

The Seasons of Life

Texts: Ecclesiastes 3: 1-8

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Let me start with a biblical passage: Ecclesiastes 3: 1-8:

For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven:

a time to be born, and a time to die;
a time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is planted;
a time to kill, and a time to heal;
a time to break down, and a time to build up;
a time to weep, and a time to laugh;
a time to mourn, and a time to dance;
a time to throw away stones, and a time to gather stones together;
a time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing;
a time to seek, and a time to lose;
a time to keep, and a time to throw away;
a time to tear, and a time to sew;
a time to keep silence, and a time to speak;
a time to love, and a time to hate;
a time for war, and a time for peace.

You can almost feel the rhythm of life in the back and forth of those verses, can't you? It's like a see-saw that keeps going up and down, up and down, a time for this and a time for that.

It can lull you into going with its flow until suddenly the poem is over and done. That's like life, too, isn't it? You were young and it seemed like there was lots of time, and suddenly you're 70 and where did all that time go? How did I get here?

Everything starts with birth and death. That's a life, right there, in verse 2, the wholeness of it: birth, and death. For us, it all begins at birth and ends at death and everything else that follows

in the poem is contained in between. Ecclesiastes just lays it out for us right off the bat.

Each verse after the introduction has a distinct characteristic of Hebrew poetry. They didn't rhyme their verses, like we might. Instead they used parallelism and contrast to bring out a deeper meaning in the ideas the poet was trying to express.

For example, in the first pairing, we hear:

²a time to be born, and a time to die;
a time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is planted;

Here, being born is paired with planting, and dying is paired with being plucked up.

Why, it's as if God is planting a soul in life, and then harvesting the fruit of that life at the end, in death. God is the expert farmer who knows the right time to plant, the right season for birth, and also the expert farmer who knows the right time to harvest, the right season for death.

Ecclesiastes wants us to see life as being part of a wise plan, by One who knows. It's not some random thing with no order or reason; instead, it's an ordered arrangement by a master farmer who understands the way things work and takes advantage of the times and seasons to produce the best crop available from the seed that gets planted.

Of course, things are never really that easy, are they? And Ecclesiastes recognizes that in the way that he structures his poem as a series of contrasts. Life isn't just laughing and dancing. Sometimes its mourning and weeping, too.

Life isn't always about building up. Sometimes it's about getting broken down, too.

Because it's part of the wisdom literature, Ecclesiastes wants to give us some good advice about good things: it's not always time for them in life, either!

How much pain is caused in life by embracing when it is time to refrain from embracing? How much hurt has been caused by speaking when it would have been better to stay silent? How much good could we have done if we had chosen to give things away when, instead, we decided to hang onto them?

Only in the last couplet does the parallelism of the poem break. It reads:

• a time to love, and a time to hate;
a time for war, and a time for peace.

The time for hate and the time for war are surrounded by love and peace, as if love and peace can swallow up hate and war. And because Ecclesiastes flipped around the last parallelism, the poem that began with birth ends not with war, but with a final peace.

And that, of course, is our hope, that the life which began at our birth ends not in death, but in an eternal peace with God forever. The ups and downs, the backs and forths, the zigzaggy jumble of highs and lows that life presents us with, they all find their culmination in love and peace with God.

That, Ecclesiastes wants to say, is the plan of the One who made seedtime and harvest, the One who organized each life with its joys and sorrows, the One who knows us and loves us.

The contrasts of the poem remind us that every life is full of contrasts, that every life is full of good deeds and bad deeds, full of intentions fulfilled and intentions gone awry, full of that profoundness of humanity which is, as the Scripture says in another place, a little lower than angels but still made of the dust of the earth.

With Ecclesiastes in mind, we thank the One who gave us the seasons of life we have shared with those we have *lost*, grateful that in God's love for us in Jesus Christ, each one of them has been *found* by God forever.

Amen