

Session 1

A TIME TO LET GO

Ecclesiastes 3:1-11

Memory Verse

He has made everything appropriate in its time. He has also put eternity in their hearts, but no one can discover the work God has done from beginning to end.

– ECCLESIASTES 3:11, CSB



A Time to Let Go

THEOLOGICAL THEME: God is sovereign throughout every season of life.

Scholar and author Sidney Greidanus explained how he personally experienced what it meant for God to “set the times,” as Ecclesiastes 3 mentions. He had received a call from his son to request that Greidanus and his wife, Marie, come to their home to babysit for their children in expectation of their third child being born any day.

Since both of their children were born five days before the due date, they encouraged us to arrive before the due date. So we drove the 1100 miles from Grand Rapids to Winnipeg and arrived nicely on time – five days before the due date. But no baby came that day, or the next, or the next. Then the due date came and went, and still no baby. The other children encouraged the baby to come out, but the baby did not control the date of her birth. Heather, understandably, became rather anxious to deliver the baby, but she also could not control the time. Finally, after fifteen days of waiting together, she went to the hospital to see if the doctor needed to induce labor. But the doctor declined because, she said, inducement often leads to complications. . . . God often works by natural means. . . . For the “time to be born,” I learned, God uses a hormone that needs to be released in the mother’s body. On the sixteenth day, at three o’clock in the morning, Nathan poked his head into our bedroom and whispered, “It’s time!” Within two hours a healthy daughter/granddaughter was born. We often have to wait for God’s time. “God has done this, so that all should stand in awe before Him.”¹

Sometimes the seasons that come in God's timing are seasons of joy and celebration. Still other times, those seasons are soul-crushing, bringing inexpressible heartache through loss, disillusionment, anger, or anxiety. In all of the seasons of a person's life, it is of great importance to understand that each season is appointed by God to accomplish His purposes, both in the person and in the world.

? How would you describe the season you are in right now? How often do you consider God's plan and design for this season?

? Where do you go to find help in understanding seasons of life that do not seem to make any sense? What friends do you reach out to? Why do you select those friends?

Session Summary

In this week's session, the writer of Ecclesiastes pointed to the rule of God in even the most dramatic seasons of life. Through joys and pain, each of the seasons of life necessarily occurs under the careful, watchful attention of the Sovereign King. Because He is loving, compassionate, good and holy, even in seasons of loss, hope propels God's people forward.

1. The Sovereignty of God from Beginning to End (Ecclesiastes 3:1-2)

Ecclesiastes has presented one of the greatest challenges for biblical interpreters in all the Scriptural canon. The difficulty has largely resided in the unique perspective of Ecclesiastes. Ecclesiastes falls into the genre of Wisdom literature, which has its own rules for understanding. Essentially the writer of Ecclesiastes was portraying the struggle of a redeemed man living in a fallen world according to a fallen worldview. God, then, was also spoken of in a significantly different manner than the remainder of Scripture spoke of

Him. Without understanding such textual subtleties, the writer of Ecclesiastes could be greatly misunderstood—particularly when equating everything under the sun with empty vanity.

As chapter 3 opened, the writer had just completed a scathing assessment of the emptiness of work, pleasure, and possessions. The tone of the book at that point was nothing short of hopeless and depressing. As chapter 2 closed, the writer had painted a bleak reality that was sculpted by the empty pursuit of worldly pleasure. Having attained every sort of pleasure he sought, there was still no satisfaction. Finally, however, at the opening of chapter 3, hope began to slowly emerge. In stating that there was an occasion for everything and that every time or season occurred “under heaven,” the writer slowly turned the attention of his readers to the “why” of everything’s happening.

Moving skillfully and poetically from the seeming emptiness and randomness of the vanity of chapters 1 and 2, the writer slightly pulled back the eternal veil to show the orchestration behind history’s events. The use of “occasion” and “time” (also translated “season”) connoted a guiding and reasoned hand carefully navigating the unfolding of history toward some unspecified purpose. All of the events of life were not happenstance or random. Rather, they occurred at the precise appointment set by the One sovereign to control all of history.



Are you more driven to discover the reason behind an event during hopeful seasons or seasons of struggle? Why do you think that is?



Describe a time when you were disillusioned when the reward for an achievement did not bring the joy you thought it would? How did that impact your motivation and your optimism?

The writer of Ecclesiastes opened his set of 14 parallels with the two most defining experiences in life: birth and death. In illustrating the need to understand the sovereignty of the Creator behind life's seasons, the writer highlighted the two events over which a person has the least amount of control. A person no more has control over the day and time of his or her birth than he or she does the numbering of life's days. Still, there is no doubting that there is a time appointed for both instances. Similarly, Sydney Greidanus notes, "we don't control the time to plant nor the time to pluck up what is planted. We plant our fruit trees at the appropriate time, and when the trees get old and no longer bear fruit, we pluck them up."² These moments, which mark the beginning and end of life, are events that humanity reacts to, not initiates. No one is capable of dictating their schedule. Doing so requires a sovereign power.

2. Seasons of Peace and Strife (Ecclesiastes 3:3-8)

Verse 3 continued the theme of creative and destructive experiences in the human existence—each governed and appointed by God's sovereignty. As verse 2 closed with the plant/uproot contrast, verse 3 pointed to a time to kill and heal, referring to the destruction and restorative actions impacting living creatures. There were certainly appointed times to kill in biblical history, particularly the battles as the Israelites journeyed to and into the promised land to take possession of it. These battles were used as an instrument of divine wrath on the indigenous peoples in the land for their abominable, pagan worship practices. Still more frequently, however, there were times appointed for healing. Likewise, the times to tear down/build reflected the seasonal fluctuation for physical structures. In fact, for the construction and restoration of certain structures, the tearing down of what stood previously was a preparatory step. All happened in due timing.

Verses 4 and 5 dealt with the dichotomies of expression in relationship. The extremities increased as the lines unfolded. In verse 4, the first pair was weep/laugh. It was followed by the much more intense mourn/dance pairing. The depths of sadness and loss, likewise the exultation of joy and elation, varied with life's experiences; all of humanity experientially knew such to be true.

Verse 5 continued with actions concerning stones. Throwing stones likely referred to the practice of making an enemy's fields useless during war by covering the fields with thrown stones. Gathering stones, then, would have referred to the clearing of

fields in preparation for planting and cultivation. The granting or withholding of an embrace also graphically depicted the difference in seasons of peace and wartime.

Verse 6–7a pointed the reader to the difficult task of discerning when to let go of something lost. Like the previous pairings, the opposite reality was also mentioned. There were seasons in which relentless searching, keeping, and sewing (mending) were the prudent course of action. However, there were also those seasons in which the difficulty of accepting loss was necessary. The dynamic expressed in verse 7 referred to the practice of tearing garments under the stress of deep mourning or grief. Still, on the other side of such seasons, there was the appropriate time for “sowing;” moving beyond the painful and even life-changing sorrow of a previous season of mourning into a new season of healing and restoration.

? Which of these pairings has been the most difficult for you to manage? What have you discovered to be the critical elements from healing in seasons of deep sorrow?

? Which of the items listed is the most challenging for you to understand there being an appointed time for? How do you go about reconciling those seasons? What biblical examples of such seasons can you think of?

Verse 8 closed out the pairings with a return to major contrasts: love/hate and war/peace. This pairing summed up many of the previous pairings in the section. So it was that the author explained the various seasons of life—all of which were necessary—as occurring in their appointed times “under heaven.”

3. The Frustration of the Immediate in Light of Eternity (Ecclesiastes 3:9-11)

Verse 9 provided a segue way of sorts by repeating a question initially asked by the author in Ecclesiastes 1:3. Specifically, what was the gain for the worker from all his struggles?

What was the benefit of enduring such perpetual seasons of gain and loss? The anticipated answer, in light of the question being a repeat from the rather pessimistic previous section, was that there was nothing to be gained at all. However, that was not the response to this asking of the question. Instead, the author pointed to the timelessness and sovereignty of God. Where God was scarcely mentioned in the first two chapters, the author now spoke His name clearly.

The writer had personally seen the work which God had tasked the children of Adam with “to keep them occupied.” While this phrase might seem similar to the modern idea of “busy work,” the author indicated that such was not his understanding. God made everything “appropriate in its time.” The idea he communicated was that everything was just right. There was a delicate beauty in the way in which the seasons ebbed and flowed in the life of humanity. The cure for a humdrum view of life’s comings and goings was an appreciation for the precision of each season’s occurrence. Instead of being random and bleak, the times or seasons of a man’s life reflected the glory of sovereign God intimately mindful of every experience.

 When you have a season in which you begin to wonder what the point of that season is, how do you remind yourself of God’s intimate attention to your life? What are some ways you cultivate a God-awareness in the daily routines of your life?

 What Scripture passages have you found to be most powerful or comforting in your life during seasons of loss or confusion?

The verse that served as the point of emphasis for this section of Ecclesiastes is actually verse 14. The writer resolutely stated “I know that everything God does will last forever; there is no adding to it or taking from it. God works so that people will be in awe of Him.” (vs. 14) God’s works will be accomplished and the gain for the worker’s struggles will be the divine awe of witnessing and knowing God.

Conclusion

Many commentators have espoused that Ecclesiastes is the most applicable book in the Bible for the 21st century believer. Here are some points of consideration from this passage.

First, because God is sovereign, nothing that happens in a person's life is random or purposeless. Admittedly, that does not always ease frustration, particularly in the season of loss. Grappling for purpose in loss can be deeply frustrating because the answers that are searched for are rarely immediately available. God reveals His purposes and workings mercifully in His timing. However, the more a person discovers those answers regarding why something happened or why loss occurred, the more likely they are to be able to expectantly wait for His answers in the future. The fact that nothing is random or purposeless can fortify the believer as he or she ask those soul-piercing questions.

Second, there is hope and heartache. Generally, people ask hard questions about God's purposes, existence, etc. during painful seasons. It is critically important to read the whole list in Ecclesiastes 3. Just as He appointed the difficult time a person may be trudging through right now, He also appointed seasons of joy, rebuilding, laughter, and healing. Difficult seasons do not last forever; God has ordained as much.

Third, the gift of biblical community is of critical importance in all seasons—especially those that are heartbreaking. It is difficult to understand or even remember the sovereignty of God when mourning and grieving rule the day. In those moments believers need the benefit of others who will sit with them and mourn with them but all the while assure them that healing is coming, hope remains, and God has not forgotten them.

Fourth, there is a time to sow. In other words, there is a time in which an appropriate period of mourning must end and life must continue. There is a time for mourning and sorrow during seasons of loss, but it is never God's intention for His people to stay there. That is why Jesus came; so that death and loss would not be the defining reality of the believer's life. That they would not grieve as those with no hope. Rather, understanding that God Himself knows what it is like for a Son to die, God provided a way for the sowing season to come. The healing from sorrow and mourning and the return of hope is God's gift to the believer.

? Describe a time when God allowed you to use a painful experience from your past to comfort another person. How did that experience help you understand how God wants to use you?

? How have you experienced the help of biblical community during a season of loss or difficulty? Who are you currently connected to that could/would offer that type of ministry to you?

? How does worship condition your soul to be able to handle seasons of loss or hardship?

CHRIST CONNECTION: In His earthly ministry, Jesus experienced every season of life—even leading to His own crucifixion. God’s power and sovereignty was shown as every detail of Jesus’ life fulfilled His promise in redemptive history.

MISSIONAL APPLICATION: One of the difficult questions frequently posed to believers has to do with God’s power in bleak seasons of suffering and loss. In understanding that God’s sovereignty never waivers, even in seasons of loss, believers can walk through those times with hope.



FOR NEXT WEEK

Seasons of the Soul: Dealing With Loss - Letting Go of the Past

Main Passages

- Psalm 51:1-19

Session Outline

1. Confronting Sin Squarely (Psalm 51:1-5)
2. Prayer for Renewal (Psalm 51:6-13)
3. Purify Worship (Psalm 51:14-19)

Memorize

He has made everything appropriate in its time. He has also put eternity in their hearts, but no one can discover the work God has done from beginning to end.

- Ecclesiastes 3:11, CSB

Daily Readings

- Monday - 1 Peter 1:3
- Tuesday - Romans 8:1
- Wednesday - Hebrews 6:1-3
- Thursday - Psalm 71:20-21
- Friday - Jeremiah 17:14
- Saturday - John 5:24

References

¹Greidanus, Sidney. Preaching Christ from Ecclesiastes. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2010.

²Ibid.