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Sovereign Seasons

A Time for Everything — Ecclesiastes 3:1–15

♦ The Appointment That Changed Everything

On the night of **August 4, 1914**, the **British Foreign Secretary Sir Edward Grey** watched from his office window as the gas lamps of London were being lit.

He said to the friend beside him: ***'The lamps are going out all over Europe; we shall not see them lit again in our lifetime.'***

He could not stop it.

He could not reverse it.

History had its own momentum, its own appointed hour.

*Every generation has moments like this — moments when the scale of what is happening becomes visible, when the tide of events reveals itself as something far larger than any individual can redirect. The Preacher knew this not merely as a political observer but as a theological conviction: **there is a time for everything. And the One who appointed the times is not the one sitting in the office window.***

I. The Poem: What the music is doing?

Ecclesiastes 3:1–8," To everything there is a season, A time for every purpose under heaven: ²A time to be born, And a time to die; A time to plant, And a time to pluck what is planted; ³A time to kill, And a time to heal; A time to break down, And a time to build up; ⁴A time to weep, And a time to laugh; A time to mourn, And a time to dance; ⁵A time to cast away stones, And a time to gather stones; A time to embrace, And a time to refrain from embracing; ⁶A time to gain, And a time to lose; A time to keep, And a time to throw away; ⁷A time to tear, And a time to sew; A time to keep silence, And a time to speak; ⁸A time to love, And a time to hate; A time of war, And a time of peace.

The famous poem of **Ecclesiastes 3** consists of **14 pairs** of opposites — **28 'times'** in all.

The literary structure is not accidental.

In Hebrew thought, the number 7 represents divine completeness.

Fourteen (2×7) represents comprehensive completeness the full range.

The poem is saying: *there is an appointed time for literally everything in human experience.*

But here is the revelatory truth that most readings of this passage miss: **the poem is not about balance.**

It is **not** saying that life has good seasons and bad seasons and they balance out. It is saying something far more radical: ***Every season including the painful ones has been appointed by the sovereign God who governs all time.***

The time to die is as much God's appointment as the time to be born.

The time to break down is as much God's purpose as the time to build up.

Acts 17:26–27, "And He has made from one blood every nation of men to dwell on all the face of the earth, and has determined their preappointed times and the boundaries of their dwellings, ²⁷so that they should seek the Lord, in the hope that they might grope for Him and find Him, though He is not far from each one of us;"

Paul's sermon at Athens is a New Testament exegesis of **Ecclesiastes 3:1–8**.

God has '*determined the pre-appointed times*' the same sovereign appointment the Preacher observes in the poem.

But Paul adds the purpose: '*so that they should seek the Lord.*'

Every time that God appoints, every season of human experience, including the painful ones is designed to press humanity toward the God who is '*not far from each one of us.*'

The difficult seasons in your life are not malfunctions of God's plan. They are the plan.

The time to weep and the time to mourn are as much God's sovereign appointments as the time to laugh and dance.

*They serve the same purpose: **to show you that you need a God who is larger than your circumstances.***

A Necessary Clarification: Sovereignty and Evil

The hardest line in the poem is verse 3: *‘a time to kill, and a time to heal.’*

If we are not careful here, sovereignty starts to sound like authorship of evil. As though God is equally the doer of the murder and the doer of the healing. Scripture will not let us say that.

God ordains that seasons of war, death, and loss occur within His purposes, His **decretive** will, but He is never the author of the sin committed in them.

God’s **moral** will forbid murder (**Exodus 20:13**).

Joseph named the distinction to his own brothers.

Genesis 50:20, *‘You meant evil against me, but God meant it for good’*

One event, two authors, and only one of them guilty.

So, when the Preacher says there is ‘a time to kill,’ he is not licensing it. He is saying that even the darkest seasons

including the ones caused by human sin unfold under a sovereignty that will still bring good out of them. That is a comfort, not a permission slip.

II. The levels of the Poem.

The **14 pairs in Ecclesiastes 3:1–8** move through the levels of human experience, from the most universal to the most intimate.

Level / Category	The 14 Pairs (Contrasts)	What They Address / Core Meaning
The Biological Level LIMITS OF EXISTENCE	Born / Die Plant / Uproot	Human mortality and natural life cycles. These forces are completely outside of human control.
The Constructive Level PHYSICAL AGENCY	Kill / Heal Break down / Build up	The power to destroy or restore. It addresses the physical impact humans have on structures and bodies.
The Emotional Level INTERNAL PROCESSING	Weep / Laugh Mourn / Dance	The necessity of psychological balance. It highlights that sorrow and joy are both temporary and valid.

Level / Category	The 14 Pairs (Contrasts)	What They Address / Core Meaning
The Relational Level SOCIAL CONNECTIONS	Scatter stones / Gather stones Embrace / Turn away	Human intimacy and boundaries. It reflects the natural cycles of hospitality, distance, and community building.
The Material Level POSSESSIONS & AMBITION	Search / Give up as lost Keep / Throw away	Our attachment to things. It addresses the wisdom of knowing when to accumulate and when to let go.
The Expressive Level COMMUNICATION & GRIEF	Tear / Mend Be silent / Speak	Public vs. private expression. It covers ritual mourning (tearing clothes) and the social wisdom of timing words.
The Societal Level MACRO-RELATIONSHIPS	Love / Hate War / Peace	Corporate human behaviour. It addresses the highest scale of interaction, from deep emotion to global conflict.

The poem moves deliberately from birth and death, the outermost non-negotiable limits inward through work, emotion, and relationship, to the political reality of war and peace.

Nothing is outside the poem's scope.

Nothing is outside the scope of the God who appointed each time.

Daniel 2:20–21, " *Daniel answered and said: "Blessed be the name of God forever and ever, For wisdom and might are His. ²¹And He changes the times and the seasons; He removes kings and raises up kings; He gives wisdom to the wise And knowledge to those who have understanding."*

Daniel's prayer is the Old Testament's most direct statement of what the Preacher's poem implies.

God does not merely observe the changing times, but He changes them.

- ✓ He removes kings and raises up kings.
- ✓ He governs the seasons of history from the inside, not merely the outside.

The poet has observed the pattern, and the prophet has named the Author.

III. The Gap.

Ecclesiastes 3:9–11, *"What profit has the worker from that in which he labours? ¹⁰ I have seen the God-given task with which the sons of men are to be occupied. ¹¹ He has made everything beautiful in its time. Also He has put eternity in their hearts, except that no one can find out the work that God does from beginning to end."*

This is the most theologically profound passage in Ecclesiastes, perhaps in all of wisdom literature.

Two truths held in stunning tension:

- ✓ God has made everything beautiful in its time.
- ✓ God has put eternity in the human heart.

This is the burden *'no one can find out the work that God does from beginning to end.'*

Here is the gap:

We are built for eternity (we can conceive of it, long for it, orient ourselves toward it) but we cannot see the full picture of what God is doing.

We live in the middle of a story whose beginning we can study and whose ending God has revealed but whose present chapter we navigate by faith, not sight.

1 Corinthians 13:12, *"For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part, but then I shall know just as I also am known."*

Paul's famous 'mirror dimly' passage in **1 Corinthians 13** is the New Testament response to the gap in **Ecclesiastes 3:11**.

We see in part.

We know in part.

The 'eternity in our hearts' pulls us toward a full understanding that we cannot yet have, but that God has promised.

The 'face to face' moment Paul describes is the resolution of the Preacher's tension: the eternity in our hearts will be fully satisfied when we know 'just as we also are known.'

The eternity in the human heart is the most important diagnostic tool in the book. Every time a human being says 'this is not right' about injustice, or 'this cannot be all there is' about death, or 'I was meant for more than this' about ordinary life, they are accessing the eternity God placed within them.

This is not arrogance, but evidence.

The longing is the proof of the design. You were made for eternity. And the God who made you knows how to get you there.

The Appointed Time in Person

Paul's language in **Galatians 4:4** turns Ecclesiastes 3 from an abstract doctrine into a face: *'When the fullness of the time was come, God sent forth His Son.'*

The same appointed time the Preacher describes in the poem, the same sovereignty Daniel praises, culminated in a single moment of history: **God sending His own Son.**

Galatians 4:4–5, *"But when the fullness of the time had come, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the law,⁵ to redeem those who were under the law, that we might receive the adoption as sons."*

The cross is 'a time to kill' and 'a time to die' taken to their absolute limit and by resurrection it becomes 'a time to heal' and 'a time to be born' for everyone who trusts Him.

Every appointed season in your life stands in the shadow of that one: the God who governed the fullness of time to send His Son can be trusted to govern the season you are in now.

IV. The Prescription.

Ecclesiastes 3:12–15, *"I know that nothing is better for them than to rejoice, and to do good in their lives,¹³ and also that every man should eat and drink and enjoy the good of all his labour—it is the gift of God.¹⁴ I know that whatever God does, It shall be forever. Nothing can be added to it, And nothing taken from it. God does it, that men should fear before Him.¹⁵ That which is has already been, And what is*

to be has already been; And God requires an account of what is past."

The Preacher's response to divine sovereignty over time is not paralysis or fatalism but joy and good works.

Rejoice, this is a command in the active sense.

Receive what God gives in each season with full-hearted acceptance.

Do good, within the season God has given you, invest actively in what is right, just, kind, and faithful.

Rejoicing here does not mean feeling happy about the season. For the one weeping, 'rejoice' is not a demand to smile through the pain but it is an invitation to trust the Giver even while you weep. The command is not 'feel good,' it is 'receive this too, from His hand.' Grief and trust can occupy the same room.

'Nothing can be added to it, and nothing taken from it.'

This is the security of living in a world governed by God.

You cannot improve God's purposes by anxious effort.

You cannot damage them by human opposition.

What God has determined will stand. This is the foundation of the peace that transcends understanding not the peace of knowing what will happen, but the peace of knowing who governs what happens.

Philippians 4:6–7, *"Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God; ⁷and the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus."*

Paul's prescription in **Philippians 4** is the New Testament application of **Ecclesiastes 3:12–15**.

The *'peace that surpasses understanding'* is precisely the peace of someone who knows that God's purposes cannot be added to or taken from.

- Anxiety is the fruit of believing that the outcome depends on you.
- Peace is the fruit of knowing that the outcome is in the hands of the One who *'does it that men should fear before Him.'*

Conclusion.

♦ The Season She Did Not Choose — Joni Eareckson Tada

In 1967, at 17, **Joni Eareckson** dove into **Chesapeake Bay** and surfaced **quadriplegic**. That night in the hospital, she screamed at God: **'Why? Why this? Why now? Why me?'**

It was, she later said, the most honest prayer she ever prayed.

Fifty-seven years later, Joni Eareckson Tada has written over **50 books**, founded an **international disability ministry**, been diagnosed and **treated for cancer twice**, and said in a **2023 interview**:

'My wheelchair is the prayer that God answered differently than I asked. I asked to walk. He gave me something better He gave me Himself.'

Ecclesiastes 3:11, *'He has made everything beautiful in its time.'*

Not immediately beautiful.

Not obviously beautiful.

Beautiful in its time, when the full story is visible.

Joni could not see the beauty in the pool on **July 30, 1967**. But God had placed eternity in her heart. And the eternity she was made for required the wheelchair to get to.

What season are you in?

Can you trust that the One who makes everything beautiful in its time is also making something beautiful in yours?

Memorize.

Ecclesiastes 3:11, *'He has made everything beautiful in its time.'*

Carry it into whatever this week hands you.

Name your season.

Write down what season you are in right now (Losing something? Building something? Waiting?).

Then write one sentence back to God about it, not explaining it, just handing it to Him.

Pray.

Philippians 4:6–7 once a day this week over whatever is making you anxious and let the peace that surpasses understanding do its guarding work.

Questions.

Question	Discussion Focus
The poem says there is <i>'a time to kill and a time to heal.'</i> This seems morally troubling. How does God's sovereign appointment of seasons apply to things we consider negative?	The hardest pairs war, death, tearing down. What does sovereignty mean for evil?
<i>'He has put eternity in their hearts.'</i> Where do you feel this most strongly? What is the eternity your heart longs for?	Personal reflection — the specific shape of each person's longing.
Paul says in Acts 17 that God appointed pre-appointed times <i>'so that they should seek the Lord.'</i>	Personal testimony — the pastoral application of sovereignty.

Question	Discussion Focus
What difficult season have you experienced that ultimately pressed you toward God rather than away?	
<i>'Nothing can be added to or taken from' what God does.</i> How does this truth address anxiety? What would it mean to live from this conviction?	Application of divine sovereignty to daily decision-making.
Joni Tada's wheelchair 'gave her God.' Can you identify something in your life that appeared to be a loss but was actually a gift in its appointed time?	Testimonial — the beauty in retrospect.