

Excerpt from Lecture V

on

Ecclesiastes 3:14: "God's Providential Ways"

by

Ralph Wardlaw

"I know that whatever God does, it shall be forever. Nothing can be added to it, and nothing taken from it. God does it, that men should fear before Him" (Ecclesiastes 3:14).

The great lesson which the book of Ecclesiastes is intended to elucidate and impress is the vanity of the attempt to find true happiness from any of the sources of mere worldly enjoyment. To this purpose chapter three is remarkably appropriate. It teaches the two following important truths: first, that the concerns of the present world are, beyond expression, unstable and fluctuating; and secondly, that all its incessant vicissitudes [changes] are so regulated and determined by the uncontrollable purposes of the Supreme will that no human sagacity can foresee and prevent them.

Such considerations impressively teach us, on the one hand, the folly of saying we shall never be moved while in such a world; and the wisdom, on the other hand, of anticipating such changes as may be appointed and inevitable, of accommodating readily to the shifting scenes of life the state of our feelings and desires, of conducting ourselves with propriety in all the varying circumstances of our condition, and of never resting on such uncertainties as the basis of our felicity [happiness].

Considering the instability and incessant fluctuation of earthly affairs (which beginning with the "time to be born" continue to present a scene of perpetual insecurity and change till the "time to die") and considering that all is in the hand of God (all under his sovereign control), Solomon repeats the question, "What profit has he who works from that in which he labors?" (v. 9) He then confirms the sentence of "vanity," which this question involves, by a renewed appeal to his own extensive experience and observation: "I have seen the God-given task with which the sons of men are to be occupied" (v. 10). He had himself seen all that he had just enumerated in verses 2-8.

In the midst of this perpetual vicissitude, the minds of men may often be perplexed and at a standstill. It may seem to their eyes a scene of inextricable confusion. But it is not so to the eye of Him who superintends and directs the whole: "He has made everything beautiful in his time (or its season)" (v. 11). This phraseology is evidently to be connected with the first verse of the chapter, and it confirms the interpretation given of it as having reference to the arrangements of Divine providence. "To everything there is a season," and He by whom the "times and seasons"

are fixed, orders them all according to his infinite wisdom. All is beautiful harmony.

Set down a man ignorant of mechanics in the midst of a system of extensive and complicated machinery, and he will gaze about him in vacant wonder, all appearing to him involved in intricate perplexity. But introduce an experienced machinist, and by the hasty glances of a few moments he discerns the proportions, relations, and mutual dependence of all the parts, the connection of the whole with the great moving power and its perfect adaptation to a proposed end. His mind is delighted with the admirable display of contrivance and skill.

Creatures like us, in contemplating the Divine procedure, are in the situation of the former. The scheme of providence may appear to us a maze of endless confusion--and even at times of jarring inconsistency, one part frequently crossing and counteracting another. But the sole cause of this is our ignorance, the very limited and partial views which we are able to take of it. It is because, as Solomon here expresses it, "we cannot find out the work that God does from the beginning to the end" (v. 11) Had we powers that enabled us to take a full and comprehensive and connected view of the whole (from the originally proposed design through all the successive steps of its progressive development to its final and entire completion), we should see "everything beautiful in its season," a perfect and delightful harmony--complicated indeed, but in proportion as it is complicated, the more astonishing because it encompasses all the affairs of worlds, kingdoms, families, and individuals. We should be at once satisfied that there is nothing lacking and nothing useless, nothing that could have been otherwise than it is without irregularity and detriment. But to such a view no powers are adequate but those of Deity, and we must in general content ourselves with the assurance that "the Lord reigns" and that "what we know not now we shall know hereafter."

A particular consideration, however, is here suggested as affecting our views of the Divine government, and preventing our observation of it from being even so correct and extensive as it otherwise might be. This is probably the idea expressed by the obscure words, "also he has set the world in their heart, so that men cannot find out the work that God does from the beginning to the end" (v. 11).¹ I would remark, *in the first place*, that from our necessary connection with the world, our hearts (indisposed as they are to look above and beyond it) get so much entangled in its various concerns, so much occupied about the objects themselves which it presents to our desire and pursuit and enjoyment, that we are ever prone to overlook the operations of God's hands; that is, not to take time to contemplate and examine them with sufficient attention, but to satisfy ourselves with hasty and superficial glances instead of a close and careful investigation. But this can never do. Of a system so involved and so extended, it is in the nature of things impossible to obtain anything approaching a comprehensive and accurate understanding without a large measure of attentive consideration, humbly and devoutly bestowed.

1 **KM Note:** Wardlaw's interpretation of this clause is based on the translation "the world." I would suggest that J. Stafford Wright gives a better interpretation based on the translation "eternity" instead of "the world." Wright states, "A number of commentators adopt the R.V. marginal rendering here and translate the Hebrew *ha-'olam* as 'eternity' instead of 'the world,' and, as this makes better sense, we may adopt it. The previous context deals with the occurrence of events at their right times. "To everything there is a season, and a time to every purpose under the heaven: a time to be born, and a time to die; a time to plant and a time to pluck up that which is planted." And a long list follows. Then come the two verses that I quoted just now. God has given us a sore travail. Events happen to us from time to time, but God has given us a longing to know the eternity of things, the whole scheme; but, try as we will, we cannot see it, though we can declare by faith that each event plays its part in the beauty of the plan." See Wright's entire article on our [Ecclesiastes page](#).

In the second place, because of our diversified attachments to the persons and things of the world, we are rendered partial in our judgments of the Divine procedure. Our minds are biased and warped. Our reason becomes the dupe of our feelings, so that what to a neutral spectator would appear the appointment of perfect wisdom, we are hindered from perceiving or hesitant to acknowledge.

It by no means follows that if such causes of partiality and short-sightedness were removed, we should have a complete comprehension of this subject. No. Our faculties are still limited. They are the faculties of creatures and incapable of embracing the plans of the omniscient God. But without doubt, the removal of such causes would render our views inconceivably more just and more extensive than they are.

Although God has set the world before men and filled it with desirable objects and sources of gratification, and has so constituted and so situated its inhabitants that they must be engaged about it, yet he is not justly chargeable with the partialities and excesses of men's attachment to the world or with its blinding and perverting influence. This influence arises from the absence or imperfection of a right disposition of heart.

In the following verses the secret is repeated of deriving from temporal things the measure and kind of happiness which, from their nature, they are capable of bestowing: "I know that there is no good in them, but for a man to rejoice and to do good in his life. And also, that every man should eat and drink, and enjoy the good of all his labor; it is the gift of God" (vv. 12,13).

In these words Solomon sums up the uses of the things of the world; that is, he declares *all the good that is in them*. It consists in two particulars, one of which he had mentioned before and the other is here added to it. The former is the unsolicitous [unconcerned] and cheerful enjoyment of whatever the providence of God is pleased to bestow. This is what he means by a man's "eating and drinking, and enjoying the good of all his labor," without forgetting that "it is the gift of God." It is the same sentiment as in the close of the preceding chapter: "There is nothing better for a man than that he should eat and drink, and that he should make his soul enjoy good in his labor. This also I saw that it was the from the hand of God" (2:24).

But in the verses now before us an addition is made to it, or rather something more is directly expressed which ought formerly to have been considered as implied in a man's making his soul enjoy good in his labor. "I know that there is no good in them, but for a man to rejoice and to **do good in his life.**" *How can he do so without the exercise of benevolence?* The contracted spirit of selfishness can never be a happy spirit. If a man would truly rejoice in the reception and use of the bounties of heaven, he must not shut his heart and hand from God and his fellow creatures and expend all upon self. He must "do good in his life."

Cheerfulness of heart in enjoying the fruits of the Divine goodness is a duty which we owe to the Giver, accompanied, as it ought to be, with the spirit of humble dependence and grateful acknowledgment. When the Israelites were to bring their basket of firstfruits before the Lord, such holy cheerfulness was expressly enjoined upon them: "You shall rejoice," says Moses, "in every good thing which the LORD your God has given to you and your house, you and the Levite and the stranger who is among you" (Deut. 26:11). But this rejoicing was to be connected with

their devoting a liberal allowance of the Divine bounty for the benefit of others. This is one of the proper uses of God's bounty. He gives in order to enable us to give. He blesses that we may be a blessing. And a compliance, from right principles, with the design of the Giver renders his bounty a source of the purest and most exquisite enjoyment. "It is more blessed," said the Lord Jesus, "to give than to receive" (Acts 20:35).

To the present enjoyment and the present use of the gifts of God, we should be excited by the truth illustrated in the preceding part of the chapter--the absolute and uncontrollable nature of God's purposes and dispensations. They cannot be altered or turned aside by any effort of human power or of human wisdom. It may be His sovereign intention soon to order a change in our situation, soon to deprive us of our present sources of enjoyment and means of usefulness. And what a sad thing will it be if it shall be found that during our time of permitted possession we have not properly improved his goodness, either for ourselves, for others, or for Him!

It is this consideration of the immutability of Divine purposes that is urged upon our attention in verse 14, "I know that whatever God does, it shall be forever. Nothing can be added to it, and nothing taken from it. God does it, that men should fear before him." These words express the impossibility of altering God's purposes, the folly of attempting or even of imagining such a thing for a moment. The Supreme Ruler forms his determinations and arranges his plans without the counsel of any created being. No wisdom and no power of any creature--or of all creatures combined--can alter them; no, not a single hair's breadth. Nothing can be added, nothing taken away. "There are many plans in a man's heart, nevertheless, the LORD'S counsel--that shall stand" (Prov. 19:21).

The proper influence of the contemplation of God's uncontrollable sovereignty, and of the utter impotence of human power and wisdom to effect any change in his purposes, is to fill the heart with reverence and godly fear: "God does it that men may fear before him" (v. 14). All the displays of his absolute supremacy over his creatures should have this effect. And the more we accustom ourselves to the contemplation of them and of the numberless indications of our entire and unceasing dependence, the more will our minds become imbued with the sentiments of religious awe, and the more will we sanctify the Lord God in our hearts and make him our fear and our dread. We will adopt, with the deeper humility, the language of sublime adoration--"Great and marvelous are Your works, LORD God Almighty! Just and true are Your ways, O King of the saints! Who shall not fear You, O LORD, and glorify Your name? For You only are holy!" (Rev. 15:3,4).

While we are tenants of this world, it will be well for us to expect vicissitudes. This will serve to prevent our being unhinged and overwhelmed when such changes come, as we are apt to be when such changes have never been anticipated. While in the season of adversity we comfort ourselves with the hope that better days may yet await us, let us also in the time of our prosperity beware of saying, with inconsiderate confidence, "we shall never be moved" (Ps. 30:6). Let us not trust to the continuance of the serene calm or the propitious gale, but rather be always on the lookout for the rising cloud, and keep our vessel in trim for the storm. In prosperity, let us be ready for adversity; in health, for sickness; in laughter, for mourning; in life, for death. If Providence favors us with "a time to get," let us calculate on the world's instability and not be astonished and disconcerted if there should come "a time to lose."

Whatever changes do take place, let us be satisfied with the providence of God. I do not mean by this that we should merely submit from necessity, from a feeling forced upon us that our case cannot be helped and cannot be altered, and that therefore repining is useless. There is a mighty difference between this state of mind and that resignation which springs from the pious assurance that all God's ways are wisdom, faithfulness, and love, that "there is a season and a time for every purpose under the sun" (Ecc. 3:1) The times and the seasons are all determined with unerring propriety. They are all as they ought to be. This is the satisfaction with God's providence which I now recommend. Let our song of faith ever be, "Hallelujah, for the Lord God omnipotent reigns!" (Rev. 19:6)

An excerpt from *Lectures on the Book of Ecclesiastes* by Ralph Wardlaw (Philadelphia: W. W. Woodward, 1822). **Note:** The text has been condensed and lightly edited. Punctuation and KJV-era pronouns and verb forms have been modernized and long paragraphs have been divided. The NKJV has been used for most quotations.