

Making Sense of Sporadic Seasons
Ecclesiastes 3:1-15
Series: *Why Everything Matters*

Congregational Prayer:

Introduction: Take your Bible and join me in Ecclesiastes 3, Ecclesiastes chapter 3.

We come this morning to the most popular and familiar text in this often misunderstood book. We will be looking at verses 1-15 this morning, and they start with 8 verses of beautiful poetry, followed by 9 verses of explanation. The words of poetry are the one so widely known. They were popularized by the band called the Byrds in 1965. As the world struggled to respond to the controversial war in Vietnam, these poetic words seemed to give hope that someday, there would be a time for peace in the world. These words from Ecclesiastes 3 have been used in countless graduation speeches and in presidential appeals to call young people to thrive in their current season of life, and to give peace in the midst of difficult times with the thought that it won't last forever.

But for all of its popularity, this passage is rarely given the voice it deserves. It rarely is allowed to speak for itself. Usually it is used to communicate something we want it to say, rather than what it actually says. So, what does it say? Ecclesiastes 3 verse 1 says –

The Preacher in Ecclesiastes now turns to tackling one of the toughest realities of life – that of the ever changing seasons of life. He has set out as the wisest, wealthiest, and worthiest philosopher to find out the meaning and purpose of life. His guiding question has been – what does man gain by all the toil with which we toil under the sun? His overwhelming conclusion has been – vanity of vanities, all is vanity and a chasing after the wind. This conclusion has been repeated after he considered the brevity of life and the worthlessness of wisdom and the pointlessness of pleasure and the triviality of toil. Now the preacher turns to consider the times and seasons of life. And this consideration will produce a new conclusion – one of God-centered faith rather than to man-centered defeatism. As we dissect this text we'll see two simple truths and two powerful applications of these truths to everyday life. As we jump in we must remember that this preacher is trying to disenchant us from our materialistic and humanistic worldview. We don't do well with reality, and we hardly ever consider reality as it is. We would rather dress it up with the covering of our choosing which will help us deal with the harshness of life lived under the sun. But in this book, God graciously uncovers reality with all of its warts and absurdities so as to disenchant us from this man-centered view of all things. So, the first ten verses present the reality of the appointed seasons of life.

- I. **Life is Full of Appointed Seasons – vs. 1-10**
 - a. Life on this earth is full of appointed seasons. That statement is clearly made in verse 1 and then poetically illustrated in verses 2-8. The Preacher says that

everything has an appointed time or season. Every matter under heaven has a time when it will happen during the rhythm of life. Time is your most precious asset and the one that we all have the same amount of in any given day. And yet, we do not have the freedom to determine the makeup of those seconds and those minutes and those days that make up the script of our life. There is something beyond us and above us controlling the rolling waves of life. And whatever directs those seasons also curtails our freedom to be the master of our own fate. That is the struggle which is delineated in verses 9-10, but before we get there we need to take note of these rolling and sporadic seasons of life described in verses 2-8. There is great good in this reality of sporadic seasons. In other words, life would not be good if it was always the time for planting and never the time for reaping – or if it was always the appointed time for keeping and never the time for throwing away. So, there is an appealing nature to these rhythms and sporadic seasons of life, but there is also frustration for the humanistic worldview. Because you are human you are prone to write your own life script about these seasons of life. You want to choose the times for laughing and the times for crying. You want to be in charge of appointing the season for birth and the season for life. You want to appoint the times for speaking and the times for silence.

- b. If you are a child or a teenaged young lady or young man you are starting to dream about how life is going to go, and about what you want it to look like. You've laid out the places you want to go, the things you want to do, the kind of people you want to be friends with, the job you want to have, and the life situation which will round out your perfect script. If you are a young adult you might still have those dreams of how you want life to go, but you are also struggling with where things haven't gone according to plan. If you are more seasoned in life you have long since learned that we can make plans, but life rarely turns out as we would have dreamed it to. That is because there are appointed times in each life experience for the gamut of experiences and seasons listed in verses 2-8.
- c. The poem is made up of 14 couplets of polar opposite realities, and this starts with the bookends of human existence – birth and death. And then each pair gives another set of bookends found in the experiences of life. These extremes of seasons are meant to communicate that everything in between is an appointed time as well. So, when the Bible says that God created the Heavens and the Earth – it means that he created everything. And when this poem says that there is a time to be born and a time to die – it means that there is a time for everything in between. The reality is – we don't dictate these seasons – but rather we respond to them. They come upon us absented of our will or our choice. We have no say in the matter. This doesn't mean that we don't make choices which contribute to birth and death and laughing and morning – and so on – but it does mean that these things are not determined by our choices. This is seen so very clearly in the fact that our decisions cannot make these times come. So sometimes the decision to bring new life into the world through birth is met by an infertile womb that not even the best of doctors can remedy. But then, God intervenes in his own way and time and gives a baby. Our decisions don't determine this – God does.

- d. And this fact frustrates the plans of mankind. The tragic death, the unexpected pregnancy, the joy of a bountiful harvest, and the struggle of a storm damaged field – all of this is brought upon us in sporadic occurrences which are dependent upon something other than the sheer determination of mankind. This is another nail in the coffin of the humanistic and secular worldviews. Mankind is not the master of his own fate nor is he the captain of his soul.
- e. This is the conflicted conclusion of verses 9-10. There is the guiding question for this philosophical inquiry – what gain has the worker from his toil. The preacher has examined to great depth the business that the Lord has given us to be busy with, and he makes the point here that all of those efforts do not determine the course or the gain in life. Life is full of appointed seasons, and if we stop there we have a hopeless existence.

II. God is Working Everything to a Beautiful Conclusion – vs. 11

- a. But, thankfully, there is another truth in this text which gives us the well-rounded picture of God and His ways in all of this. You can easily take the words of the poem in verses 2-8 and make them talk in a way which pleases you, but if you don't look to the truth of verses 11-15, you will not have the full picture of God and His Sovereign control over all things. If you stop at verse 10 you will have a miserly view of God which makes him a cosmic killjoy who rudely interrupts our lives with his haphazard providence.
- b. But verse 11 provides the needed clarity when it says – He has made everything beautiful in its time. This lets us know that there is a Master Plan which is guiding the providential arm of God. His bringing and taking of these various seasons into our lives is all working toward a beautiful work. But this beautiful work is not one that we can yet fully appreciate. So, the next phrase says that he has also put eternity into man's heart, yet so that he cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end. So, there is an overall beauty to behold in the Sovereign ways of God, but we cannot yet see it all and therefore appreciate it all. It is like our timeless and eternal God is painting a large fresco which spans from his first words of creation to the destruction of this world and the creation of the new Heavens and the New Earth. We are being painted on somewhere in the middle of this giant scene and we can catch a glimpse of its beauty, but the overall beauty will be ours to explore for all of eternity. So, the moment of your birth and the moment of your death, and every event and appointed season in between is all determined by the God of Heaven as he creates this masterpiece of his beautiful glory. So, every tragedy and every moment of joy and everything in between represents one brush stroke after another of our Eternal God working out his eternal plan.
- c. And inherently man knows that these moments of life in the here and now are simply parts of a bigger whole. So in verse 11 he says that eternity is set in our hearts. This means that we know there is more going on in this universe than just what we know right now. We inherently know that we are part of a bigger story. That there was a beginning, and there will be an ending to this overarching story. But this also frustrates our control-freak tendencies because we can never zoom

out far enough to see from the beginning to the end. We are captured by God's appointed time in this appointed moment and we simply cannot escape it to zoom out and see the big picture.

III. Therefore, We Should Walk by Faith – vs. 12-13

- a. This means that we must walk by faith in this Sovereign God of Heaven. We obviously cannot walk by sight in this world in any kind of a way that makes sense. These sporadic seasons which are dropped upon us at the most unsuspecting of times dictate that we need a larger view than we are capable of on our own. If indeed God is working all of these things to be beautiful in His own way in His own time, then this means we won't see that full beauty and therefore we must trust Him.
- b. This is what is being commended to us in verses 12-13. Because life is full of sporadic seasons and because God is working all of these seasons out for His own glory and because we can't see how it all fits together right now, we must walk by faith in Him. So verse 12 says – "I perceived that there is nothing better for them than to be joyful and to do good as long as they live; also that everyone should eat and drink and take pleasure in all his toil – this is God's gift to man." These are very similar statements to what the Preacher made at the end of chapter 2. Instead of bucking God's sovereign control we ought to gladly receive the lot that He has given to us. So, when the text says in verse 12 that there is nothing better than to be joyful and to do good as long as they live – this is not a defeatist and fatalistic statement – but rather it is a faith-filled statement. We can't control the various seasons of life, so we might as well respond to them in faith. And this faith will look like accepting God's sovereign appointment for this moment. If it is a time for tearing down and throwing away then that is what we accept from the Lord as His good providence, but if it is time for building up and keeping then we accept that by faith.
- c. The alternative is to buck the sovereign ways and plan of God. This will lead us to fight against His purposes and to resist his brush strokes in our life which are contributing to this grand fresco He is painting throughout all time. This desire to be in control of our lives and to take the hand of God and paint the picture we imagined is really a fruit of our sinfully rebellious hearts. This is the link to the Garden of Eden. This was the struggle that Adam and Eve faced as they stared at the forbidden fruit and listened to the deceptive words of the serpent reinterpret their reality. Would Adam and Eve continue to daily receive their allotted season of life under their Sovereign Lord or would they seek to be Masters of their own fate and captains of the own destiny? Eve was compelled to take the fruit because she believed the lies of Satan which were telling her that there was something better for her than what God had given, she just simply had to take and eat. And so, this created fruit was taken into her created hands as she tried to seize control from her Creator. But rather than gaining control she lost her grip on the blessed life lived by faith in the God of Heaven. When Adam and Eve rejected the season of life God had given to them they did not gain control so as to be able to write their own beautiful script. Rather, everything was now touched with the chaos

and the curse of their sin, and they were still captive to the Sovereign ways of God.

- d. That is the risk we are so often willing to take when we are given some aspect of God's sovereign control of our lives to deal with that we don't like. Our discontent with this current season or with that aspect of God's sovereign control tempts us to grab the forbidden fruit and put it to our lips and taste it to see if we can seize control of our fate. We know it will likely make everything worse, but we simply can't accept what God has given. We can't continue on living in this God-appointed hour and so we grab the wheel.
- e. Imagine life in this world as a journey on a great ship at sea. God is the captain and we are all the deck hands who have been given specific jobs to do to make the journey a success. Every time we buck against the providential control of God in all things and try to take matters into our own hands and go our own way, it is like we are storming the bridge of the ship and in mutinous rebellion we are grabbing the wheel to take control. We think He is not good or not capable or not trustworthy, and so we need to correct His course. We wrestle with Him because we think we know better.
- f. What these verses call us to is walking by faith in the fact that we do not know better. We are not capable captains or trustworthy in our ability to direct the course of history. We do not see the entirety of the journey and our steering would land the ship upon some hidden reef and through shipwreck the whole thing would go down. This is why there truly is nothing better for us than to be joyful and to do good as long as we live – eating and drinking and taking pleasure in all of our toil – because it is all a gift from our Sovereign God. This doing good is not the good works which some will tell us we must do to earn eternal life. Those works were done by Christ alone. These are rather the good works of being a faithful deck hand on God's cosmic ship sailing through across the sea of time and eternity.
- g. We can accept this with joy and we can take pleasure in this because God has appointed this for right now. So, whatever your lot in life and whatever your specific tasks given to you for each day, you can do them as an act of trusting faith in the Captain of the ship. We have seen in the first 8 verses that He appoints all of the season and sweeping epochs of life. Therefore, He has appointed this one for you right now. Everything from big to small in your life is sovereignly appointed by God, so how you respond in all of these seasons of life matters. Instead of looking for meaning and permanence by charting our own course and steering our own ship, we find meaning and permanence by receiving from the Lord all that He has given for this season. Whether incredibly difficult or abundantly full of delight – this season is given to you by God for His great and grand purposes. This means that how you act today matters to God. As Thomas Boston has said, "Each generation has its work assigned it by the sovereign Lord; and each person in the generation has his also. And now is our time. We could not be useful in the generation that went before us; for them we were not: nor can

we [be useful] personally in that which shall come after us; for then we shall be off the stage. Now is our time; let us not neglect usefulness in our generation.”¹

- h. Beloved, do you see your life in this way? That right now is given to you by God? It is part of His perfect plan and design, not only for you but also for the larger sweep of human history? He has given you this role to play and He has asked you to go through this season of life, and not another. Will you receive it by faith as a good gift from God’s hand? Will you be joyful in your Sovereign Lord and walk by faith in this particular season? Did you know that God’s Word directs you in each of these seasons so that you don’t have to be ignorant about how you should now live? So, if God has asked you to walk through a season of abundance and blessing and prosperity God has told you how to walk through that season – with a contented heart that fights greed for more and generously gives to the Lord and to others. What if it is a season of poverty and need? Then don’t be idle, but work hard with your hands and do your best to make ends meet, and seek first the Kingdom of God and all these things that you need for daily life will be added to you. What of singleness or marriage? Many children at home or an empty nest? A job you love or one you hate? Being in school or being all done with education? Suffering under tragedy or enjoying the bright side of blessing? Abundance or loss? Relational harmony or relational discord? What of all of these and so many more? In the spectrum of possible human experience God in his sovereign ways has put you in your current one. Will you walk by faith in Him? Will you seek His clearly stated will for how you should now live in this appointed season of life? Or will you always be charging the bridge, grabbing for control of the ship?
- IV. Therefore, We Should Walk by Faith in the Fear of God – vs. 14-15**
- a. The second point of application which the preacher makes in this text is found in verses 14-15 and it builds off of the first one found in verses 12-13. So, because life is full of appointed seasons which God is working together for His glory and our good, we should therefore walk by faith, and we should do this in the fear of God. So, in verse 14 he says, “I perceived that whatever God does endures forever; nothing can be added to it, nor anything taken from it. God has done it, so that people fear before him. That which is, already has been; that which is to be, already has been; and God seeks what has been driven away.” That last phrase is a difficult one to translate and interpret. It could be pointing to the sovereign judgment of God – that at the end of it all He will recall everything that has been done and deal with it, or it could mean that everything that has already happened will come back around by His sovereign design and for His sovereign purposes. I think this phrase is speaking of the rhythm of sovereignty which often brings the same things back around to different people.
 - b. But whatever we do with that last phrase, the overarching point is clear in these 2 verses. God is in charge. When He does it, it endures forever. There is the permanence of His work. When He does it, nothing can be taken from it or added to it. There is the completeness of His work. It cannot be improved upon or

¹ As quoted in Philip Graham Ryken, *Ecclesiastes: Why Everything Matters*, pg. 95.

altered. I cannot be changed. So, while the Lord gives you the freedom and the responsibility to walk by faith in His Sovereign appointment of the various seasons of life, he also does have plan that will not be thwarted – whether we accept it or not.

- c. And because this is true, we should fear God. This is the familial reverence and awe of the all-wise and sovereign God. Because His plans don't change and His script is never altered we should fall before Him in humble submission and we should worship Him in joy-filled praise. Who is like the Lord our God? Who else can run the Universe with such permanence and such completeness? No one – not even you! If you truly believe that, then you will be compelled to walk by faith in the fear of the Lord. You will see every season and appointed time as coming from the true Master of fate – your Sovereign Lord. You could buck against His plans and you could try to strong arm Him into your ideas of how life should go – but you will not succeed. His ways endure forever – they cannot be added to or taken from. He is Sovereign!
- d. So, what aspect of your life story would you change? Kids and teens, what aspect of your movie scripted life are you unwilling to have altered in the years to come? Seasoned saint – what season of life do you wish you could experience again? Afflicted brother or sister, where are you bristling under the Sovereign Hand of our Lord? What of His sovereign control is tempting you to storm the bridge and seize wheel? Here it is that you need to see the unalterable sovereignty of God and you need to walk by faith in the fear of Him!

Conclusion: As we close let me point you to the Gospel and to the perfect man – God in the flesh – Jesus Christ. Mankind has been forever prone to think that our greatest problem is circumstantial. If we could just have the control panel of life for a few minutes we would fix it all up just right. We would correct all of God's mistakes and we would set it all just so. But God knows that our greatest problem runs much deeper. Our desire to have control is but a symptom of a heart rebellion – sin. We want to be like God and so we snub our nose at God's sovereignty and we go our own way. This is why God sent forth His Son at just the right time, born of woman, born under the Law, so that He might redeem those who were condemned under the Law. This Triune God who is outside of time as Creator, chose to intervene into the course of humanity through Jesus, the Son, coming to Earth as a man. He who created these times and appointed seasons now became subject to them so as to redeem those who were His enemies and who were walking in sin. So, the Bible tells us that Jesus was born at just the right time – the appointed moment. That He had an appointed time to give His life as a ransom for many on the Cross of Calvary. He was not going to be stopped or delayed or distracted. What God was doing in redemption no one was going to change or alter. He was going to give His life at just the right moment. And then He was going to be raised from the dead after the prescribed amount of time in the Tomb. You see, our greatest problem is not that God doesn't know what He is doing in his appointment of all of these things. Our greatest problem is that our rebellious hearts think that we could do it better. We deem God as untrustworthy and as incapable and as deficient of good intentions. And so, we storm the bridge of the ship and grab a hold of the wheel and bring the curse of sin and condemnation into our lives. So, Jesus entered into our time-strapped and

sovereignly controlled universe. He became subject to the appointed seasons of life so that he could walk in humble obedience where we have so miserably failed. He trusted His Father with every moment of sovereign control, and He even endures the horror of the Cross as He cries out, not my will, but thine be done! Has this Jesus liberated you? Are you walking in Christ by faith in the fear of the Lord?