

# Adult Teaching Resources

January 1, 2023



January 1, 2023—Ecclesiastes 3:1-13—“It’s Always Time”

## Season of Epiphany: What Does God Expect?

January 8, 2023—Isaiah 42:1-9—“Bringing Justice”

January 15, 2023—Isaiah 49:1-7—“Bearing Light”

January 22, 2023—Isaiah 9:1-7—“Multiplying Joy”

January 29, 2023—Micah 6:1-8—“Defining Expectations”

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# It's Always Time

## *Ecclesiastes 3:1-13*

### FIT Teaching Guide

by David Woody

This adult teaching outline is designed to support THE BIBLE LESSON by Tony Cartledge, printed in *Nurturing Faith Journal*. You can subscribe to either the digital or print edition of *Nurturing Faith Journal* to access the lessons. Please also ensure that each person in your class has a copy of *Nurturing Faith Journal* so they can prepare before the lesson.

### Key Verse

*For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven ... (Ecc. 3:1)*

### Opening

Before class, secure a way to play the song, “Turn, Turn, Turn” by The Byrds. Make sure it is loud enough for everyone to hear.

After everyone arrives, remain in the large group.

Once everyone is settled, ask everyone to open their Bibles to today’s passage—Ecclesiastes 3:1-13. Then, ask everyone to follow the passage as you play this popular song from 1965.

After listening to the song, ask these questions for discussion and conversation:

What, if any, is your history/experience with this song?

Were you aware the lyrics for this song came directly from scripture?

Where are the lyrics exactly the same as our passage?

Where do the lyrics stray from our passage?

What do you think about scripture being used as lyrics in a popular song like this? Does this cheapen scripture or does it give scripture added weight? Why do you say that?

### Reading the Bible

When is it appropriate to do the actions in verse 2?

When is it appropriate to do the actions in verse 3?

When is it appropriate to do the actions in verse 4?

When is it appropriate to do the actions in verse 5?

When is it appropriate to do the actions in verse 6?

When is it appropriate to do the actions in verse 7?

When is it appropriate to do the actions in verse 8?

What has our scripture writer seen? (the business that God has given everyone to be busy with.)

## Reading the Bible *continued*

What has God done? (he has made everything suitable for its time; he has put a sense of past and future in their minds)

What does our scripture writer know? (there is nothing better for them than to be happy and enjoy themselves as long as they live)

What is God's gift? (that all should eat and drink and take pleasure in all their toil)

## Making Connections

Our Lesson Writer introduces us to "The author of Ecclesiastes, who called himself Qoheleth, does not come across as a happy man." When you learn the author of this passage is unhappy, does it change the way you read it? Does that information inform the tone you use when you read it?

What is your favorite season of the year? Why? What is your least favorite season of the year? Why? When you think about the seasons of life, what is your favorite life season? Why? What is your least favorite life season? Why?

Our passage makes the statement that there is a time and a season for everything. Do you agree or disagree with that statement? Why do you say that?

How do you interpret there is a time to be born and a time to die;

How do you interpret there is a time to plant and a time to pluck up what is planted;

How do you interpret there is a time to kill and a time to heal;

How do you interpret there is a time to break down and a time to build up;

How do you interpret there is a time to weep and a time to laugh;

How do you interpret there is a time to mourn and a time to dance;

How do you interpret there is a time to throw away stones and a time to gather stones together;

How do you interpret there is a time to embrace and a time to refrain from embracing;

How do you interpret there is a time to seek and a time to lose;

How do you interpret there is a time to keep and a time to throw away;

How do you interpret there is a time to tear and a time to sew;

How do you interpret there is a time to keep silent and a time to speak;

How do you interpret there is a time to love and a time to hate;

How do you interpret there is a time for war and a time for peace.

## Making Connections *continued*

Our Lesson Writer says, “Qoheleth presumed that God had set the world and its realities in place, leaving humans to live in a situation they could not understand.” Do you find yourself siding with Qoheleth or do you think we live in a situation we can understand? Why do you say that?

Our Lesson Writer suggests, “Perhaps Qoheleth’s frustration was a belief that God had given humans an innate sense of eternity— of a divine reality beyond one’s days of earthly toil— but had not given them an ability to understand what God is about.” What do you think God is about?

Qoheleth finds comfort in the pleasures of life he could understand. Where do you find comfort? Is God in those things that comfort you?

## So What?

Have everyone remain in the large group. Move to the board or large sheet of paper in front of the room. Ask your group to think of the things that make them angry and that they would like to protest against (like Qoheleth). Make a list on the board.

Then, write a poem (it doesn’t have to rhyme) like our passage from today.

When the poem is finished, ask these questions for conversation and discussion:

What does our poem say about the world we live in?

What does our poem say about us?

What does our poem say about God?

What does our poem say about our faith?

What does our poem say about our hope?

After the discussion, go back and edit the poem to make it more positive so that it is apparent that God is at the center and the hope we have in Christ is evident.

## The Challenge

This week, continue to write the poem from class, looking more toward the hope we have in God in each season of life.

## Prayer

Loving God, we are well aware that life is full of seasons and there is a time for every matter under heaven. While we may not understand it all, nor can we comprehend all of who you are, we give you thanks that you are at the center of our life and are with us no matter what we face or when we face it. Help us to remain faithful to you. Amen.

## Digging Deeper

by Tony Cartledge

Digging Deeper is designed to support THE BIBLE LESSON by Tony Cartledge, printed in *Nurturing Faith Journal*. Watch for the “shovel” icon in the THE BIBLE LESSON, and then reference that item in this Digging Deeper resource. You can subscribe to either the digital or print edition of *Nurturing Faith Journal* to access the lessons. Please also ensure that each person in your class has a copy of *Nurturing Faith Journal* so they can prepare before the lesson.

**Turn! Turn! Turn!**—Here’s a link to the Byrds’ cover of Pete Seeger’s adaptation of Ecc. 3:3-8, along with other information about the song. <http://www.songfacts.com/detail.php?id=246>

**Qoheleth**—The book we call “Ecclesiastes” was written by a man who called himself Qoheleth, an unusual name that is formed from the feminine form of the qal active participle of the verb *qāhal*, which means something like “to assemble” or “gather,” as when Moses called together the “congregation of Israel” (Exod. 35:1, Lev. 8:3, Num. 1:18, 8:9, etc.). In that sense, it may mean something like “one who assembles,” or “convener.” The feminine ending was sometimes used to indicate a title rather than a personal name.

The notion of Qoheleth as one who assembles a group led the Septuagint translators to use the equivalent Greek word, *Ecclesiastes*. This is related to the term *ekklesia*, the Greek word often used for the church (the letters “c” and “k” represent the same Greek letter *kappa*; there have been different systems of transliteration). Perhaps this connection, and the notion that Qoheleth’s purpose was to address the assembly, inspired the fourth century Latin scholar Jerome to call him *Conciantator*, and Martin Luther to use the German word *Prediger*, both meaning something like “preacher,” a translation reflected in the King James Version.

Most readers would not think Qoheleth was much of a preacher. Qoheleth appears to be a member of Israel’s wisdom community, a philosopher of sorts whose reflections on life were often at odds with traditional teaching, but which nevertheless drew an audience and were considered valuable enough to be preserved as scripture.

For an explanation of why the tradition attributing authorship to Solomon cannot be correct, see “The Hardest Question” below.

**Editorial comments**—Ecclesiastes 1:1 and 12:9-12 were almost certainly added by a later hand, someone who sought to balance Qoheleth’s radical cynicism and *carpe diem* musings with more traditional beliefs. The presence of the same sentence in 1:2 and 12:8 appears to have been intentional bracketing, Qoheleth’s way of underscoring his belief that humans might find some joy and profit in life, but were unable to obtain deeper meaning or understand the ways of God.

*Hevel hevelim*—Some translators render *hevel* with words like “meaninglessness” or “absurdity.” Robert Alter’s translation lets the metaphor speak for itself without interpretation: “Merest breath, said Qoheleth. Merest breath. All is mere breath” (*The Wisdom Books: Job, Proverbs, and Ecclesiastes* [W. W. Norton, 2010], 346).

**Every matter**—In the phrase, “a time for every matter under heaven,” the word translated as “matter” is *hēphets*, which often means “delight,” “desire,” “pleasure,” or even “precious

## Digging Deeper *continued*

stones.” The same word is translated as “pleasure” in Ecc. 5:4 and 12:1, and as “pleasing” in 12:10. It can also mean something as mundane as “matter,” however, and context requires that translation here, as in Ecc. 3:17, 5:8, and 8:6.

**Wordplay**—In verse 4 the poet utilizes a playful combination of words that share similar sounds. “Weeping” and “laughing” are *libkōt* and *lishōq*, while the words for “mourning” and “dancing” are *sepōd* and *reqōd*.

**Midrash**—Within Judaism, a primary role of the rabbis has been the interpretation of scriptures found in the Hebrew Bible. From the early centuries of the Common Era, rabbinic interpretations have been collected into works such as the *Mishnah* and the *Midrashim*. The *Midrash Rabbah* (“Great Midrash”) on Qoheleth probably dates back at least to the seventh century CE.

**Chiasm**—Some interpreters see a structure within the poem that literary scholars call a chiasm: various thematic elements that appear in one part of the text are balanced by similar statements later in the text, in reverse order. A line drawn along the left margins of the diagram would look like the left half of the Greek letter *chi* (X), hence the name “chiasm.” Recognizing the elements of chiasm in vv. 2-8 reinforces the view that in v. 7, which corresponds to v. 4, the rending of clothes should be seen as a symbol of mourning.

vv. 2-3—Life and death, killing and healing

v. 4—Mourning and joy

v. 5—Throwing away and gathering

v. 6—Throwing away and gathering

v. 7—Mourning (ripping clothes) and silence

v. 8—Love and hate, war and peace

**Eternity, or ignorance?**—The Hebrew text was written without vowels, which were added many centuries later, based on the way rabbis were commonly pronouncing the text at that time. Some scholars believe the word *’ōlam* in v. 11 should be read with different vowels, as *’elem*, which can mean “darkness.” Thus, they would translate the verse to say that God has put darkness or ignorance into human hearts, so they cannot understand what God is doing (see, for example, NET2).

# The Hardest Question

by Tony Cartledge

The Hardest Question is designed to support THE BIBLE LESSON by Tony Cartledge, printed in *Nurturing Faith Journal*. You can subscribe to either the digital or print edition of *Nurturing Faith Journal* to access the lessons. Please also ensure that each person in your class has a copy of *Nurturing Faith Journal* so they can prepare before the lesson.

## Why couldn't Solomon have written Ecclesiastes?

We have indicated above that the book of Ecclesiastes appears to have been written during the postexilic period. Modern scholars hold differing opinions of whether he wrote during the rule of the Persians (538-333 BCE), or after Alexander the Great conquered Palestine in 333 BCE, bringing the area under Greek rule and expanding the influence of Hellenistic thought. There are few, however, who would date the book earlier than 400-350 BCE.

But what about the traditional belief, held by many, that Solomon was the author? This came about because of the superscription in 1:1 (“The words of the Teacher, the son of David, king in Jerusalem”) and 1:12-2:26, where Qoheleth employs the literary device of royal fiction as a teaching method.

It is unlikely that Qohelet expected anyone to believe he really was “king of Israel in Jerusalem,” though countless people have done so, including the person who added the superscription and identified him as a “son of David,” since all the kings who ruled in Jerusalem were Davidic descendants. Solomon, of course, also had a reputation for great wisdom, so it is not surprising that a tradition arose that Solomon was the author of this book as well as Proverbs, even though much of Ecclesiastes is contradictory to the traditional wisdom of Proverbs, which contains attributions to a variety of authors.

Solomon could hardly have written the Book of Ecclesiastes. Why?

First, the royal fiction is found only in a small part of the book. In most of the book, Qoheleth makes no pretension about being king. In fact, his attitude toward kingship is more critical than friendly. He sometimes connects kingship with injustice (3:16, 4:1-2, 5:7) and often makes comments about how to deal with kings, but not how to rule (8:2-4; 10:4-7, 16-17, 20). A king would hardly write in this way.

Secondly, the themes and vocabulary of the book are manifestly unlike what one would expect from a book written in the 10th century, as it would have to be if Solomon was the author. The Hebrew text has all the characteristics of the postexilic period, a time when the Hebrew language showed influence from Aramaic, which had become the *lingua franca* of the period. The presence of Aramaic and Persian style or loan words is strong evidence that the work was written in a later period. Qoheleth's grammar is unlike classical Hebrew and has often been described as reflecting the transition period between biblical Hebrew and the Mishnaic Hebrew of the rabbis that developed in the last couple of centuries before Christ. Perhaps Franz Delitzsch said it best: “If the Book of Koheleth were of old Solomonic origin, then there is no history of the Hebrew language” (cited by Roland E. Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, vol. 23A of Word Biblical Commentary [Zondervan, 1992], xxvii).

## The Hardest Question *continued*

Thus, there is little to substantiate the idea that Qoheleth and Solomon were the same person. Qoheleth could pretend to be Solomon for the sake of teaching his students, even as a modern preacher might present a dramatic monologue in the guise of an ancient prophet, but he was a sage from a much later period. Qoheleth's background and occupation are unclear. He appears to have been a person of some means (and frustrated that he could not take his wealth with him), but he was neither a king nor the richest man who ever lived.