The Divine Sabotage: An Exegetical and Theological Study of Ecclesiastes 3

by Dan Lioy

Abstract

The author uses the concept of the “divine sabotage” as a starting point for an exegetical and theological study of Ecclesiastes 3. He notes that on the one hand, God has “set eternity in the human heart” (v. 11). Yet, on the other hand, “no one can fathom what God has done from beginning to end”. The author explains that God has imposed limitations on the human race that undermine their efforts to look beyond the present—especially to understand the past and probe into the future. Expressed differently, because people are creatures of time, their heavenly-imposed finitude subverts their ability to fathom the eternal plan of God. An objective, balanced, and affirming examination of Solomon’s treatise indicates that the fundamental quality of life is defined by revering God and heeding His commandments (cf. 12:13).

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1 The views expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the beliefs of the South African Theological Seminary.

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3 This essay is a preliminary version of material to appear in a forthcoming monograph being researched and written by the author. The views expressed herein do not necessarily represent those of the South African Theological Seminary.
1. Introduction

The idea for the title of this essay comes from Roland Murphy’s discussion of Ecclesiastes 3:11 (1987:256; 1992:39). The verse states that God has “set eternity in the human heart, yet no one can fathom what God has done from beginning to end”. Murphy explains that God has placed within people an awareness of “the timeless”, namely, a “sense of duration”. Yet, He also prevents people “from understanding what [He] is about in all the key undertakings of life”. This is a “case of divine sabotage” in which humanity’s efforts to look beyond the present—especially to understand the past and probe into the future—are subverted by numerous heavenly-imposed limitations.

Seow (1997:173) remarked that “God is responsible for giving both time and eternity, and the human being is caught in the tension between the two”. In a similar vein, Bridges (1860:68) observed that people “can neither unravel the thread of [God’s] counsels, nor grasp the infinite perfection of his work”. Kaiser (1979:60) described the finitude and frustration of human beings in this way: “So vast, so eternal, and so comprehensive in its inclusion is [God’s] plan that man is both threatened and exasperated in his attempts to discover it for himself”. Williams (1984:257) maintains that God “does not resolve the crisis” for humankind. Instead, He “remains hidden in His person, work, and justice”. In light of this dilemma, Lee (2005:121) concluded that “any attempt to strain for the impossible or master the mysterious is destined to lead only to frustration and failure”.

Polkinghorne stated in an interview that the “mysterious infinite reality of God cannot be caught within the finite nets of human thinking” (Fitzgerald 2008). Kidner (1976:39) likened the human predicament to the “desperately nearsighted, inching their way along some great tapestry or fresco in the attempt to take it in”. People “see enough to recognize something of its quality”, yet the “grand design” eludes them, for they “can never stand back far enough to view it as the Creator does, whole and entire” from start to finish. Caneday (1994:103) noted that “man struggles for life and meaning in

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4 Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture quotations are taken from Today’s New International Version (hereafter abbreviated, TNIV).
an environment that taunts him with its paradoxes: birth and death, weeping
and laughter, love and hate, war and peace, and the like”. This “relentless and
inflexible cycle of events extends beyond the grasp of man’s control and
understanding”.

Together, the litany of preceding comments paint a rather stark, unsettling
picture. When we candidly and objectively look at the facts, we should not be
surprised that at times our existence seems vague, incongruous, and
antithetical. We are left feeling confused, powerless, and frustrated. As well,
somewhere along the way, we begin to ask what life is really all about.
Solomon (otherwise referred as the Teacher, sage, and Qoheleth), who was
Israel’s wisest and most powerful king, also wrestled with these issues, and he
recorded his observations and conclusions in the Book of Ecclesiastes. 5 This
essay will consider in part what he had to say by undertaking an exegetical and
theological study of chapter 3 of his discourse. Observations and conclusions
drawn from it are representative of what is found throughout the philosopher-
theologian’s entire treatise.

2. The Lord’s Sovereign Ordering of Life’s Events (Eccl 3:1-8)

Earlier in Ecclesiastes, Solomon noted that life is ephemeral, unreliable, and
incomprehensible, especially when divorced from God (cf. 1:1-11). Likewise,
true meaning and joy come only from God. In chapter 3, the sage considered
the spectrum of life’s activities and events and affirmed that all of them were
under God’s sovereign ordering and control (cf. Ps 31:15; Prov 16:1-9). The
parallel sentence structure of Ecclesiastes 3:1 indicates that the Hebrew terms
rendered “time” and “season” denote a range of human endeavors and
situations on earth, all of which are appointed by God to occur at the
appropriate moment (cf. Brown, Driver, and Briggs 1983:273, 773). While He
has ordained a time for everything, the responsibility of the upright is to seek
the Lord’s wisdom so that they might discern what activities go with what
seasons.

5 This essay holds to the traditional view of the Solomonic authorship of Ecclesiastes.
Admittedly, it is not imperative to have a definitive identification of the author to understand
the message of the book. For a discussion regarding the inspired perspective of Ecclesiastes,
see Lioy 2006.
Verses 2-8 list many of the activities that take place “under the heavens” (v. 1). The reader finds here 14 pairs of opposites. In Hebrew speech, the mentioning of opposites together expressed totality (for example, “heaven and earth” stands for all of physical and spiritual reality). Thus, these 14 pairs are meant to be representative of all the activities of life (cf. Glenn 1985:983; Longman 1998:114; Provan 2001:87). Verse 2 opens with the observation that God establishes the time for birth and the time for death. In Qoheleth’s view, God has a plan for one’s arrival on earth, for the living out of one’s temporal existence, and for one’s departure from life. In the previous two chapters, the sage commented on the brevity of life. Ecclesiastes 3:2-8 rounds out his presentation by addressing what comes between birth and death.

In the divine ordering of earthly existence, people take time to plant crops as well as to uproot the same (v. 2). They engage in killing and healing activities, as well as tearing down and building up initiatives (v. 3). These three lines of the poem address creative and destructive endeavors used for either establishing or undermining. For instance, planting seeds and pulling weeds must be done to reap a harvest. The same is true of life in general. Some aspects must be planted and others uprooted if one’s life is to be complete and meaningful.

When Solomon noted that there is a time to kill, he was not condoning premeditated murder. His point was more complex than that. Perhaps he was suggesting that the righteous must wrestle for God’s wisdom during times when they are confronted with aggression. For instance, when is the proper time to resist evil with forcefulness? On the other hand, when is it time to negotiate and seek reconciliation? Of course, there are also times when those who seek to revere and obey God need to tear down negative aspects of their personal lives and times when they need to build up the positive aspects.

Verse 4 moves the reader farther along the path of life’s sovereignly ordered events by mentioning such activities as expressing sorrow and joy, along with mourning and dancing. The Teacher covered the range of human emotions—both private and public—in these two lines of the poem. The Hebrew words translated “weep” and “laugh” indicate expressions of an individual’s emotions (cf. Brown, Driver, and Briggs 1983:113, 987), while the Hebrew verbs translated “mourn” and “dance” indicate expressions of a group’s
emotions (cf. Brown, Driver, and Briggs 1983:704, 955). Put differently, there is a time for an individual to be sad, and a time for that person to be happy. Likewise, there is a time for an individual to join with others in lamenting a loss, and a time for that person to join with others in celebration.

In verse 5, the sage drew attention to throwing away and gathering stones, along with embracing and refraining from doing so. Various interpretations exist of these two lines of the poem, which focus on friendship and enmity. In ancient times, fields taken by enemies were made unproductive by scattering stones across them. Oppositely, stones were gathered from fields as a sign of a community’s desire for peace. A different interpretation points to the gathering of stones for use in building a wall to keep out invaders. In contrast, tearing down those stone walls indicated the residents’ desire to make peace with their enemies.

According to one view, “a time to embrace” is a call for people of faith to comfort someone who is experiencing pain, grief, or reconciliation; and yet at other times, it is best for the upright to respect a person’s privacy, and not to interfere. A second, more literal view places Qoheleth’s advice in the context of love and its physical expression between a man and a woman. Thus, there is a time to show affection and a time to refrain from doing so.

Verse 6 reveals that God establishes the time for individuals to search for people and possessions as well as the moment when the latter should be given up as lost. At least a portion of life on earth consists of humanity’s concern for accumulating or getting rid of what they own. According to the sage, God bestowed on people special times when they must look long and hard for things, friendships, and goals, and hold on to them when they were acquired; but there are other times when He summons people to give these up.

In verse 7, the Teacher spotlighted times of ripping things up and sewing them together, as well as keeping silent and deciding to speak. The tearing and mending most likely refer to the ancient custom of rending one’s clothes in grief. If so, this line of Solomon’s poem restates verse 4, in that it shows there is a season to express grief and a season to recover from grief. The second half of verse 7 reminds the reader that communication—a key part of human
existence—is like a two-way street. Thus, there is a time to remain quiet and a time to voice one’s opinion, an interval to listen and an interval to remark.

Verse 8 notes that in the divine ordering of earthly matters, there are times for love and hate, along with seasons for war and peace. Qoheleth recognized that life on earth can hardly resemble what God intended for it when human affections are missing. Indeed, throughout history, the existence of people has been marked by both love and hatred. The sage encouraged his readers to be careful about the times both are exercised. As a king, Solomon understood the necessity of taking account of the political endeavors of his audience. For instance, the same emotions that can give rise to love or hatred in two individuals can also give rise to war or peace in two communities. Furthermore, as history has shown, conflicts will always arise. Sometimes wrong is resisted with force; at other times, peace is the goal.

3. The Decision to Enjoy the Present Amid Life’s Uncertainties and Inequities (Eccl 3:9-22)

The poem recorded in Ecclesiastes 3:1-8 leaves the reader with the impression that there is an unmistakable rhythm and order to existence on earth; however, it would be incorrect to conclude from this that everything that occurs in the world is straightforward and predictable. An examination of the first two chapters of Solomon’s treatise indicates that existence is filled with paradoxes and that God oversees the ebb and flow of Creation, even though it remains opaque and cryptic to human beings.

It is understandable why people, in their effort to make sense of life’s enigmas, would ask what advantage or benefit they obtained from their hard work (v. 9). Qoheleth acknowledged the “burden” (v. 10) God has placed on the human race. “Burden” renders the Hebrew noun ‘inyān, and also can be translated as “occupation”, “task”, or “job” (cf. Brown, Driver, and Briggs 1983:775). In the present context, this referred to the efforts of people—through theology, philosophy, and science (to name a few disciplines)—to determine on a daily basis where they fit into the divine ordering of life;

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6 The Hebrew consonantal and vowel transliterations used in this essay conform to those found in Brown, Driver, and Briggs 1983:xx.
however, this search for meaning only ends in frustration, for people constantly discover anew that the whole picture of life on planet Earth eludes them.

Theology may be defined as the study of the metaphysical—including the nature of God, the content of religious belief, and the character / conduct of religious practice—done through an examination of revelation, Scripture, personal experience, and culture. Philosophy may be defined as the study of the fundamental nature of knowledge, reality, and existence, done primarily through speculative means (rather than empirical methods). Science may be defined as the investigation of physical reality, done through a complex interplay of theory, observation, and experimentation (cf. Baker 2007:153-172; O’Brien, 2007:59-67; Orr 2006:437-442; Scott 2001; Willard 1994).

Even the sharpest minds remain ignorant of God’s providence. Rather than become endlessly preoccupied with trying to discern the latter, Solomon affirmed that God has beautifully orchestrated everything to occur at precisely the right moment. The king also acknowledged that God has “set eternity in the human heart” (v. 11). Expressed differently, the Creator has made people with a deep-seated, inborn awareness of “God’s ways in the world” that transcends the present and impels them to comprehend how the past, present, and future all fit together (LaSor, Hubbard, and Bush 1996:816).

Krüger (2004:87) thinks the Hebrew noun ‘ôlām, which is rendered “eternity”, denotes a “concept or idea of ‘distant time’ that extends far beyond the life of an individual human being in the direction of either the past or the future or both” (cf. Brown, Driver, and Briggs 1983:761). Despite each generation’s stellar intellectual abilities and attainments, people remain largely ignorant of what God has foreordained. They are even unable to fathom the nature and timing of events during the course of their individual lives. Incredibly, no one is “privy to the designs of this inscrutable God, and cannot predict the consequences of human works” (Ranger 1989:2). This impasse is a prime example of divine sabotage.

For a discussion of the overall failure of science, as a discipline, to recognize God as the primary agent or cause behind the ordering and coherence of the
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universe, cf. Pretorius 2007. The author notes that science is able to “argue what reality is from as many realms and ideas” as it chooses; yet this hypothesising is based on a “limited understanding of how the cosmos was formed”. In contrast, the Judeo-Christian Scripture “widens the picture”. Specifically, the Bible “gives deeper meaning to the purpose for creation and causes one to search for answers to greater truths than science can produce” (41). In the final analysis, the “theistic world-view” is the “most biblically viable” paradigm “within which reality can be understood” (10). More generally, even the “most major alternate world-views are self-defeating and inadequate” in making sense of existence (both physical and metaphysical). All these constructs (whether philosophical or empirical in character) are unable to “answer questions surrounding humanity’s journey of life and their final destination, life after death” (26).

Such observations notwithstanding, Pretorius affirms that “both science and theology involve themselves in a journey of discovery, both seek answers, and both concern themselves with truth” (12). Furthermore, he maintains that it is possible for “science and theology” to “comfortably work to further each ones’ understanding of reality” (23). Based on the preceding supposition, it seems reasonable to consider “science and religion” as separate and complementary disciplines that “address aspects of human understanding in different ways”. Moreover, “attempts to pit science and religion against each other create controversy where none needs to exist” (National Academy of Sciences and Institute of Medicine 2008:12).

In another study, it was maintained that since the dawn of time, the human drive for life has been checkmated by death (Lioy 2006). Specifically, a biblical-theological examination of Genesis 5 and Ecclesiastes 1 indicates that despite the efforts of people both individually and collectively to extend the realms of human existence, their efforts are ultimately ambushed (in a manner of speaking) by a divinely-imposed termination of life (cf. Pss 2:1-6; 18:25-27; 37:1-40; 75:4-10; 90:3-12; Prov 3:32-35; 10:25; 14:11; Isa 40:5-8, 15-17, 21-24; Dan 2:20-21; 7:9-12; Jas 4:6; 1 Pet 5:5-6; Rev 18:1-24; 19:11-21). Moreover, while each generation appears to be making incremental strides—sometimes even laudable gains—the reality of death neutralizes these advances and in some cases entirely wipes them out. A consideration of 1
Corinthians 15:50-58 informs people of faith that only in the Messiah can work and leisure be enjoyable, beneficial, and fulfilling.

Paul’s statements recorded in Romans 1:18-32 draw attention to a circumstance in which the Lord increasingly gives pagan humanity over to the futile outcome of their perverted lifestyles. The apostle began by affirming that God’s wrath was being revealed against the wickedness of all those who suppressed the truth (v. 18). This is something that is occurring even now, as people continue to believe their own deceptive hearts. The individuals described in Romans 1 were certainly worthy of God’s wrath, for they suppressed divine truth. The latter refers to the character of God and His invisible qualities revealed in creation.

God’s eternal power and divine nature are demonstrated through what He has made (vv. 19-20). This is known as natural revelation, for God uses the created order to disclose a part of Himself. Special revelation, in contrast, is the disclosure of God’s character through the written words of Scripture. God, who is “spirit” (John 4:24), is invisible (Col. 1:15). Though the physical eye cannot see Him, His existence is reflected in what He has made. Because God has disclosed Himself in creation, all people stand condemned before Him. The condemnation of those who suppress God’s truth is justified because ignoring the revelation of God in creation is indefensible.

Romans 1:21-23 indicates that these individuals worshiped the creation instead of the Creator. By seeing the intricate design of the universe, they could clearly understand the nature of God. Instead of glorifying God for His power, they looked for substitutes. In their foolishness they refused to give thanks to God. Their thinking became futile and their hearts were darkened. Because of their idolatry, God abandoned pagan human beings (or “gave them over”) to their depravity. Instead of attempting to restrain their wickedness, God simply allowed their sin to run its course. He removed His influence and allowed their willful rejection to produce its natural consequence, which in this case was deadly.

What did God give the Gentiles over to? Verse 24 indicates it was sexual impurity. In this way pagans exchanged the truth of God for a lie. This also involved an exchange in worship. People served the creation instead of the
Creator (v. 25). In verse 26 we read for the second time that God “gave them over”—this time to sexual perversion. Individuals perverted God’s gift of physical intimacy in the context of marriage by engaging in homosexual acts (vv. 26-27). Men and women exchanged natural relations (between men and women) with unnatural relations (men with men and women with women). The result of exchanging the truth of God for a lie was the substitution of natural sexual relations for unnatural ones. For this twofold exchange, they received the due penalty for their perversion.

In verse 28 we read for the third time that God “gave them over”—this time to a depraved mind. These pagans put God’s reasonable moral boundaries out of their minds, and God responded by abandoning them to warped thinking. Out of this mindset comes all kinds of evil deeds. In verses 29 and 30, Paul categorized these into four kinds of active sin: wickedness (the opposite of righteousness), evil (the profound absence of empathy, shame, and goodness), greed (the relentless urge to acquire more), and depravity (a constant bent toward immorality). Such sinful behavior was not due to ignorance of God’s commands (v. 32). Rather, people sinned despite their knowledge of God, making them all the more responsible. Not only that, but they also applauded these practices in others. Perhaps seeing others do these things filled them with a sense of self-justification. In any case, they received what they deserved—spiritual death.

According to Ecclesiastes 3:11, since God’s ways are inscrutable, human beings are powerless to make anything different—at least permanently. Towner (1997:284) explains that this state of affairs is “deterministic, but not fatalistic”, for people are “still perfectly free and responsible to act”. The author takes issue with the notion that Qoheleth depicts God as being “arbitrary and capricious or even just plain absent”. Instead, the sage characterizes God as being both transcendent and imminent in the world, which He created and oversees. This view is contra Bickerman (1967:149), who claims that for Qoheleth, God was an “morally neutral being, beyond good and evil.” Also, God reputedly was as “arbitrary and fickle as Luck”.

Lee (2005:47) points out that in the “drama of life”, God is the undisputed “primary Actor”, the “one who gives and authorizes”. Moreover, the “human agent is given a responsibility for the proper use of that right of disposal”.

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Accordingly, rather than become frustrated and disillusioned, people of faith choose to revere and obey God, trusting that His wisdom is infinite and His eternal purposes are wise. Ellul (1990:37) maintains that the “unexpected appearance of God in this text cannot be seen as a later supplement or pious veneer”. Instead, “God’s presence at every turn signifies a righting of the situation”.

For an analysis of the concept of God in Ecclesiastes, cf. Estes (1982). The author’s study deals with both the “elements of God’s activity” (19-102) and the “effects of God’s activity” (103-163). Estes concludes that Qoheleth’s primary emphasis is on God’s transcendence, sovereignty, and inscrutability (164-165). In a similar vein, Kidner (1976:15) asserts that in Ecclesiastes the reader encounters God in three primary ways: “as Creator, as Sovereign, and as Unsearchable Wisdom”. Eaton (1983:82) advances the discussion by noting that affirming the “sovereignty of God” is crucial to properly enjoying His material blessings. Here one finds “secularism [giving] way to theism, pessimism to optimism, [and] human autonomy to human faith”.

This mindset is reflected in verse 12, where Qoheleth advised his readers to enjoy life in the present (cf. 2:24-26). Based on his observations and personal experience, he concluded that the most worthwhile approach is for people to find joy in their God-given existence. The latter included doing “good” (3:12) as long as they lived. Lee suggests that “enjoyment is not only a matter of right conduct.” As well, it is a “matter of character and disposition” (2005:52; italics are the author’s). While deriving enjoyment in life could include the satisfaction the comes from being charitable and philanthropic in one’s undertakings, this does not rule out the idea of obtaining pleasure from daily, ordinary experiences. Indeed, the Teacher noted that a great source of contentment can be found in eating, drinking, and performing satisfying work (v. 13).

How can one find real delight in the common outlets of life? The righteous do so by believing that such daily activity—indeed, all of life itself—is a gift of God. The is only possible when people humbly revere the Lord and place their confidence in Him. Smith (1996:731) maintains that Ecclesiastes 3:12-13 is not advocating “licentiousness”. Instead, Qoheleth is enjoining “that happy appreciation of the innocent pleasures which the love of God offers to those
who live in accordance with his standards of goodness”. Ginsberg and Fox (2007:6:90) explain that while God-given enjoyments are “brief, imperfect, and uncertain, they are enough to make life worth living”.

Furthermore, the sage advised the prudent to adopt a measure of humility regarding the short-term import of their lives. Unlike the achievements of the human race (whether individually or collectively), everything God undertakes has a certain finality to it. As a matter of fact, what He does “endures forever”, with people being unable to change His sovereign plans. God has designed the world to operate in this way “so that people will fear him” (v. 14; cf. Brown, Driver, and Briggs 1983:431). The latter is not an irrational feeling of dread and impending doom. As well, it is more than courteous reverence. Fearing the Lord is a multivalent concept. It includes an affirmation of His sovereignty and power; it involves revering Him in worship and obeying Him unconditionally (cf. 12:13); and it encompasses a “reverent recognition of the perfection of God’s work” (Krüger 2004:89).

Parsons (2003:164) thinks the “concept of the fear of God is not an afterthought but is a theme woven into the fabric of the book” (cf. Eccl 3:14; 5:7; 7:18; 8:12-13; 12:13). According to Gordis (1995:236-237), the biblical concept of fearing God has “both a metaphysical and an ethical character”. Expressed differently, the notion “embodies both a theory of life and a course of conduct”. In specific terms, fearing God “means to be conscious of His limitless and unfathomable power and to be aware of the uncertainty and brevity of life”. Seow (1997:268) explains that those who fear God recognize the “chasm between the divine and the human”. Also, they know the “proper place of humanity in relation to the deity”. Moreover, they embrace life as God providentially gives it—including the “contradictory realities” of existence on earth.

Deuteronomy 10:12 conveys a similar set of priorities. Moses urged the covenant community to live in reverential trust of the Lord, to obey His commandments, and to love and serve Him with all their heart and soul. A corresponding set of admonitions is found in Micah 6:8. The Lord’s requirements recorded in this verse set the highest standards for godly living. For instance, to “act justly” means to treat others with honesty, integrity, and equity (cf. Brown, Driver, and Briggs 1983:1048). To “love mercy” implies
being loyal to God and kind to others (cf. Brown, Driver, and Briggs 1983:13, 338). This is not done impulsively, but rather as a consistent part of one’s life. To “walk humbly” with God signifies being circumspect in what one says and modest in one’s demeanor (cf. Brown, Driver, and Briggs 1983:229, 857). People of faith willingly choose to follow the Lord and submit to His will. These requirements progress from what is external to what is internal and from one’s relationship to other people to one’s relationship with God. Specifically, in order to be just toward other people, one must display loyal love. Also, such compassion demands a humble walk before the Lord.

In Ecclesiastes 3:15, Solomon used a brief poem to take a broader view of history, especially as it affects people. Throughout the course of human affairs, people seek to discern God’s will. As they try to make sense of His providential undertakings, they begin to discover that history is more than just facts and events repeating themselves without meaning. Admittedly, incidents tend to occur in certain patterns over and over again. Nonetheless, whatever is happening now or will take place in the future has already occurred before (cf. 1:9-11). Such observations notwithstanding, the upright, with faith in God’s wisdom, can learn from the course of human events in ways that will benefit them in the present.

The precise meaning of the latter part of 3:15 is debated. The TNIV margin states that “God calls back the past”. The idea is that He seeks to do again what occurred in prior generations. The TNIV main rendering of 3:15 says that one day “God will call the past into account”. This statement can be both unsettling and reassuring. For instance, it is sobering to realize that people must answer to God for whatever they have done throughout their time on earth. All the same, it is comforting to remember that God will vindicate the righteous. In particular, He will not overlook those who have suffered evil at the hands of others, especially believers and innocent people who have been persecuted or slaughtered.

The reality of the latter truth is stressed in Revelation 20:11-15, which concerns the judgment of the wicked dead. John, in his heavenly vision, saw God open several books that contain a record of the deeds of every human being. The Lord will judge all people according to their works. This did not mean that salvation is based on good deeds, but that God keeps a record of
what people do in this life. God then will open “the book of life”, which records the names of those who trusted in the Messiah for salvation. The Lord Jesus will deliver from judgment only those whose names appear in this book. For those who spurn the Son, all that remains is for the Father to condemn them. It will be a terrifying scene as He issues a verdict of guilty against the unsaved.

Moreover, John saw the sea giving up the dead who were in it, and death and Hades (the realm of dead) also giving up their dead. The idea is that no one will escape judgment. The Creator will cast death and Hades into the eternal lake of fire. John called this the second death because it is the final state of everlasting torment. The documents detailing humanity’s deeds will be a sobering witness that cannot be refuted. The Father will banish forever from His presence those who do not have their names listed in the Lamb’s book of life. No unsaved person will escape this fate.

Ecclesiastes 3:16-22 explore further the theme of divine justice in the midst of human oppression. “Judgment” (v. 16) translates the Hebrew noun mishpāt, which refers to the rendering of a verdict (whether favorable or unfavorable) in a court of law (cf. Brown, Driver, and Briggs 1983:1048). “Justice” translates the noun tsedeq, which denotes what is upright or fair in a moral or legal sense (cf. Brown, Driver, and Briggs 1983:841). Solomon observed that often in a society’s judicial system, people grasped for power rather than pursued justice, and then they used that power to maltreat others. As a result, “wickedness” reigned over the place of judgment instead of equity and compassion. “Wickedness” translates the noun is reshā’, which points to a variety of iniquities committed by people in society (cf. Brown, Driver, and Briggs 1983:957).

Down through the centuries, believers have wondered why God allows evil in the world (cf. Hab 1:13). Whether one is considering evil attitudes, actions, or aims, this wickedness results from the absence of the moral perfection that God originally intended to exist between good things. Ultimately, only God knows why He has allowed evil to exist in the world. Nevertheless, it remains true that the Lord may use ungodliness to bring home to people the distressing fact of their mortality, to warn them of greater evils, to bring about a greater good, or to help defeat wickedness. The last two reasons are especially evident
in the cross of the Messiah. Despite the tragedy of His suffering at Calvary, His atoning sacrifice resulted in a greater good (the salvation of the lost) and the defeat of evil (for instance, sin and death).

Rather than giving in to pessimism and despair, Qoheleth voiced some hope. He pointed his readers to a higher court—the justice of God—when he stated his belief that the Lord would judge both the “righteous” (Eccl 3:17) and “wicked.” “Righteous” translates the Hebrew adjective tsaddîyq, which refers to those who are lawful and upright in their conduct (cf. Brown, Driver, and Briggs 1983:843). “Wicked” renders the adjective râshâ’, which (like the related noun resha’) denotes those guilty of criminal activity (cf. Brown, Driver, and Briggs 1983:957). Garrett (1987:163) acknowledges that “Qoheleth does not speculate about what type of punishment the wicked will receive”. Nonetheless, he “offers the the hope, albeit an undefined one, of divine judgment and vindication”.

The sage observed that in the divine ordering of life’s events, there is an appropriate time for every human undertaking (cf. v. 1). Likewise, God has reserved a time of judgment for all that people do. Perhaps for the moment the wicked might seem to get away with their evil deeds, but in the end God’s justice will triumph (cf. Eccl 9:1; 11:9; 12:14; Mal 3:16—4:3; Rev 22:11-12). Kaiser (1979:125) clarifies that people are “responsible beings, not brutes, who are destined to live to confront the past with the God that they either feared or flouted”.

Next, Solomon directed his attention to another related aspect of the human condition. Time after time people fail the divine test to live uprightly. The presence of injustice in the world clearly establishes this fact. Additionally, despite the efforts of individuals to exceed the parameters of their existence, they remain as mortal as any other creature on earth (Eccl 3:18). Like animals, people both breathe and are destined to die. In point of fact, the “shadow of death relativizes human distinctions” (Crenshaw 1987:84). Moreover, the prevalence of wickedness and the inevitability of death indicate that humans have no temporal superiority or “advantage over animals” (v. 19).

Because this is so, the sage declared that everything in life seemed fleeting and fruitless. After all, both humans and animals have the same lifebreath and end
up in the grave. Fox (2004:26.) explains that the Hebrew noun *ruach*, which is rendered “breath” (cf. Brown, Driver, and Briggs 1983:924), does not refer to an “immortal ‘soul,’ but . . . an animating force that gives and preserves life” (cf. Gen 6:17; Job 34:14-15; Ps 104:29-30). Every creature is made from the same minerals and chemicals of the ground, and in death that is where all of them return (Eccl 3:20; cf. Gen. 3:19; Pss 49:12, 20; 103:14). No living entity can escape this destiny. In light of this sobering truth, people of faith choose to revere God and obey Him (cf. Laurin, 1990:594; Waltke 2007:964-965).

In a way, the issue of death is just as difficult to deal with as is the issue of injustice—particularly for those who have no trust in God. For the atheist, if there is no ultimate justice (as is typically alleged), and if people simply die off like snakes and sparrows (as is often maintained), then life would indeed seem to be a farce. To an extent, Solomon indulged this mindset in Ecclesiastes 3:21 by adopting a noncommital stance on the question of whether there is life after death. Hubbard (1991:200) suggests that Qoheleth made numerous provocative statements in Ecclesiastes as a way to “penetrate the dull ears and hard hearts” of his peers. In a corresponding manner, Dorsey (1999:197) thinks Qoheleth first aimed for the “demolition of misguided hope” before “rebuilding on firmer ground”. Expressed differently, the author “clears away the foolish debris down to bedrock, and only then does he begin to rebuild on a solid foundation”.

When the horizon of human knowledge and understanding rise no higher than temporal earthly existence, it is impossible to prove conclusively that in death a human’s lifebreath ascends upward to heaven and an animal’s lifebreath sinks down into the netherworld. A determination cannot be made on the basis empirical evidence obtained through scientific investigation. In short, “death prevents one from extrapolating a conclusive forecast after he dies from principles governing his present life” (Lobdell 1981:95). Wright (1991:5:1164) notes that Solomon was “speaking phenomenologically”, that is, “as things appear to the senses”. In like manner, Glenn (1985:985-987) remarks that “no living person can observe or demonstrate a difference between people and animals by watching them as they die” (italics are the author’s).
Even so, it is clarifying to note that the Teacher did not categorically rule out the likelihood of immortality for people. Also, Qoheleth did not affirm the pagan notion that death is either a state of nothingness or total annihilation. Indeed, as Waltke (2007:965) indicates, the “doctrine of the afterlife in Ecclesiastes is consistent with the Old Testament in general”. Furthermore, other passages of Scripture reveal a distinction between the respective fates of humans and animals. While people have an afterlife that is dealt with by God, all other earthly creatures cease to exist when they physically expire. In the Old Testament, there is an emerging awareness of the truth that there is life after death for people (cf. Pss 16:9-11; 49:15; 73:23-26; Isa 26:19; Dan 12:2). With the advent of the Messiah, the truth of the resurrection has been fully and clearly revealed in the gospel (cf. John 5:24-29; 2 Tim 1:10).

In Paul’s day, some of the Corinthians did not believe in the bodily resurrection of the dead. They may have affirmed that Christians, after death, live on forever in heaven as spirits; but to them the idea of one’s soul being rejoined with one’s body was distasteful. Paul felt he had to correct their error. Recognizing the seriousness of this problem, the apostle strove to reason the Corinthians out of their mistaken opinion. To start, he pointed out that if the dead are not raised, then neither could Jesus have been raised, for that would be an exception to the rule. Besides, if the dead are not raised, then there was no point in the Messiah’s resurrection. In short, the Corinthians’ two beliefs contradicted each other. They could not assert that Jesus was raised and claim say that the dead are not raised (1 Cor 15:13-16).

From this point Paul drew some conclusions, ones the Corinthians would not like but would have to recognize as logically consistent with their denial of any resurrection. First, if the Savior was not raised, then the apostle’s preaching and the Corinthians’ faith were both useless, for Jesus’ resurrection is at the core of the Christian faith. Without His resurrection, the gospel is not worth spreading or believing (v. 14). Next, if the Son was not raised, then Paul had taught falsehood about God, for the apostle declared that the Father had raised the Son from the dead. In other words, Paul was a liar and the Corinthians could not trust his teaching (v. 15). Finally, if the Messiah was not raised, then the Corinthians’ belief in Him had done nothing to solve their sin problem. They were all still hell-bound. In that case, no one was more pitiable
than believers, for Christians were hoping for salvation while remaining under condemnation for their sin (vv. 17-19).

In one sense, all the logical conclusions Paul had drawn from the Corinthians’ implicit denial of Jesus’ resurrection were meaningless, for He was raised. The apostle firmly asserted that Jesus is the “firstfruits” (v. 20) of those who would be resurrected. At harvest time, Israelite farmers took the first and finest portions of their crops and offered them to the Lord (Exod 23:16, 19; Lev 23:9-14). The whole nation initially celebrated the offering of the “firstfruits” in the late spring, 50 days after Passover, at the beginning of harvest season. At first, this celebration was known as the Festival of Weeks. Later it became known as Pentecost, the Greek word meaning “fiftieth”. The celebration was repeated throughout summer as other crops were brought in. The whole purpose of the festival was to give thanks to God for His bounty. It was a time of great rejoicing throughout Israel. The Son not only was the first to rise from the dead, but also He serves as a pledge that more resurrections will one day follow. His resurrection guarantees that all the deceased who placed their trust in Him while alive will someday be raised from the dead.

In Ecclesiastes 3:21, Qoheleth may have meant to galvanize his readers into action by being so opaque about the issue of life after death. Instead of them giving up in the face of certain death, the sage urged them to make the most of their opportunity to live for God. Solomon perceived that because life is so short and filled with injustice, it was best for people to find satisfaction in their work. Ultimately, whatever joy they obtained from their labor was their God-given reward. Assuredly, after people died, God would not bring them back from the grave to reenter temporal existence and discover what the future held for succeeding generations on earth. In short, God’s perfect plan for human beings was to serve Him fully and joyfully right now before their lives ended (cf. 9:7-10).

In Ephesians 5:15-20 (cf. Col 3:15-17), Paul offered similar counsel for his readers. He urged them to act like people with good sense, not like fools. Indeed, because the era in which they lived was characterized by evil, they were to make the most of every opportunity. For instance, rather than act thoughtlessly, they were to discern what the Lord wanted them to do. This included putting themselves under the control of the Holy Spirit. In turn, those
whom He filled had a strong desire to worship God, particularly with music. Paul encouraged believers to communicate among themselves with psalms, hymns, and other kinds of sacred melodies. Additionally, on an individual level, they were to praise the Lord with all their hearts. In these and other ways, they offered thanks to the Father for all He had done for them in union with the Son.

4. Conclusion

This essay has undertaken an exegetical and theological study of Ecclesiastes 3. Doing so has enabled an exploration of a number of issues related to the central question of this provocative book: What is life really all about? The reader discovers that from the vantage point of eternity, human existence seems “utterly meaningless” (Eccl 1:2; 12:8), especially when divorced from God. One also finds out that humanity’s efforts to look beyond the present—especially to understand the past and probe into the future—are thwarted by the divine sabotage. Expressed differently, because people are creatures of time, their heavenly-imposed finitude subverts their ability to fathom the eternal plan of God. This frustrating predicament is like trying to pitch “our tents in an oasis of peace and happiness” surrounded by a “desert of absurdity” (Towner 1991:5:303).

The prudent response to this nonnegotiable impasse acknowledges and accepts both the “impossibilities and possibilities of being human”. Also, there is an awareness that “human limitations can lead to a profound freedom”. In this scenario, God empowers the upright to “embrace life all the more fully and enjoy the gift of each moment of goodness present to them”. There is a recognition that while “life is beyond one’s control”, every single “moment is for the taking, by the gift of God” (Lee, 2005:121). Furthermore, one learns from a study of Ecclesiastes 3 that the fundamental quality of life is defined by revering God and heeding His commandments (cf. 12:13). If human existence is likened to a cord made of three strands (cf. 4:12), it remains coherent and interconnected when God is at the center of one’s inner world, the core of one’s understanding of the external world, and the basis for the significance one derives from life.
Lioy, Divine Sabotage

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