

# Sample Study      Ecclesiastes

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**Read — Eccl. 3:1–4:16; other references as given**

When a person lives **under the sun**, his life is often marked by grief and sorrow because he doesn't understand the true meaning of life (Eccl. 1:16–18). If he focuses on seeking pleasure, his life will be empty (Eccl. 2:1–2). If he focuses on career and business success, his hard work may be lost by misfortune or by those who come after him (Eccl. 2:18–19).

In the first two chapters of Ecclesiastes, Solomon quietly introduced God and the phrase **under heaven** (cf. Eccl. 1:13, Eccl. 2:3, 24, 26). Beginning in chapter three, Solomon boldly informs his students that God, rather than man, is the center of life. It's God who governs the affairs of this world.

Now before you begin this lesson, humble yourself before God, and ask Him to reveal Himself to you through His inspired Word.

1. Ecclesiastes 3:2–8 serves as an elaboration or explanation of Ecclesiastes 3:1 and as a bridge between two similar passages (cf. Eccl. 2:24–26, 3:12–13). The fourteen comparisons demonstrate that life has endless cycles, but God exercises sovereign control over the affairs of life. Do you think these things or events are pre-ordained by God regardless of man's involvement, are they simple realities of life over which God governs, or something else? Why?
  
2. The phrases **a time to die** and **a time for war** (Eccl. 3:2, 8) bring to mind the subjects of just wars, capital punishment, and the current "right-to-die" debate. The concept of a "just war" has been discussed for hundreds of years, but debate has recently escalated due to increased international terrorism.
  - a. *Imperialism* is the policy and practice of one nation attempting to extend its power and dominion over another nation by direct acquisition or by political or economic domination. *Pacifism* is the attitude or policy of non-resistance, based on the belief that disputes can be settled by non-violent means. Although some religious sects believe in pacifism, most Christians believe in some degree of the "just war" concept. In your opinion, when is a nation's military action justifiable?
  
  - b. What does the Bible teach about capital punishment and the need for swift execution of justice (Gen. 9:6; Eccl. 8:11; Acts 25:11; Rom. 13:4)?
  
3. A living will is a legal document recognized in many states. Before a critical health situation occurs, an individual authorizes either the performance or non-performance of certain medical procedures (for example, sustained life support, etc.).
  - a. Do you think the advancement of certain life-sustaining medical technology allows man to "play God" by interfering with **a time to die** (Eccl. 3:2), or is it a gift from God? Explain your answer.
  
  - b. Do you think physician-assisted euthanasia (a lethal injection) at the request of a terminally ill patient or patient's family is right or wrong (Ex. 20:13)? Why?
  
  - c. Do you think a Christian is wrong if he doesn't authorize the implementation or continuation of certain *extraordinary* medical procedures to sustain the life of a terminally ill patient? (An extraordinary medical procedure is defined as those procedures, such as the continuing use of a respirator, a kidney dialysis machine, or heart pump, that keep a patient alive.)

1. **A time to embrace and a time to refrain from embracing** (Eccl. 3:5) addresses what is appropriate and inappropriate for a believer regarding sexual conduct with other people. Unfortunately, sexual sin in the lives of Christians has brought great reproach on Jesus' name, severe damage to the testimony of the church, and guilt and brokenness into the lives and marriages of God's people.
  - a. What is God's will for all Christians in the area of sexual conduct (Matt. 5:28; Rom. 1:26–27; 1 Cor. 5:11, 6:18; 1 Thess. 4:3)?
  - b. What additional responsibilities has God given married Christians in this area (1 Cor. 6:9–11, 7:2–3; Heb. 13:4)?
2. Satan uses a variety of temptations such as ungodly people and sensual entertainment to entice believers into sexual sin. The enemy's goal is to destroy lives and marriages, as well as the children who are victims of their parents' sin (cf. John 10:10). The apostle Paul addressed several groups of people who had been involved in sexual sin, including fornication, adultery, and homosexuality (cf. 1 Cor. 6:9–10). In the same passage, Paul used three powerful theological words to assure those who had been enslaved to sexual sin that God has completely forgiven them. What are they (1 Cor. 6:11)?
6. In ancient Israel, people tore their garments at times of severe grief (cf. Gen. 37:29, Josh. 7:5–6). If **a time to tear** refers to an appropriate time or period to express grief (Eccl. 3:7), what do you think is meant by the phrase **a time to sew** (Eccl. 3:7)?
7. In Ecclesiastes 3:9, Solomon asks again if there is any human benefit to life apart from God. Although he previously stated that God is the true giver of joy (Eccl. 2:24–26), he now questions whether a man can find lasting fulfillment in his work (cf. Eccl. 3:9). How would you describe his perspective on life at this time (Eccl. 3:9–13)?
8. Benjamin Franklin, the famous American inventor and statesman, once remarked, "I have lived a long time, sir, and the longer I live the more convincing proofs I see of this truth that God governs in the affairs of men." Only when we acknowledge God's sovereign control over all aspects of life are we able to respond to His plan for our lives with joy. Embracing God's sovereignty keeps us from becoming frustrated with the problems and trials we cannot control (cf. Eccl. 3:2–8).
  - a. What gift has God given all men to help them see life from His perspective (Eccl. 3:11)?
  - b. The fact that God has set eternity in every man's heart has profound implications on the subject of evangelism. In what way(s) do you think this great spiritual truth should affect a Christian's efforts and methods of reaching the lost?
9. God has arranged this world so that nothing can be changed or altered by man (Eccl. 3:14). Interestingly, many insurance companies inadvertently acknowledge God's sovereignty when their policies contain clauses that exclude "acts of God," such as floods and tornados. God's sovereign administration over His creation includes the trials and struggles we face during our brief lifetime.
  - a. What is God's divine motivation for arranging the affairs of life (Eccl. 3:14)?
  - b. What valuable spiritual lesson(s) do you think a Christian should learn from the knowledge of God's sovereign control over the affairs of life (cf. Rom. 8:28, 1 Thess. 5:18)?

1. Realities of life. God's original plan for man didn't include some of these characteristics. It seems best to view them as results of living in a fallen world cursed by sin. God allows them during this time, or He wouldn't permit them to happen.
2.
  - a. Just war.
  - b. The "just war" theory began in ancient Greek society and was developed further by a number of Christian theologians. To be considered a "just war," five criteria must be met. 1) Just Cause — There must be a just cause to engage in war, such as self-defense or defense of a weaker nation where innocent people are being killed. 2) Formal Declaration — An official declaration of war must be made by a proper authority. 3) Right Intention — The motive for going to war must be just, such as establishing peace. Revenge and mere political expansion are not just causes. 4) Legitimate Possibility of Success — A nation that goes to war must have a reasonable chance of success, or its citizens will die needlessly. 5) Proportionality — The use of military might must not be excessive, resulting in unnecessary death and destruction.
3.
  - a. Yes, in some situations. The rapid advancement of life-sustaining medical technology, and society's continuing inability to define when life begins (at conception or at birth) and terminates (the cessation of voluntary respiratory function, the discontinuation of detectable brain wave function, etc.), have forced man to face ethical questions he's never before had to face. Some families have been advised to discontinue a loved one's basic needs (food and water) because death is imminent, quality of life is significantly impaired, or the patient's recovery is extremely unlikely. When we attempt to define life from the quality-of-life factor rather than viewing life as a gift from God, we're likely to make critical healthcare decisions that may be inconsistent with God's will.
  - b. Wrong. Man does not have the right to take another person's life because the Bible says, "You shall not murder" (Ex. 20:13).
  - c. No. God has appointed a time for everything, including death (cf. Eccl. 3:1–2). Using *extraordinary* medical procedures often prolongs life rather than causing death. In many situations, the decision to not incorporate heroic medical procedures to save a patient doesn't constitute murder or a lack of love. It's simply recognizing that life has predictable and unavoidable cycles ("a time to die").
4.
  - a.
    1. Matthew 5:28 — God prohibits lust because He equates it with committing adultery, which He condemns. Temptation is the same as lust. To be tempted is not a sin. Lust, a sin, occurs when an individual embraces sexual temptation mentally, regardless whether he acts on it.
    2. Romans 1:26–27 — Homosexuality is a sin.
    3. 1 Corinthians 5:11 — Christians are not to associate with other Christians involved in sexual sin, among other things.
    4. 1 Corinthians 6:18 — Christians are to flee from sexual immorality.
    5. 1 Thessalonians 4:3 — It's God's will for every believer to be morally pure.
  - b.
    1. 1 Corinthians 6:9–11 — Christians should not commit adultery.
    2. 1 Corinthians 7:2–3 — Christian married people should not withhold sexual relations from their spouses.
    3. Hebrews 13:4 — A Christian couple's marriage should be undefiled by anything or anyone.
5. Washed, sanctified, and justified. (They're all in the past tense, signifying completed action.)
6. There's an appropriate time for individuals to put aside grief and resume God-given responsibilities in life.
7. Solomon seems less convinced that he would find happiness in this world apart from God. He believes God has a sovereign, eternal plan for this world that can neither be changed nor completely understood by man during his futile lifetime (Eccl. 3:11). He also believes man's joy in life is related to the work God assigns him, even though he doesn't fully comprehend what God is doing. If man enjoys his work and does good, he may be receiving his ultimate earthly satisfaction (Eccl. 3:12–13). He believes that joy, enjoyment of one's work, and the simple pleasures of life are all gifts from God (Eccl. 3:13).

8.
  - a. God places the reality of eternity in every person's heart. The Hebrew word (*ha' olam*) represents "everness" and occurs in Ecclesiastes 1:4 and 12:5. The use of the definite article indicates that the whole of eternity, rather than particular ages, is in view. The knowledge that God places in man's heart enables him to anticipate some measure of human reality beyond the grave. This gives him the ability to consider the eternal dimension of life and the transitory nature of this physical world.
  - b.
    1. Evangelism is not convincing another of the reality of God and eternity. It's reminding him of a truth that God has already placed in his heart and telling him what God wants him to know.
    2. As we grow older and the responsibilities of life erode, the reality of eternity remains in our thinking and often becomes more dominant because we are closer to eternity. There's a common misconception in the church that as a man grows older, his percentage of opportunity to be saved decreases. This error denies the effect of Ecclesiastes 3:11 and is inconsistent with the record of conversion testimonies in the New Testament — almost all adults.
9.
  - a. Envy.
  - b. Both problems and trials are part of God's plan. They're divinely arranged by God's loving hand to help us learn to fear Him.