

# Sowing And Reaping In God's Divine Timing

Printed Text • Ecclesiastes 3:1-8, 14-15

## Aim for Change

By the end of the lesson, we will: EVALUATE if there is a time for everything in our lives; feel COMFORTED that God's timetable provides balance in our lives; and EXPLORE the various ways in which God uses objectionable experiences to serve our good.

## In Focus

"When Cheryl left the kitchen, her 6-year-old daughter, Jasmine, turned from the window where she had been watching the fall leaves blow in the yard. "Mommy, why do leaves change colors?" Cheryl smiled and said, "Because God says it's time."

Suddenly, it was like talking to an adult. Jasmine said: "No, I mean really, Mommy. I told Rhonda's big sister that, but she says it's because the trees stop making stuff that makes their leaves green, something called Colorfill. Is that true?"

"Oh! You mean chlorophyll."

"Yes, ma'am, colorfill," her daughter said, repeating her version.

Cheryl sat down on the floor and tried a different answer. "Yes, it's true that when it gets cold, God takes green away. The red, orange, and yellow colors you see are always there, but the colors are covered by chlorophyll during the spring and summer."

Her daughter responded, "I wish God would let the colors stay all the time. Don't you, Mommy?" "Sometimes," Cheryl answered. "But I think it's nice that God picks the time for the seasons." Jasmine stroked her teddy bear and said, "Oh, just like it was nice that God picked the time for Granddad to die, because we would have wanted to keep him here with us. But instead, God knew it was time for him to go to heaven."

Cheryl smiled and thought about how much we can learn from the wisdom of a child. She said softly, "Jasmine, dear, you are absolutely right."

*In Ecclesiastes, Solomon pondered God's design and divine timing. When we struggle with life's events, we must remind ourselves that everything happens in God's appointed time.*

## Keep in Mind

"To every thing there is a season, and a time to every purpose under the heaven" (Ecclesiastes 3:1, KJV)

## Words You Should Know

**A. Cast away stones gather stones (Ecclesiastes 3:5)** — A contrast that is probably a reference to the demolition of a building and to the preparation for building. Some argue that the phrases also refer to human relationships, thus connecting them to embracing and avoiding embrace.

**B. Time to rend time to sew (v. 7)** — A contrast that is probably a reference to tearing one's clothing as a sign of mourning and to sewing one's clothing back together when mourning is ended. Such an interpretation also compares the time of silence during mourning with the time when mourning is ended.

## Say It Correctly

**Parats.** paw-RATS

**Banah.** BAH-naw

## KJV

**Ecclesiastes 3:1** To every thing there is a season, and a time to every purpose under the heaven:

2 A time to be born, and a time to die; a time to plant, and a time to pluck up that which is planted;

3 A time to kill, and a time to heal; a time to break down, and a time to build up;

4 A time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance;

5 A time to cast away stones, and a time to gather stones together; a time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing;

6 A time to get, and a time to lose; a time to keep, and a time to cast away;

7 A time to rend, and a time to sew; a time to keep silence, and a time to speak;

8 A time to love, and a time to hate; a time of war, and a time of peace.

14 I know that, whatsoever God doeth, it shall be for ever: nothing can be put to it, nor any thing taken from it: and God doeth it, that men should fear before him.

15 That which hath been is now; and that which is to be hath already been; and God requireth that which is past.

## NLT

**Ecclesiastes 3:1** For everything there is a season, a time for every activity under heaven.

2 A time to be born and a time to die. A time to plant and a time to harvest.

3 A time to kill and a time to heal. A time to tear down and a time to build up.

4 A time to cry and a time to laugh. A time to grieve and a time to dance.

5 A time to scatter stones and a time to gather stones. A time to embrace and a time to turn away.

6 A time to search and a time to quit searching. A time to keep and a time to throw away.

7 A time to tear and a time to mend. A time to be quiet and a time to speak.

8 A time to love and a time to hate. A time for war and a time for peace.

14 And I know that whatever God does is final. Nothing can be added to it or taken from it. God's purpose is that people should fear him.

15 What is happening now has happened before, and what will happen in the future has happened before, because God makes the same things happen over and over again.

## The People, Places, and Times

**Ecclesiastes.** The book of Ecclesiastes discusses the age-old question that many people continue to ask: “Is life worth living?” The writer was initially convinced that life was meaningless and without purpose. He reasoned that, much like riding a merry-go-round, so much of what we experience is repetitious, boring, and takes us nowhere except to the grave. In the language of the text, all “is vanity and vexation of spirit” (Ecclesiastes 2:26). How then are we to live life in a way that rises above the “vanity” Solomon ascribes to everything?

The key is not to be found in the circumstances of life itself, because all things have validity in their own time. The key to life is only found “under heaven,” that is, under and in God Himself.

Why does life sometimes seem so empty (vain)? Is God responsible for meaninglessness? Of course not! The world we know is not the world as God created it. The world God created was “very good” (Genesis 1:31). The world in its present condition is fallen and messed up by sin. That is why the mystery of life cannot be solved from within life itself.

We cannot see God’s complete purposes in life because we are finite (limited). There are some things that only God knows in His infinite (unlimited) wisdom. When we tried to pry into God’s exclusive knowledge, the result was the Fall of mankind (Genesis 3:1–19). Yet, God “has also set eternity in the human heart.” (Ecclesiastes 3:11b). Thus, we desire to live life on a higher level than the animals. There is meaning to life. But how can we know it? This is the question Solomon wrestles with in this passage.

## Background

Ecclesiastes 3, which is probably the most often quoted portion of the book, announces an initial change in the writer’s perspective on life. Here the writer begins to think about the sovereign rule of God. Verses 1–8 are intended to remind the reader of God’s presence and His control over the affairs of mankind. While the experiences of life may toss us from one extreme to the other, we are not left dangling forever at one extreme. Things may seem erratic and arbitrary, but there is a degree of order and dependability about the events of our lives. God’s sovereignty and grace arrange life’s extremes in ways that give balance to what we experience.

Solomon shows us that the key to understanding life is to start with God’s purpose and work out from there, because God has an appropriate time for all of life’s activities (3:1–8). When we recognize this, we are able to deal with the issues life can throw at us, even if our understanding is not complete. The secret to peace of mind is to be yielded to God in all things; as the apostle Paul would say, “So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God” (1 Corinthians 10:31, NIV).

### At-A-Glance

1. The Seasons Of Our Lives (Ecclesiastics 3:1-8)
2. The Power Behind The Seasons Of Our Lives (vv. 14-15)

# In Depth

## 1. The Seasons of Our Lives (Ecclesiastes 3:1–8)

The writer of Ecclesiastes uses verses 1–8 to illustrate God’s sovereign activity in human affairs. The principle stated in verse 1 echoes the psalmist’s testimony: “My times are in thy hand” (Psalm 31:15). In other words, the events of our lives are all under God’s control and occur within the timeframe He determines.

Verses 2–8 are not intended to identify all the events that occur in one’s life. Rather, they are intended to present the reader with a picture of the broad scope of God’s involvement in human affairs and mankind’s response to God’s sovereignty.

Twenty-eight human experiences are listed. These experiences take place between the boundaries of birth and death, both of which are under God’s control. The experiences listed reflect human choice to be involved in either constructive or destructive activities. These activities, in turn, give rise to joys and sorrows, love and hate, at both individual and social levels.

The first set of activities speaks of birth and dying, and of planting and plucking up what is planted. One may ask, “In what sense is birth and dying an activity of God that requires some human response?” The time of birth and the time of dying are determined by God. Expectant parents often speak about when their child is due. The reality is that under normal circumstances children come forth from the womb according to God’s timing, and parents respond accordingly. Our times are in God’s hands.

In like manner, under normal circumstances, God determines the time of our dying and we respond to God’s timing. “Planting” and “plucking up” are metaphors aimed at reinforcing the idea of birth and dying.

Just as birth and dying represent seasons of life, so also do killing and healing. Given the metaphorical use of “breaking down” and “building up”... “killing”... is probably not the best translation. A more helpful understanding is to think in terms of demolishing and repairing, which is further pictured in the idea of breaking down and building up. The common thread is destruction and construction.

Another universal experience is listed in verse 4, weeping and laughing, with the parallel experiences of mourning and dancing. Again, one might ask, “What is the divine activity referenced in weeping and laughing?” Psalm 30:11 gives the answer: “Thou hast turned for me my mourning into dancing: thou hast put off my sackcloth, and girded me with gladness.” What joy and encouragement there is in knowing that during our times of weeping and mourning, God comes at the appropriate time and turns our mourning into celebration.

While verse 5 refers to “a time to cast away stones, and a time to gather stones together,” its meaning is difficult to decipher. Obviously, however, it is a reference to negative and positive action, or to destructive and constructive activity. We can be certain, however, that God can use both destructive and constructive events to serve His purposes and our good (Romans 8:28).

Verse 6 identifies an experience common to all: that of keeping for oneself and sharing with others. Knowing when one has enough and when to share with others is a virtue, the development of which requires prudence and a heart touched by the love of God.

Various interpretations have been given to verse 7. Some see it as a reference to mourning. Others see it as a reference to the breach and restoration of a relationship. In either event, we can be confident of God's capacity to transform our mourning and any broken relationship into a thing of beauty.

Verse 8 focuses on the human experiences of love and hate, and war and peace. Again, we can be certain that whether love or hate, war or peace, God has the last word.

## **2. The Power Behind the Seasons of Our Lives (vv. 14–15)**

While there may be differing interpretations of the antitheses cited earlier, they all have one thing in common—they are generalized descriptions of some of the events that constitute living under the rule and reign of God. We can be grateful that God, in His providence and grace, uses the events of our lives to accomplish His purposes. Thus, those who yield themselves to God will, by His grace, see beauty in all the events of life. Like the writer of Ecclesiastes, they will come to "know that, whatsoever God doeth, it shall be for ever: nothing can be put to it, nor any thing taken from it: and God doeth it, that men should fear before him" (v. 14).

God can and does give beauty to the seasons of our lives. His activity in our midst is not new to our age. For "that which hath been is now; and that which is to be hath already been; and God requireth that which is past" (v. 15). Truly, our times are in God's hands, and He can be trusted to make the good and the bad work together for our good.

### **Search the Scriptures**

1. "A time to be born, and a time to \_\_\_\_\_" (Ecclesiastes 3:2).
2. "A time to \_\_\_\_\_, and a time to \_\_\_\_\_ from embracing" (v. 5).
3. "Whatsoever God \_\_\_\_\_, it shall be \_\_\_\_\_" (v. 14).
4. "That which hath \_\_\_\_\_ is now; and that which is to be hath already \_\_\_\_\_" (v. 15)

### **Discuss the Meaning**

1. In what ways does God's sovereignty benefit humankind?
2. According to the writer of Ecclesiastes, what gives meaning to the monotony of life?
3. What should be our response to God's activity?

### **Liberating Lesson**

All of us live on the edge of the unknown. While we may give considerable time, effort, thought, and prayer to planning certain events in our lives, some events happen without our planning and in spite of our expectations. Some events catch us by surprise and, at times when we are least prepared to handle them. Given the realities that are beyond our control, we would do well to put God center stage in our planning and in our lives. Our plans without God will inevitably send us in meaningless circles, drifting without purpose. We need not reinvent the wheel that the writer has already called to our attention. Let us learn from His experience and affirm the

truth that God uses both positive and objectionable experiences for His good purposes and to keep balance in our lives.

### **Application for Activation**

Identify two positive experiences and two disappointing experiences you have had within the past month. Thank God for the blessings that emerged from the positive experiences. If you have not already discovered the silver lining in your disappointing experiences, ask God to help you to do so. Dare to believe that your times and all the events of your life are both known to Him and controlled by Him.

### **Follow the Spirit**

What God wants me to do:

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### **Remember Your Thoughts**

Special insights I have learned:

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## **More Light on the Text**

### **Ecclesiastes 3:1-8, 14-15**

The statements in verses 1-8 proceed from the previous verses (2:24-26). Everything in our reality (under heaven) goes through changes, but God does not go through changes. Everything is relative to Him and His unchangeable counsel. In light of this, we are wise to live "one day at a time" because God is Lord over life. Enjoyment in life and the satisfaction we derive from work come "from the hand of God."

Since everything has its time from God, all the labor of man by itself cannot change the time or circumstance or control events. Everything has its regular time, and time moves on. God has a plan for all people. He provides cycles of life, each with its work for us to do. Many times we face problems that seem to contradict God's plan. However, problems should not cause us to disbelieve or lose trust in the providence of God. Without God, the problems we face have no lasting solution. The lesson to be learned is patience: endure whatever you face, for its time will end. War and peace, and love and hate all have their time. Solomon stressed the importance of studying and learning in order to know the right time for each thing. The wise person has good timing, whether in knowing when to speak or when to plant; one could take the rhythm of time as a gift.

## **1 To every thing there is a season, and a time to every purpose under the heaven:**

Solomon boldly stated that every action of humanity can be traced to its ultimate source: an eternal plan that is controlled and directed by God. For all the affairs of life, argues Solomon, God has set a time. Thus, we must understand that in God's economy, there is an appropriate time for every human experience and activity. If we understand the right times for the right actions and perform these actions according to God's ordained time, we will discover that in His providence "everything is beautiful in its time" (v. 11).

## **2 A time to be born, and a time to die; a time to plant, and a time to pluck up that which is planted.**

Solomon listed 14 pairs of opposites to illustrate the comprehensive providence of God, beginning with the most extreme opposites of all, at least with regard to human life: "A time to be born, and a time to die."

The issues raised by birth and death were important at the time of Solomon, and they are important for us today. We can try to extend life through modern medicine or shorten it through euthanasia, but ultimately God alone has the last say over birth and death.

Planting and plucking up ('aqar, aw-kar', meaning to uproot) have an appropriate time. The call of Jeremiah involved both activities metaphorically. "See, today I appoint you over nations and kingdoms to uproot and tear down, to destroy and overthrow, to build and to plant" (Jeremiah 1:10 NIV). In Ecclesiastes 11:6, Solomon gives us a physical application: "Sow your seed in the morning, and at evening let your hands not be idle, for you do not know which will succeed, whether this or that, or whether both will do equally well" (NIV). Jesus' parable of the wheat and the tares (Matthew 13:24-30) gives us an application that is both physical and metaphorical.

## **3 A time to kill, and a time to heal; a time to break down, and a time to build up.**

God's judicial acts illustrate this statement. For example, when God brings judgment, it is often a time of death and destruction, but when the people repent, it is a time of healing. "Come, let us return to the LORD. He has torn us to pieces but he will heal us; he has injured us but he will bind up our wounds" (Hosea 6:1, NIV).

Breaking down (parats, paw-RATS', meaning to breach or to break in pieces) and building up (banah, BAW-naw', meaning to establish, to cause to continue, or to rebuild) have their appointed times. If a building is not sound, it needs to be torn down and replaced with a structure that is stable and sturdy. This is the way it is in the walk of the Christian. The Apostle Paul teaches this truth in Corinthians: "By the grace God has given me, I laid a foundation as a wise builder, and someone else is building on it. But each one should build with care. For no one can lay any foundation other than the one already laid, which is Jesus Christ. If anyone builds on this foundation using gold, silver, costly stones, wood, hay or straw, their work will be shown for what it is, because the Day will bring it to light. It will be revealed with fire, and the fire will test the quality of each person's work. If what has been built survives, the builder will receive a

reward. If it is burned up, the builder will suffer loss but yet will be saved—even though only as one escaping through the flames” (1 Corinthians 3:10–15 NIV).

**4 A time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance; 5 A time to cast away stones, and a time to gather stones together; a time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing.**

There is an appropriate time for “weeping” and “laughter,” “mourning” and “dancing.” Grief is part of the healing process, and different people handle the same grief in different ways. Paul admonishes us, “Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn” (Romans 12:15, NIV). Because we are under the providential care of God, David was able to say, “Weeping may endure for a night, but joy cometh in the morning” (Psalm 30:5b, KJV). For some, the mourning period is short; for others, it is long. We exacerbate the grief of some when we flippantly say, “Get over it.”

On the other hand, we must be careful to encourage those in mourning not to languish in their grief. Laughter is also therapeutic and should be encouraged. However, we must distinguish between genuine joy and silliness.

God has appointed a time for “casting away” stones (shalak, shaw-lak), meaning to throw, hurl, fling, or cast down. Sometimes the ground needs to be cleared of loose stones to prepare the way for something new. There are other times when “gathering” stones together is appropriate (anac, kaw-nas’, meaning to collect) for erecting a new building.

There are also times for the closeness of an “embrace” and times for keeping our distance and refraining from embracing. Affection does not apply to everybody in the same way. For close and trusted friends, an embrace is appropriate, but at first introductions, it is usually wise to play it safe with a handshake. Paul reminds married couples that the conjugal “embrace” is the norm. The only exception should be by mutual consent for spiritual purposes, and the period of abstaining must be short (1 Corinthians 7:3–5).

**6 A time to get, and a time to lose; a time to keep, and a time to cast away; 7 A time to rend, and a time to sew; a time to keep silence, and a time to speak.**

Like the preceding opposites, “to get” (baqash, baw-kash’, meaning to seek, require, desire, or request) and “to lose” (‘abad, aw-bad’, meaning to perish, vanish, go astray, or be destroyed); “to keep” (shamar, shaw-mar’, meaning to guard, protect, or retain) and to “cast away” (shalak, shaw-lak, meaning to throw, cast, hurl, fling, or shed); “to rend” (qara’, kaw-rah’, meaning to tear or tear in pieces) and “to sew” (taphar, taw-far’, meaning to sew together or mend); “to keep silence” (chashah, khaw-shaw’, meaning to be quiet, still, or inactive) and “to speak” (dabar, daw-bar’, meaning to declare, converse, or command); all unfold under the appointment of God’s providence in their time.



## **8 A time to love, and a time to hate; a time of war, and a time of peace.**

Love and hate both have their proper place under heaven. However, it is imperative that we love and hate the right things. Like God, we should hate sin and love sinners. The Apostle Paul says, "Love must be sincere. Hate what is evil; cling to what is good" (Romans 12:9, NIV). To hate evil is to protest it and work against it. For example, racial segregation was an evil that plagued American society. The Civil Rights Movement emerged to protest and dismantle this injustice. The protestors hated segregation, yet they demonstrated love toward their segregationist oppressors.

Remember what the apostle John tells us: "Whoever claims to love God yet hates a brother or sister is a liar. For whoever does not love their brother and sister, whom they have seen, cannot love God, whom they have not seen. And he has given us this command: Anyone who loves God must also love their brother and sister" (1 John 4:20–21, NIV).

**14 I know that, whatsoever God doeth, it shall be for ever: nothing can be put to it, nor any thing taken from it: and God doeth it, that men should fear before him. 15 That which hath been is now; and that which is to be hath already been; and God requireth that which is past.**

His reflection on the appropriate times for human activities brought Solomon face to face with human limits. It is not the difficulty of knowing the right time for an activity that produces the frustration and resentment, but the fact that all human times come to an end, that there is the inevitable "time to die." This awareness of death (for both the righteous and the wicked, and for animals) as the final human boundary is key to the book of Ecclesiastes.

Therefore, we must seek to do the will of God in this life because He is the only constant in reality. Everything God does will endure forever, and only that done for Him will last. In other words, "...Store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moths and vermin do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also" (Matthew 6:20–21, NIV). At the end of the day, all our "works" will be tested by fire. Only the permanent works will survive—those done in pursuit of God's will: "gold, silver, precious stones" (1 Corinthians 3:10–15, KJV).

God has given us only a glimpse of His creative genius. We are incapable of seeing into the future or comprehending the magnitude of the perfection of His creation. God has the final answer and word. Life, with all its diverse activities, can lead to frustration and resentment. Frustration and resentment will remain until humanity comes to fear God, that is, to believe and obey Him. The incomprehensibility of life as perceived by man has its purpose—the total commitment of the whole self to trust and believe the living God. The absolute lordship of God is essential to any happiness, meaning, or purpose in life. God's purpose and plan, said the writer, are final, or unchangeable (v. 14). God, in His infinite wisdom, can call back the past and connect it with the future (perhaps as a witness at the last judgment) (v. 15). "And I know," concluded the writer of Ecclesiastes, "that whatever God does is final. Nothing can be added to it or taken from it. God's purpose in this is that people should fear Him. Whatever exists today and whatever will

exist in the future has already existed in the past. For God calls each event back in its turn" (vv. 14-15, paraphrased).

History is not meaningless. We have all heard the saying, "Those who fail to learn from history are doomed to repeat it." Fortunately for us, the futility viewed by the writer of Ecclesiastes has been radically changed by God sending His Son into the world. The coming of Christ makes possible a transforming experience that gives us hope for the present and hope for the future. We know that despite all the pessimism in the world today, the time will come when Christ will make all things new. We who place our confidence in Jesus Christ can overcome the obstacles we face today and share in God's wonderful plans for the future.

# Daily Bible Readings

## **MONDAY**

Genesis 8:15-22

## **TUESDAY**

Psalms 90:1-6

## **WEDNESDAY**

Psalms 90:7-12

## **THURSDAY**

Psalms 90:13-17

## **FRIDAY**

Psalms 1:1-6

## **SATURDAY**

Ecclesiastes 3:1-8

## **SUNDAY**

Ecclesiastes 3:9-15