

Ecclesiastes 3:1-15

Intro December 31, 2006 Changing with the Seasons

Two old fellows were walking along the shoreline of a lake when a frog came hopping up to them. Creaking with age, one of the old-timers slowly bent down and scooped up the frog in his hands. As he stood there gazing at the frog, fascinated by its ugliness, the frog croaked, "Hey, mister! I'm not really a frog. If you kiss me, I'll turn into a beautiful princess who be devoted to you forever."

Startled, the old man slipped the frog into his pocket and headed on down the shoreline. For the longest time he and his friend trudged along in silence.

"Well?" his buddy finally blurted out. "You gonna kiss it?"

"Naw, I guess not," the codger replied. "At my age, I think I'll have more fun with a talking frog."

There are some times that change just does not seem to be worth the effort.

Most of us fear change. We fear the unknown; concerned that we may fail, or worse still, we may succeed and then suffer a greater loss. At the core of this fear is the loss of control that our plans may not come about, so maintaining the status quo is simpler, even if it is undesirable.

But change still comes. It comes on a day such as today, when, at the stroke of midnight we will change from one year to the next. Such change is minor, other than having to adjust to the change of putting `07 on the check or homework assignment instead of `06. Some of you who wrestle with change still struggle not putting 19...

There are some who seem to thrive on change, but even those do so when they have a sense of control, input, say as to what, where, when and why there is change. Yet change happens all around us—and within us—every day. We are getting older and our family members are getting older. We are working on a job or working to get a job. Sometimes change is clearly unwanted, such as the death of a loved one, the dissolution of a friendship, or the loss of job security.

So, while we don't handle change well, God's providence presents the proper perspective.

When we understand God's care of us, we can see change from a different perspective. The perspective of time, of pleasure and of God's plan takes on a new meaning.

While we witness the change of a New Year, as we consider all the changes in our lives in the year past, as we prepare ourselves for the changes that will come as we age, let us turn to God's Word to give us the guidance we need to change with the seasons.

READ Ecclesiastes 3:1-15.

We're jumping into Ecclesiastes this New Year Eve morning to help us to think biblically about change.

But this little book is perplexing. These are the words of the Preacher, the son of David, king of Jerusalem (1:1). For that reason tradition attributes this to Solomon. Yet the wisdom found here appears rather earth bound, as it pronounces all in life as empty, with the repeated phrase "vanity of vanities, all is vanity." But this is not the cynical ramblings of a nihilist, but the conclusions of one who looks for hope in this world. The only valuable conclusion is to fear and obey God.

We see that glimmer of hope in our passage before us this morning as the Preacher takes us to God's providence as the answer for how to handle change.

That change comes is seen in the cycle of 14 times of change. For some of you these early verses take you back to a time of change, 1965 when the Byrds with Pete Seeger made them famous. But the context here is not an endless cycle of change, but change that comes from God, so that we are able to have the proper perspective on that change.

When we say that our perspective is to be of God's providence, what we mean by providence is God's holy, wise and powerful preserving and governing all his creatures and their actions. (repeat)

With that as our foundation, when facing a world of changes, we may then see that the constant cycle of life and death, of joy and sorrow, of war and peace is not some random movement, but God's appointment for us. It is then that we can answer the question of v9ff. What is the use of going through all this change? God's providence presents for us a perspective of time, of pleasure and of God's plan.

Time teaches that change is not always bad

As the Preacher gives us the list in vv2-8, we see that at least half of what is stated we welcome. Life is not all hardship; the bad will not always last. Yet this is not Pollyanna counsel, to smile and plaster a smile for tomorrow is another day. Rather the answer to handling change comes in the form of God's gift of time

In v10 we see that it is God who gives us a task. What lies before us is not of our making, but a gift from God and we are to busy ourselves with that gift. Who we are and what we are given to do shape our calling.

Our calling comes not from our choices, but God's direction seen in the cycles mentioned above means those callings will change. The 28 items listed above come not randomly, but are ordered by God.

Are you a student today, then at this time be the best student you can be, but there will come a time when you will cease soaking in and start giving out.

Are you a mom with young kids? Look around, others were in your same spot and are not now, change will come, they will grow up, you won't always be wiping their noses.

But at whatever point God has placed you that is what is good, appropriate, beautiful.

That is an interesting choice of a word. It is used to describe the beauty of Sarah, Rachael, Esther, the daughters of Job and even Joseph. This means there is a design in life, and since you don't see the whole picture, you can miss the beauty. It is easy when we speak of birth, healing, building up, laughter and dance. But we must realize that when change brings death, killing, tearing down, weeping, and mourning, that God has not ceased working in our lives.

God's providence comes not just in good times, but when loved ones die, relationships crumble, sin seems to explode on every front. What is hard is that we do not and can not perceive what the beauty is in those times of horrific change; yet, the perspective of God's providence gives us the perspective of time – which God does work all for good.

But the perspective of time as under God's providence teaches us something else.

C.S. Lewis said: Our Heavenly Father has provided many delightful inns for us along our journey, but he takes great care to see that we do not mistake any of them for home.

While we must never miss the beautiful in this life, we must never forget that there is a greater beauty to come. This is not all there is in which to see, for with all the change that goes on around us, God reminds us of the future that is to come.

Time teaches that change is outside our control

God made us so that we always want to know the whole story. He gives us a task, but also gives us a perspective of time. In v11 we are told that God put eternity in our hearts.

We know there is more. That is the good news. The bad news comes in the next phrase: "yet so that he cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end."

You will never have all of the answers in this life. And that is by design. God has structured it to be that way. You know there is more, but it is outside your control. Why is it that we consider the future when we've never been there? Unlike the animals, we conceive of time outside of the present.

In other words, the perspective of time lets us look around and see our world for what it is, temporary. The pains and troubles you now face will not always be. Likewise, the season of joy will not last forever. The fact that you have a longing for something that you can not obtain in this life sets us up for the eternal perspective. As Augustine said in his Confessions:

You (God) have created us for Yourself and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in You.

God's providence gives us the perspective of time

When change comes, remember that all you see and know is this brief glimpse of time. That will not make death feel good or harden your heart to joy. Rather it teaches us that there is a perspective in our lives which we must never forget – this is not the end.

Don't grow so attached to the joy you have now that when the cloud burst comes you do not shake your fist at God, as though you deserve everlasting bliss here and now.

Don't become so embittered with your present sorrow that when God raises a phoenix from the ash heap that you are too hardened to enjoy the change.

It is good to do good

The next thing the Preacher perceived as he considered God's providence in life that in the face of change, we should not shy away from pleasure. We should be joyful and do good.

The idea of providence is not one of fatalism in which we cease to have any freedom.

Providence does not teach that these seasons come and we are but pawns in God's game.

For all his cynicism the Preacher here is rather hopeful that in the midst of these times, when we face changes we don't have to think the changes will crush us. While we are not in control, we know that God is in control, and that should energize us to activity. God's providence provides opportunities for us to respond, how we respond will depend on our perspective as change comes.

During times of painful change, joy can still remain, for we should be confident God is at work, you are not helpless and alone.

The Preacher's focus in this book is limited, earth bound, yet Scripture reminds us that there may be joy in sorrow, for we know that our circumstances do not define our eternity.

As Paul reminds us in Romans 8, the God who did not spare his own Son, will he not graciously give us all things? We should speak with confidence of God's providence that even in the worst of circumstances that we will still see our God's loving hand, for the hardship we may face today will not win the day.

What is more, there is something you can do. When it is a time to die, to tear down, when there is weeping, mourning, loss, hate and war – you can do good. The next verse gives us one avenue by which we can do good ... we can enjoy the good.

It is good to enjoy the good

While all changes, pleasure in what God has given us should be forefront in our minds.

You should enjoy your life. It's okay to have fun as a Christian. Enjoy your children if you have them. Enjoy your car, your home, your health. Enjoy going fishing, shopping, washing dishes, coming to church. The ugly step child from pietism tells us that pleasure in things of this world are inherently wrong, as though created matter should have no sway in our life. But God has gifted us with pleasure and we should enjoy it as a gift.

Archbishop William Temple once remarked, "It is a great mistake to think that God is chiefly interested in religion."¹

But how we find pleasure when hardship comes? We are never forced to respond with evil. Given all the changes listed, the writer here knows that we may still do good, while all else crumbles around us. History is replete with tales of those who did good in the face of evil.

Victoria Ruvolo of Lake Ronkonkoma, New York, was selected as the "Most Inspiring Person of 2005" by *Beliefnet*, and for good reason. Victoria was driving to her niece's voice recital when she passed another car driven by 19-year-old Ryan Cushing. Cushing was riding with five other teens, and had just used a stolen credit card to go on a spending spree. One of their purchases was a frozen turkey, which Cushing decided to toss into oncoming traffic. The 20-pound projectile smashed through Ruvolo's windshield, crushing her face.

Amazingly, Ruvolo survived, although she spent 10 hours in an operating room while doctors repaired her face. When she finally went home, she brought a tracheotomy tube and endured months of painful rehabilitation.

On October 17, 2005, Ruvolo attended Cushing's sentencing and asked his judge for leniency. Part of her statement read:

"Despite all the fear and the pain, I have learned from this horrific experience, and I have much to be thankful for.... Each day when I wake up, I thank God simply because I'm alive. I sincerely hope you have also learned from this awful experience, Ryan. There is no room for vengeance in my life, and I do not believe a long, hard prison term would do you, me, or society any good."

Cushing, who wept and expressed remorse for his action, received 6 months in jail. He could have gotten a 25-year prison sentence if Ruvolo, his victim, had not intervened.²

¹ Madeleine L'Engle in *Walking on Water*. Christianity Today, Vol. 38, no. 10

² Leah Ingram, "Compassionate victim," www.beliefnet.com December 2005

GOD'S PROVIDENCE PRESENTS THE PERSPECTIVE OF HIS PLAN 3:14-15

Change teaches us God is in control and we are not

That all there is has its season and time as we are told in v1 is not a random series of events, but the unfolding of what God designs in our life. The question is now: "how will you respond?"

The Preacher is clear – God is God, you are not – so worship God not your plans.

That is the thought behind the Hebrew *fear*. To fear is to worship; it carries with it the sense of awe and reverence. It also carries with it the idea of living rightly.

This is at the heart of why we don't like change. We have reason to like our plans and dislike change, but at the heart is a me-worship instead of God worship, for I fear the loss of my plans.

*We like our current plans.*³

We get committed to our goals and plans, and can become very focused on them. We may visualize ourselves realizing those goals, and imagine how satisfying that will be. Commitment to goals is beneficial. It helps us stay productive in the midst of distractions.

However, when changes occur that hurt our chances of realizing our goals, we're predisposed to disliking them. Change may mean that we'll have to do more work than what we had planned, get retrained, lose relationships and develop new ones.

At the heart we think we know best when change comes and recoil at it for our chief end is harmed, that is, the worship of our own sovereign plans.

We distrust flighty people.

Another reason we dislike change is because we like people who are consistent. I want to be known as someone who sticks to his commitments. When I tell you that I'm going to do something, I want you to believe that I'll follow through and do it. You'll trust and respect me more if I stick to my commitments, right? So, it's not just that I like my current plans for their own sake--I also resist change because I want you to see me as consistent.

In other words, I fear your opinion of me more than I fear God. We may recoil at this, but if I believe God works in and through circumstances in my life, I will maintain my responsibility when and where I can, but otherwise rest in God's guidance in my life.

We are risk averse, and we fear the unknown.

Have you ever known kids who have to sleep with the lights on in their bedroom at night because they're afraid of monsters under the bed? There aren't any monsters in their bedrooms, but with the lights off the kids can't verify that. They fear the unknown.

Adults are also bothered by uncertainty and risk. Uncertainty accompanies change.

We can't always know whether a change will result in a gain or loss for us. Sometimes trying to convince adults that a particular change will benefit them looks a lot like a parent trying to convince a child that there's no monster under the bed--it's very difficult to persuade them.

Change teaches us God's plan will not fail

But when we come to realize that change comes from a God who lovingly plans and works out that plan for our good, and then we can take comfort in v15.

That last line is difficult in Hebrew and scholars debate what it means in this context. And yet I can not help but be reminded change has been a constant on earth. Yet there is another constant – God still seeks those driven away by sin and rebellion. The horrors of change that bring us the pain of death and weeping and mourning and loss are the horrors of God's exact plan that brought us the cross.

Our sin that brought the change to God's creation will never defeat the change that God has ordained for our salvation. The changes that comes in our life, the times of good and ill, are but reminders that God is at work and should push us to see that this is not our home, that we can and should take pleasures in what God gives, but we are not bound by the good and bad of this life. No change will separate us from the love of God in Christ.

What will change in this coming year? You may not find a talking frog to upset your status quo, but you experience changes you can hardly imagine. How will you handle them?

Find you safety in the perspective of God's providence, that he is holy, wise and powerfully preserving and governing you and all your actions.

³ taken from <http://www.wright.edu/~scott.williams/LeaderLetter/flexibility.htm#Why%20We%20Don't%20Like%20Change>

