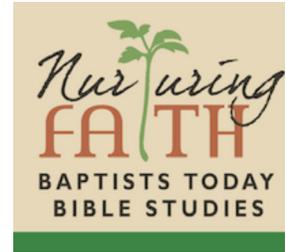


Adult Teaching Resources

January 1, 2017



Looking Forward (January 1-February 26)

Ecclesiastes 3:1-13 – “It’s Always Time”

Isaiah 42:1-9 – “A Time for Justice”

Isaiah 49:1-7 – “A Time for Light”

Isaiah 9:1-4 – “A Time for Hope”

Micah 6:1-8 - “A Time for Mercy”

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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 Cartlege, 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.

Bible Background

“For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven...” Ecc. 3:1

Today’s passage has been used to bring comfort and funerals, peace in times of war and unrest, and been immortalized in popular music. “A time to be born and a time to die” is just the beginning of the memorable poem we find in Ecclesiastes. As our lesson writer reminds us though, the author of this poem found little comfort in his belief that life is as orderly and predictable as his words. Today, your group will spend time examining the ancient words that still hold true today.

Opening

This is one of the most popular pieces of scripture thanks to Pete Seeger and The Byrds. Pete Seeger wrote the song, “Turn, Turn, Turn” in the late 1950’s and it became an international hit by The Byrds in 1965. The majority of the lyrics are taken directly from scripture.

Before class, print copies of the lyrics, which can be found at <http://www.azlyrics.com/lyrics/byrds/turnturnturn.html>. Give each learner a copy. They will use it during class and for the Challenge at the end of the session.

Ask your class to form small groups, and then play a recording of the song. One option is found at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W4ga_M5Zdn4.

In small groups, ask each group to talk about their reactions and reflections of the song. Some might remember when it came out and listened to it on records back in the 1960’s. Others might only know the song in digital format or from a movie soundtrack.

After some time of discussing the song, ask each group to write their own set of lyrics for “a time to.., and a time to ..” that more closely resemble the struggles and hopes they currently face in your life. Some of the lyrics might be exactly the same that are found in scripture, while some of their lyrics might be completely different.

After all the groups have had some time to think and write, ask everyone to share what they wrote. Take some time to discuss what was written and affirm the real struggle each set of lyrics presents.

Reading the Bible

As mentioned earlier, today's passage is one of the most well-known sections of the Bible. It is appropriate to discuss this passage today, January 1, as today brings new hope for an entire year. As you spend time discussing the passage, keep in mind the newness of the day and the year.

Our lesson writer explains the couplets and their connections. In smaller groups, give each group one verse of the couplets for them to explain to the larger group. What does your couplet say? What does your couplet mean? Why do you think this couplet was included in the poem?

God is not mentioned in the poem part of the passage. What do you make of that omission? Or do you think it is intentional? Why?

What is the question asked in verse 9? What is the significance of that question?

What does Qoheleth say about God after the poem? What does he know to be true about God?

What is God's desire for humanity, according to Qoheleth? Do you agree or disagree with his stance? Why?

How do you explain, or unpack, verse 15?

Making Connections

The time to act is of utmost importance in this passage. How do you spend your time? What is the best use of your time? What are you saving your time for? How do you think God wants you to use your time?

What emotion does this passage evoke in you? Do you find it hopeful or full of despair? Why? If you wanted to share words of hope and comfort, what would your poem sound like?

Our passage says that "That each of them may eat and drink, and find satisfaction in all their toil—this is the gift of God." Do you agree with that idea? What do you think is the gift from God?

If you were going to write a poem like this to be more reflective of current culture, what couplets would you keep from the original? What couplets would you remove? What couplets would you add? What would that poem say about your understanding of God?

How do you understand God after reading the poem? Does this passage change the way you think about God? How?

So What?

According to our lesson writer, “Qoheleth’s philosophy was not limited to, “eat, drink, and be merry,” but he firmly believed that God intended for humans to enjoy what pleasures they could, even if they could not understand the full meaning of their existence.”

As travelers on the faith journey, we are constantly moving. Sometimes our movements put us closer to God, and sometimes we find ourselves moving further away from God. As a way to pull this passage closer to us, ask these questions for large group discussion:

What do you believe God intends for us, while we try to fathom God? What is our human task in relationship to God?

Hopefully, your group will have lively discussion on these two questions, and might even have some dissenting viewpoints. Encourage and affirm the discussion as there really is no one right answer. Qoheleth’s philosophy might not fit smoothly with some in your class, but that doesn’t mean the passage is worthless. Truth and God are to be found in scripture and it is up to us to dig it out.

The Challenge

Make sure each person has a copy of the lyrics to “Turn, Turn, Turn.” Tell them the challenge for the coming week is to reflect on the passage from Ecclesiastes, reflect on the discussion from their class, and write their own poem reflecting their idea of what there is time for. Use the song and the scripture as a model, but spend time thinking about what it is that God is speaking to them. Encourage them to write their poem and pray with it during the week. Then, fold it and place it in the Bible at Ecclesiastes 3.

Prayer

Loving God, you have told us there is a time to be born and a time to die. There is a time for everything under heaven. You are our God and we are your children. Thank you for loving us and giving us time. Thank you for caring for us and giving us what we need. Forgive us for thinking we are in control, when we know you are the author and creator of life. Amen.

Digging Deeper

by Tony Cartlege

Digging Deeper is designed to support THE BIBLE LESSON by Tony Cartlege, 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. Seeger claimed that he leafed through the Bible and wrote the song in 15 minutes after his publisher complained that he couldn’t sell the protest songs that Seeger preferred. <http://www.songfacts.com/detail.php?id=246>

Qoheleth – The book we call “Ecclesiastes” was written by a man who tells us that his name was Qoheleth, an unusual name that is formed from the feminine form of the qal active participle of the verb *qahal*, which means something like “to assemble.” 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 *Conciantor*, 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 sage, perhaps a philosopher of sorts whose reflections on life were often at odds with traditional teaching, but 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).

Digging Deeper *continued*

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 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.

v. 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, NET).

The Hardest Question

by Tony Cartlege

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Why couldn't Solomon have written Ecclesiastes?

We have indicated above that the book of Ecclesiastes appears to have been written sometime 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 Qoheleth 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, however, 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 language 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 [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992], xxvii).

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.