

What Really Matters, Pt. 2
Everything in Its Season
Ecclesiastes 3: 1-8

**First Presbyterian Church
Baton Rouge, Louisiana**

**May 23, AD 2021
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Ecclesiastes 3 entered Pop Culture in 1965 with the Byrds' classic song "Turn, Turn, Turn." The Byrds gave it a subtle anti-war twist when after singing the line, "A time for war and a time for peace" they added, "I swear it's not too late." The song really never went out of favor. Both AM pop and FM sophisticated rock stations kept playing it. In elementary school, I was stunned when my friend told me the words were from Scripture. The Bible rose in my estimation after that!

Ecclesiastes 3 is a bridge to people of other faiths, or of no faith at all. "For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven." Life moves in seasons. Doors open and doors close. Everyone gets that. And we find it comforting. Things change. But they're supposed to. The universe is unfolding as it should, according to a bigger plan. Things happen for a reason, even if we can't see a reason. So be at peace, everything happens that needs to happen in due time.

The very rhythm of Ecclesiastes 3 helps create the meaning. There's the feeling of the pendulum of a grandfather clock gently swinging. To everything there is a season: a time to be born and time to die, a time to weep and a time to laugh, a time to keep silence and a time to speak. We feel the rhythm in life, the tick-tock of the different moments. A time to embrace and a time to refrain, a time to mourn and a time to dance, a time to love and a time to hate. If you just read these 8 verses aloud, you feel better. Perspective seems to return. Everything is going to be ok.

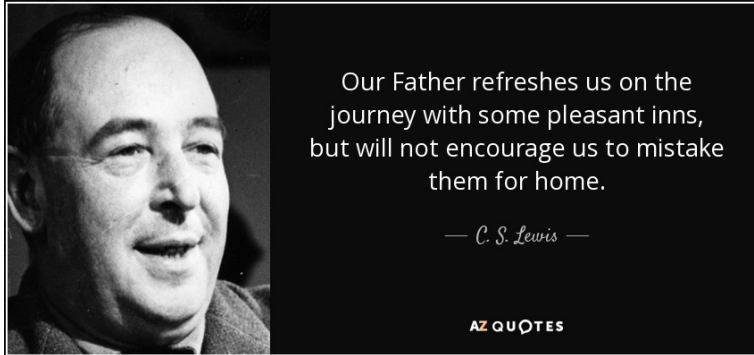
Ecclesiastes 3 is non offensive. Even the most militant atheist materialist has to agree with its logic. What's the matter with the world? Nothing. Everything is evolving according to the laws of nature. Seasons and times are built in. Or, practicing Eastern methods of spirituality, Ecclesiastes also fits right in. The world is what it is. Breathe. This change is just change. Breathe and accept. It's not for you to control. It ain't why, why, why, it just is.

So is there anything more to Ecclesiastes 3 than this? It makes a great rock song. It's no doubt been on a thousand different greeting cards. You can say it to a stranger on a plane and not get in trouble. But does it go any deeper than being oddly comforting that the universe is unfolding as it should? Let's start with three insights:

1) God orders the seasons of the world and the seasons of our lives. There's a certain sense in which the brackets of time we undergo are not within our control. We can't stop the summer heat from coming; it's not my fault Louisiana is hot. I can't fix the problem we have with hurricanes and I'm not expected to. Life has phases. I can't stop a child from growing up. I can't stop the reality of aging. The seasons of life change quite often beyond any ability of us to control it. I can't stop time. But that doesn't mean time has gotten out of hand for God. That doesn't mean seasons will go on forever and never get better because God can't change winter to spring anymore. No, the seasons are under his sovereign control. Most of the world and even my life unfolds beyond my control. I can rest in that. And trust that God has a wider view. His hands hold more time than I can imagine. All our days are firmly in his grip. To God belong the brackets of time, the seasons.

2) God's seasons bring us points of choice. Though I can't control the season, at each point in time I get to make choices. I get to choose to praise God in whatever season it is. I get to consider and then choose to do the right, good and loving thing in this moment. I get to do the one will of God for me in this day. I can't do everything. I can't influence many things. I may not have much or any strength. But what God has for me is what I am able to do, now, in this moment, in grateful faithfulness and love. The seasons are in the hands of the sovereign God. He gives this next moment to me. He asks me to give this moment back to him by doing the right thing that is right before me.

3) Peace comes from trusting God's sovereignty. I take the losses and the gains, the gifts and the changes occurring in these present moments as part of the seasons of a sovereign God, and so I find peace. In point 1, we saw that God is controlling the seasons of the world and the seasons of my life. In point 2, we saw that each present moment is given by a sovereign God to me to choose to offer to him by faithful action. That means I can receive the difficulties of difficult seasons as coming from a loving, sovereign hand and therefore even the sorrowing road can be received in gratitude and faithful reply. I don't have to fight against the hard seasons, hating them and trying to get out of them. I can go through them in peace, acceptance and fruitful service.



Last week, a friend randomly sent me a quotation from C.S. Lewis' book *The Problem of Pain*. I found it to be life-changing. And directly related to our passage:

The settled happiness and security which we all desire, God withholds from us by the very nature of the world: but joy, pleasure, and merriment, He has scattered broadcast. We are never safe, but we have plenty of fun, and some ecstasy. It is not hard to see why. The security we crave would teach us to rest our hearts in this world and thus pose an obstacle to our return to God. A few moments of happy love, a landscape, a symphony, a merry meeting with our friends, a bathe or a football match, have no such tendency. Our Father refreshes us on the journey with some pleasant inns, but will not encourage us to mistake them for home.¹

The more I thought about this quote, the more Lewis turned upside down my usual approach to the world. To be honest, though I know better, I expect “settled happiness and security.” I know it’s not realistic, but I still think my life should be a bit of heaven on earth. And so I get angry because there is always something broken, always another need, always another false and dangerous belief to fight, always another necessary expense, always a relational challenge. So I’m living for myself but not enjoying it.

Lewis reminds me that this life is not home. Home is in the High Country. Further up and further in. The land more real, more vibrant, more varied and interesting than this one. Home is the Kingdom of God in which all things are made new. I’m journeying towards Home. Along the way I am expected to give my time, my effort, my life to showing forth Christ’s love for the world. Such a life in pilgrimage necessarily meets resistance on many levels. It’s supposed to be hard. The world is broken. My heart is wicked. People are mean. Moving Christ-ward takes rigor. That’s the normal Christian life.

Once I give up trying to make this world my permanent home, a great turn occurs. I stop focusing on being angry at the hard seasons. Rather, I see the refreshment God gives me along this journey. Pleasant inns that are not meant

to be permanent homes. I stop looking at what frustrates me. I look instead at any good thing, any good season, as what God gives to encourage me on this pilgrim path. And then I am overwhelmed with amazement at all the signs of hope he gives me. Pleasant inns along the way! Dogs. Smiles. Food. Shelter. Friends. Work. Clothes. Hot showers. Trees. Seeing growth in people. Seeing renaissance and renewal occur in lives. Witnessing acts of sacrifice. Laughter. Fun. Oh my, it's overwhelming. These are the foretastes, the appetizers of all that is to come. And suddenly, this hard slog through the seasons of life in the world becomes filled with wonder. Opportunities for love are everywhere. No good season can be captured and held. But abundant joys are poured into every step along the way.

To everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven. Let's go a bit deeper now. For Ecclesiastes, realizing the seasons of life and God's sovereignty in them did not stop the endless cycle of change. It offered some comfort but no real escape from the experience that everything is just chasing after wind. Nothing new every happens, it all just cycles in and out in futility.

We now have a further revelation. Let's look at a familiar verse with fresh, Ecclesiastes eyes: "But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law" (Galatians 4: 4-5). Ecclesiastes revealed the cycle ride of endless seasons, births, and deaths, where what goes around comes around over and over again. God interrupted the cycle. He did something new. There is a time for every matter under heaven. In the fullness of time, at just the right time, God stepped into the world as the man Jesus. He entered the world under the same conditions as all humanity. Jesus was subject to the seasons and times, to the cycles of human maturing and economics, to aging and to working. He broke into the world to subvert the endless circle of existence in time. He fulfilled the law in order to redeem us out from under the demands of the law. Whether the law that everything that lives must die, or the moral law to which we are obligated but cannot keep, to the endless bondage to things falling apart. God entered the world and he entered into the season of death to which we are all subject. He broke the power of death in his resurrection. He opened the channel between heaven and earth in his ascension. Now Jesus pours his Spirit through that channel, from heaven into our hearts.

Today is Pentecost Sunday. We celebrate the gift of the Holy Spirit to the disciples that had seen Jesus alive. We celebrate that Jesus continues to pour his

Spirit into the hearts of all who trust him. His Spirit interrupts our death march. He foils our sinful natures. Christ's eternal Spirit breaks the cycle of futility in each of our lives as we call upon him. This is a particular season that Ecclesiastes could scarcely anticipate. The season of the mission of the Son of God to bring vast multitudes of sons and daughters to himself. He sends his Church throughout the world to call people to find home, not in a dream of safety and security now, but the heart's true home in Christ.

So let's look one last place at time in the Bible to wrap it up. Paul wrote to the Romans, "You know the time, that the hour has come for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we first believed. So then, let us cast off the works of darkness and put on the armor of light" (Romans 13: 11-12). For everything there is a season and a time to every matter under heaven. Something happened in time. God entered the world to create salvation for us in Jesus Christ. So we are in a new season. The seasons are created by God. But at each point in time in a season we are given opportunity to choose. Now is the season of salvation, but it won't always be. That window will close with the return of Christ. May be today, may be a thousand years from now. We don't know and we can't control the seasons. But now, this moment, we can do the next right thing. Wake up from sleep. Wake up from trying to make this life and this earth your heart's home without God. Wake up from trying to control all the seasons and times. Wake up to realize the sovereignty of the God who loves enough to save us.

A daily prayer in the Church of England is based on these verses from Romans. Every morning, the minister says, "For the night has passed and the day lies open before us." The people reply, "Let us worship God with one heart and mind." Whatever season you may be in, it is not out of God's control. He holds the times in his hands. Whatever season you are in, this present moment is open to you. To choose. To trust God. To give yourself to him. To do the next right thing. Right now. To everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven. The night has passed and the day lies open before us. Let us worship God with all our hearts and minds, right now.

¹ C.S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain*, Chp VII, "Human Pain," 1940.