



CENTRAL truth

Life brings both joys and challenges, and God calls us to make the most of both.

09^{session 9} TIMES OF LIFE



EXPLORE scripture ECCLESIASTES 3:1-15

ECCLESIASTES 3:1-8

a time for war and a time for peace. **1** There is a time for everything, and a season for every activity under the heavens: **2** a time to be born and a time to die, a time to plant and a time to uproot, **3** a time to kill and a time to heal, a time to tear down and a time to build, **4** a time to weep and a time to laugh, a time to mourn and a time to dance, **5** a time to

scatter stones and a time to gather them, a time to embrace and a time to refrain from embracing, **6** a time to search and a time to give up, a time to keep and a time to throw away, **7** a time to tear and a time to mend, a time to be silent and a time to speak, **8** a time to love and a time to hate, a time for war and a time for peace.

ECCLESIASTES 3:9-13

9 What do workers gain from their toil? **10** I have seen the burden God has laid on the human race. **11** He has made everything beautiful in its time. He has also set eternity in the human heart; yet no one can fathom what God has done from beginning

to end. **12** I know that there is nothing better for people than to be happy and to do good while they live. **13** That each of them may eat and drink, and find satisfaction in all their toil—this is the gift of God.

ECCLESIASTES 3:14-15

14 I know that everything God does will endure forever; nothing can be added to it and nothing taken from it. God does it so that people will fear

him. **15** Whatever is has already been, and what will be has been before; and God will call the past to account.



EXPLORE options

1. Time

Come up with some simple challenges to ask various students in your group to do. Examples could include spelling their full name backwards, reciting the Pledge of Allegiance, reciting the names of all the books of the New Testament in order, singing all the words to a well-known song or hymn, etc. The twist is that you will time students using your phone or a stopwatch to see how quickly they can finish each challenge. After one student completes a challenge, ask if any other students think they can beat that time. Allow a couple of other students to try to complete the challenge in less time. After playing a few rounds with a few different challenges (as time allows), point out that time is one resource we cannot make more of. No matter what new innovations we come up with to make things in our lives more efficient, none of us can add hours to a day. In this session we will see the Teacher reflect on the various seasons of life, and as we do so, we will be challenged to make the most of these various seasons for the glory of God. As we continue our study of Ecclesiastes, we will see that life brings both joys and challenges, and God calls us to make the most of both.

2. Making the Most

Prior to your group meeting, compile a list of some unfortunate situations your students might face one day soon. Examples could include: a friend borrows your new gaming system and returns it to you broken, you drop your phone and the screen shatters, you find out you failed an important test, you find out you didn't make the team/choir/band, you find out you didn't get accepted to the college you really wanted to attend, etc. Point out that the Bible promises us that God is at work for our good, even in the midst of frustrating situations and experiences (see Rom. 8:28). In fact, James tells us that difficult times produce endurance, which helps us mature in our faith (James 1:2-4).



LET'S talk

What is your favorite season of the year? Your least favorite?

What do you most look forward to about your favorite season? What do you dread about your least favorite?



THIS WEEK'S focus

Perhaps you love the summer because you love sunshine and going to the beach. Or maybe you love the cool weather and changing of the leaves that come in the fall. Some people love the snow that comes in winter while others hate winter because of the shorter days and cold weather. Like the changing seasons, the human experience of life in our good-yet-broken world goes through cycles. While everyone's lives are different, for most of us there are times of great joy and triumph, and times of deep frustration or even tragedy. As we continue our study of Ecclesiastes, we will be challenged to navigate all of life's seasons with faith. Life brings both joys and challenges, and God calls us to make the most of both.



CONVERSATION questions

READ ECCLESIASTES 3:1-8.

a time for war and a time for peace. **1** There is a time for everything, and a season for every activity under the heavens: **2** a time to be born and a time to die, a time to plant and a time to uproot, **3** a time to kill and a time to heal, a time to tear down and a time to build, **4** a time to weep and a time to laugh, a time to mourn and a time to dance, **5** a time to scatter stones and a time

to gather them, a time to embrace and a time to refrain from embracing, **6** a time to search and a time to give up, a time to keep and a time to throw away, **7** a time to tear and a time to mend, a time to be silent and a time to speak, a time to **8** love and a time to hate, a time for war and a time for peace.



CONTEXT | What's the point of mentioning all these different times?

This text is a masterpiece of wisdom poetry. The verses move back and forth between desirable and undesirable aspects of life. The Teacher is not telling us how to find joy and avoid pain. In fact, if anything, the Teacher is saying that most of us will experience both. However, Ecclesiastes is not suggesting that all people are stuck in a cycle of joy and pain. These verses simply affirm the reality of the kind of world we live in—one that is very good (Gen. 1:31) and yet, because it is also broken due to sin, one that is also marked by frustration and disappointment (Gen. 3:14-24). These verses encourage us to acknowledge these realities so that we can make the most of whatever season of life we are in. When our hearts are prepared to continue trusting God through both the good and the bad, we will be poised to glorify Him in whatever life may bring.

.01 Why do you think the Teacher brings up all these different and opposite human experiences? What's the point?

.02 Which of the times on this list do you most look forward to? Which do you most dread coming to pass?

Life is made up of wonderful, glorious joys and also difficulty, pain, and tragedy. It is worth noting that we live in a culture that doesn't like to talk about or dwell on the difficult parts. But consider this: if we never talk about the hard seasons of life, will we be prepared when they come?

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SCRIPTURE commentary

Life is made of both joy and sorrow, building and destroying, and living and dying. Each comes at the proper time. The Teacher reminds us that we are creatures of time and not yet able to experience the joys of eternity. No one can be happy who has not come to grips with the reality that life is full of challenges and sorrows as well as triumphs and joy. We must remember that our time in this present life is limited. Knowing this, we can begin taking steps to make the most of the time we have for God's glory and the good of our neighbors.

KEY QUESTION

.03 What might it look like to make the most of the various seasons mentioned in these verses?

Challenge your students to think about what it would look like for them to live for God's glory in the various times the Teacher mentions. Be prepared to give some examples of your own. Verse 4 tells us that there is a time to weep and a time to laugh—one of the simplest ways we can glorify God is by celebrating the successes of our friends and having compassion for them when they are suffering or mourning (Rom. 12:15). Verse 7 tells us that there is a time to be silent and a time to speak—consider sharing about a timely piece of advice you were once given or maybe you gave to someone else. Conversely, you could share about a time you gave advice when you should have instead listened and just been present with a friend (remember Job's three friends? They would have benefited from the wisdom of Ecclesiastes).



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ITEM 7 | Is there really a time to kill (v. 3) or to hate (v. 8)? For more information and a visual illustration of the times the Teacher mentions, see the “**There is a Time to . . .**” poster.

ECCLESIASTES 3:1-8

3:1-8. These verses, the most famous text in Ecclesiastes, must be read from the context of the fundamental claim of the book: that we are mortals, doomed to perish, and that our work will perish with us. No human work is eternal, and our activities, whether building or tearing down, must change as the situation dictates. We naturally prefer to stay on the positive side of the list—to laugh rather than to weep, to love rather than to hate, and to have peace rather than war—but as long as we live in a world of change, conflict, and death, we must accept the fact that we cannot have unchanging bliss. Even so, as verse 11 says, everything is *beautiful in its time*.

3:1. The poem concerns life “under heaven.” It is not so much a theological statement as an observation on human life in the human world.

3:3. Destruction and killing are part of life and cannot be avoided, although healing and building are certainly preferable. Ecclesiastes is not concerned here with ethical questions of what constitutes a just war or the like. The Teacher is merely asserting that in a world where death is a central fact of life, there will also be a time to kill.

3:5. The meaning of throwing or gathering *stones* is uncertain. It may refer to clearing a field for planting versus building a wall, or spoiling a field (2 Kings 3:25) versus clearing it (Isa. 5:2).

3:7. This may allude to mourning and funerals. Mourners tore their clothes, and their comforters kept silent during times of grief, but people were free to repair clothes and freely converse at other times.



CONVERSATION

questions

READ ECCLESIASTES 3:9-13.

9 What do workers gain from their toil? **10** I have seen the burden God has laid on the human race.

11 He has made everything beautiful in its time. He has also set eternity in the human heart; yet no one can fathom what God has done from

beginning to end. **12** I know that there is nothing better for people than to be happy and to do good while they live. **13** That each of them may eat and drink, and find satisfaction in all their toil—this is the gift of God.

.04 Have you ever wished that you could slow down or speed up time? Who is ultimately in control of time?



THEOLOGY | What is meant by “no one can fathom what God has done” (v. 11)?

If we can accept life as it is, even the hard parts will be bearable. Yet there is a catch. We feel like aliens in the world of time and yearn to be part of eternity. We feel the need for our selves and our work to be eternal, yet are we grieved to be trapped in time. We also desire to understand our place in the universe against the backdrop of eternity. But we cannot find out what God has done from beginning to end. That is, we are not able to discern any plan or pattern to all of this. God’s purposes are outside our realm of control or investigation. This realization gives us a sense of alienation and bewilderment with regard to time. Rather than frustrate us, this realization can and should move us to look to God. Admitting that there are things we don’t know or understand should move us to lean more fully upon the One who knows and understands all things (Ps. 147:5) and promises to take care of us (Phil. 4:19).

KEY QUESTION

.05 What has God put into human hearts (v. 11)? What should we do in light of this (v. 12)?

Sometimes time seems to drag along really slowly, like when you’re really hungry and you’re waiting for your food to come out at a restaurant, or when you have to sit through your least favorite class or a boring meeting. There are other moments when time seems to fly by, like when you finally get to go to that theme park you’ve been longing to visit or school finally lets out for summer. Despite how time feels, it is always passing. No

human being has ever succeeded in speeding it up, slowing it down, or stopping it. Ecclesiastes reminds us that we are not in control of time—God is. Rather than being frustrated about what we can't control, we should ask God for the strength and wisdom to enjoy the time we have been given in a way that honors Him. Verse 11 reminds us that God has placed eternity in our hearts, even though as limited human beings we cannot fully grasp it. As followers of Jesus, we know that this life is not the end—there is a future resurrection and those who trust Christ will rise to be with Him forever (John 5:29; 11:25). Knowing this gives purpose and meaning to the time we have this side of eternity. Challenge your students to consider how the reality of eternity should shape how they think and live in the present.

.06 Look at verse 13. How aware are you of God's many gifts in your life? How can we open our eyes to this?

We all face a temptation in life to get really frustrated with God in the difficult or painful seasons. How often are we really aware of God's hand at work in the times when life is going really great and we are really happy? Have you taken inventory of God's many good gifts to you? Taking note of the ways God has taken care of, provided for, and shown kindness to us helps us grow. What is most important to recognize, however, is that our God never leaves us, no matter what season of life we find ourselves in (Ps. 46:1).



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ITEM 10 | As you talk about the meaning of Ecclesiastes 3:11, be sure to point to the verse poster.

ECCLESIASTES 3:9-13

3:9. Human mortality extends beyond the fact of physical death; it is the nullification of all that people do as well (compare with Gen. 3:17-19).

3:10. Work is a gift from God—it is an essential part of God's design for humans (Gen. 1:26-2:25). However, we also need to recognize that work is cursed—because of the fall, work is difficult and often does not live up to its potential (Gen. 3:17-19).

3:11. The fact that God *has also set eternity in the human heart* tells us that although we are creatures of time, we are not like the animals, who are fully and exclusively creatures of time. God made us as hybrids, so to speak, in that we are temporal but we have an inner longing for eternity. We don't understand how God can exist outside of time. And we are often not able to discern any plan or pattern to our existence in time. We can never be fully at peace in this life because, although we are mortal, we yearn for immortality.

3:12-13. The fact that we are creatures of time is another reason to enjoy the days we have. Giving ourselves to excessive mourning and toil is as wrong as indulging in excessive laughter and dancing. Seeing good in our labor is the gift of God. We are reminded again that this can't be done apart from the supernatural enabling of God.



CONVERSATION questions

READ ECCLESIASTES 3:14-15.

14 I know that everything God does will endure forever; nothing can be added to it and nothing taken from it. God does it so that people will fear

him. **15** Whatever is has already been, and what will be has been before; and God will call the past to account.

KEY QUESTION

.07 What does the Teacher say about God in verse 14? What are the implications for us? Is this difficult for you to believe?

The contrast between our work and God's could not be more distinct. While all human creations and achievements will eventually fall apart or be forgotten, God's work lasts forever. This should move us to live in awe of God. There is an important lesson here for all of us in terms of how carry ourselves during the various seasons Solomon, the Teacher, has already mentioned. When our focus is on God's power, we will lean less on ourselves and more on Him for strength. When our focus is on God's greatness, we will be less concerned with proving how important we are and more focused on honoring and pointing people to God, no matter what is going on around us. A relationship with God changes our focus, our priorities, and our perspective.

.08 Do you find comfort in verse 15? How does this relate to the various seasons of life the Teacher already mentioned?

We cannot alter the fundamental nature of the world. Part of following Christ is acknowledging the broken nature of the world we live in. When, by God's grace, we are willing to let go of living for our own popularity and influence and instead live for God's glory, we will also begin to find the wisdom we need to enter into the various seasons life brings (vv. 1-8). Followers of Christ don't look to themselves for hope—ultimately they look to Christ.

We are promised at the end of verse 15 that our God seeks justice for the persecuted. In other words, even if things don't go well for us now, we can trust that we serve a God who will establish justice for us in the end. This is not to say that we should not advocate for justice for those who are mistreated or oppressed, something the Bible call us to do (see Isa. 1:17; Jer. 22:3; Zech. 7:9). The reality of God's promise of future justice at the end of verse 15 reminds us that the injustices of this broken world are not the end of the story for us. In the toughest seasons, we can still live with hope and purpose, knowing that our God will establish justice in the end.



BE VULNERABLE

How has your relationship with Christ given you hope or perspective during a difficult time or maybe during a time of success? How is each important? Consider sharing an example from your life as a means of encouraging your students.

ECCLESIASTES 3:14-15

3:14. The Teacher observes that the eternal perfection of God's work overwhelms all human endeavors and mocks human aspirations to become eternally significant. No one can thwart or change God's will, and His ways are beyond our understanding. This verse may be compared to Genesis 3:5,22. There the origin of human suffering and alienation is the desire to be like God. If we were able to know all, to master life, and be like God, we would feel no need for piety. But humanity is far from divine stature. We are altogether contingent beings, and our only appropriate response is reverence.

3:15. The phrase *God will call the past to account* is literally "God seeks the pursued" or "God seeks the persecuted." Such a translation suggests that God cares about and seeks out those who are harassed and oppressed. An alternate interpretation is that God is concerned with repeating ("seeks to do") what has occurred in the past ("what was driven away"). The first alternative, as found in the CSB, better anticipates the text on injustice that follows (vv. 16-17).



NOW what?

CENTRAL truth

Life brings both joys and challenges, God calls us to make the most of both.

.09 Which does life seem to be bringing more of lately: joys or challenges? Has our study of Ecclesiastes given you perspective? Explain.

KEY QUESTION

.10 How can we navigate challenges or frustrations in a way that honors God? What about joys and successes?

.11 Why is it important to remember that God has put eternity in our hearts? How should the reality of eternity shape our actions and perspective now?

.12 How will you remind yourself of God's perfect power and infinite greatness this week?



THE STUDENT LEADER PACK is available for purchase on lifeway.com/explorethebiblestudents. It includes valuable posters that are referenced throughout the *Leader Guide*, Family Connection guides that equip families to discuss the Bible on-the-go, a Midweek study of a complimentary book of the Bible, a link to training audio to help leaders prepare for each session, and PowerPoint templates with graphics from the quarter study to help prepare slides for teaching.



DAILY devotions

The Bible is no ordinary book—it is God’s powerful Word and it is given to us for our good (2 Tim. 3:16-17; Heb. 4:13). So we should read the Bible more carefully and thoughtfully than any other book. This is where the 7 Arrows of Bible Reading come in—these 7 questions will train you and your students to get more out of your time in the Bible and experience its life-transforming power. Your students’ *Daily Discipleship Guide* (item 005646504) contains five days of Daily Devotions built on the 7 Arrows. Here is a summary of the texts they will be studying. We encourage you to follow along and use the 7 Arrows questions to guide your own study of God’s Word.

7 ARROWS FOR BIBLE reading



What does this passage say?



What does this passage tell us about God?



What did this passage mean to its original audience?



How does this passage change the way I relate to people?



What does this passage tell us about man?



How does this passage prompt me to pray?



What does this passage demand of me?

LEADER challenge

MEMORIZE

Ecclesiastes 3:11

CONNECT

Send a group email or group message to your students, encouraging them to complete their daily devotions. You might also consider sharing your own insights from the daily readings as a means of encouraging them.

DAY 1 ECCL. 3:1-8

DAY 2 ECCL. 3:9-13

DAY 3 ECCL. 3:14-15

DAY 4 ECCL. 3:16-17

DAY 5 1 PETER 1:3-7