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There Is a Season, Turn, Turn, Turn... (Ecclesiastes 3:1-15)

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The text of this study will be difficult to read without a certain song coming to mind. When Pete Seeger wrote his folk classic "Turn! Turn! Turn!" in the late 1950s, he probably didn't anticipate how popular it would become. Taken almost exclusively from our next passage in Ecclesiastes, the lyrics repeat the wisdom Solomon wrote thousands of years earlier. That sound that you'll hear in your head as you read will probably be the version by The Byrds, an American band who recorded the song in 1965.

The theme of this section of Ecclesiastes is very direct: as one moves through this life, certain experiences will seem to contradict others. Options that are open to us might present confusing decisions. But Solomon assures us today that these options are natural and for our good if we are willing to look at them in the right way.

I. ANTITHESIS OF OUR SEASONS (3:1-8)

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 cast 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 cast 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.*

As you read over this list, several things become clear. First, many categories are represented here. These seasons cover our work, our relationships, our attitudes, even life itself. It can also be inferred that if these are all common experiences in our lives, then there is a legitimate justification for them all. In other words, they aren't all bad things if they have their appointed season and have an appropriate time at some point.

Some things aren't as clear, though. The list begs some questions: If everything has its appropriate time, then how do I know when it's the right time for any given action? When do I tear or sew? When do I love or hate? And isn't hate wrong and love right? It's not a straightforward list, but presents its own set of potential problems.

Remember that this book is a part of the Old Testament's wisdom literature. In it we find great direction for how to think and live. The wisdom that is required to understand and effectively live out this list takes a lifetime of experience and training. For example, will we always know when to be silent and when to speak? No, but as we progress through life and get ourselves into difficult situations because of our words (or lack thereof), hopefully we learn when the appropriate time will be for each approach. We all need such wisdom everyday.

We also need to define these terms correctly or this can be a very confusing list of contrasts. For example, hating is something we should always avoid in relationships, but not all hate is wrong, else it wouldn't have its season. Some things should be hated. Even God hates, underscoring that there is a right time even for this emotion.

Proverbs 6:16-19 There are six things that the LORD hates, seven that are an abomination to him: haughty eyes, a lying tongue, and hands that shed innocent blood, a heart that devises wicked plans, feet that make haste to run to evil, a false witness who breathes out lies, and one who sows discord among brothers.

Our time here on earth will take us all through many varied experiences and decisions. Knowing how to respond at the right time is crucial to living as we've been designed. Diametrically opposed situations are right at the appropriate moment, depending on the timing.

II. AUTHOR OF OUR SEASONS (3:9-11, 14, 15)

Ecclesiastes 3:9-11, 14, 15 - What gain has the worker from his toil? I have seen the business that God has given to the children of man to be busy with. He has made everything beautiful in its time. Also, he has put eternity into man's heart, yet so that he cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end. 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.

If there is a right season for all of these varied experiences, there is also a source and Scripture could not be clearer about what it is. God himself is the One who brings about the times of our lives and there is no other ultimate decision-maker to turn to. Even those who reject God are at his mercy for day-to-day events, small and great. Control freaks of every stripe must take a back seat to the direction of the

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Creator and Controller of all creation. There is no other alternative and mankind cannot break free from this reality.

What he ordains cannot be undone. As created beings, we cannot figure out the beginning from the end, but in his right timing he makes everything work out for his pleasure.

While the picture is in drawing, and the house in building, we see not the beauty of either; but when the artist has put his last hand to them, and given them their finishing strokes, then all appears very good. We see but the middle of God's works, not from the beginning of them (then we should see how admirably the plan was laid in the divine counsels), nor to the end of them, which crowns the action (then we should see the product to be glorious), but we must wait till the veil be rent, and not arraign God's proceedings nor pretend to pass judgment on them.¹

The sovereignty of God is a comforting, freeing doctrine, not a stifling, restrictive one. Regardless of how one feels about it or even if one believes it, the truth of God's care and control affects all creation and we are not as self-determining as we might think. Do we have free will? Yes. But God still guides all that happens in his world.

Proverbs 16:9 The heart of man plans his way, but the Lord establishes his steps.

Do horrible things sometimes happen to us? No question. Do we often have reasons to rejoice in the good in our world? Every day. But God is the only one who sees the whole picture and knows the beginning from the end.

I know the day is coming when they'll find something in me, or some car will cross the yellow line and hit me head-on, or this body will just wear out. But I refuse to let what I can't control destroy what I can enjoy.²

III. ADVICE IN OUR SEASONS (3:12, 13)

Ecclesiastes 3:12, 13 - 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.

So what we do? Our lives will reflect contrasts throughout our seasons and God is in control of all that happens to us. There has to be some responsibility that we have. Does Solomon have any advice for us in this world of constant flux and change?

According to these verses, we should take joy in our time here on earth, doing good to those around us. As we work, put in an honest day's labor and sleep well at night, knowing we tried our best and enjoyed God's blessings as we did. In Solomon's words, "That is God's gift to man." There is nothing better for us to do. And the one who follows Christ has a renewed outlook that makes this kind of giving possible.

But when God, in the person of Jesus Christ, comes into a life, he gives that once-selfish individual the capacity to do good. And that means the ability to do good without being thanked, getting credit or receiving applause. You find yourself motivated to do good, because God's life is at work in you.³

You may get a call tonight telling you that a parent or spouse or child has passed away. There is a season for that. You may have a promotion coming soon or a big win in an upcoming election that you've sought for a long time. There is a season for that. Life's highs and lows come sooner or later and when they do, we must realize that because of God's plan, which we can't always know or understand, we must trust that he is in control.

In human history, who underwent the highs and lows more than Job? May we all be able to echo his words in the good seasons and difficult seasons.

Job 1:21, 22 And he said, "Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked shall I return. The LORD gave, and the LORD has taken away; blessed be the name of the LORD." In all this Job did not sin or charge God with wrong.

¹ Henry, Matthew. *Commentary on Ecclesiastes 3*. Blue Letter Bible. 1 Mar 1996.2013. <http://www.blueletterbible.org/commentaries/comm_view.cfm?AuthorID=4&contentID=1309&commInfo=5&topic=Ecclesiastes&ar=Ecc_3_11>

² Nelson, Tommy. *A Life Well Lived* (B & H Publishing: Nashville, TN, 2005), p. 54.

³ Swindoll, Chuck. *Living on the Ragged Edge* (Word Books: Waco, TX, 1985), p. 90.