in part, soon, we shall know it fully, even as we are fully known by you. Meanwhile, as a fitting end to this series of meditations, may we be reminded again that these three remain: faith, love and hope. But the greatest is love.

Epilogue

Ecclesiastes 3: 1 - 11 (NIV)

(1) There is a time for everything, and a season for every activity under the heavens: [2] a time to be born and a time to die, a time to plant and a time to uproot, [3] a time to kill and a time to heal, a time to tear down and a time to build, [4] a time to weep and a time to laugh, a time to mourn and a time to dance, [5] a time to scatter stones and a time to gather them, a time to embrace and a time to refrain from embracing, [6] a time to search and a time to give up, a time to keep and a time to throw away, [7] a time

to tear and a time to mend, a time to be silent 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 do workers gain from their toil? [10] I have seen the burden God has laid on the human race. [11] He has made everything beautiful in its time. He has also set eternity in the human heart; yet no one can fathom what God has done from beginning to end.