

LIVE WITH WISDOM

CORE PASSAGE: ECCLESIASTES 3:1-15

CONTEXT

Wisdom literature in the Bible includes the books of Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Song of Songs. This genre wasn't unique to ancient Israel but was popular throughout the ancient Near East. Nations such as Egypt and Babylon wrote down wise sayings before Israel did. In Scripture, however, the wisdom books only address one God and generally speak to human flourishing by living according to God's holy will.

KEY CONCEPT

God's timing is perfect, and everything is a gift from God.

As you read Ecclesiastes 3:1-15:

- Acknowledge that while we long to know the future, only God knows His purpose for everything.
- Celebrate that God is awe-inspiring and just in all His ways.



TIMELINE

Solomon Becomes King upon
David's Death (1 Kings 1–2)

Solomon Wrote Numerous Proverbs
and Songs (1 Kings 4)

SESSION STUDY: Solomon
Contemplates Life (Ecclesiastes 3)

Solomon Asks the Lord for Wisdom
(1 Kings 3)

Solomon Builds the Temple and
His Palace (1 Kings 5–9)

Daily Readings

- ☐ **Day 1:** Ecclesiastes 1–4
- ☐ **Day 2:** Ecclesiastes 5–8
- ☐ **Day 3:** Ecclesiastes 9–12

- ☐ **Day 4:** Song of Songs 1–3
- ☐ **Day 5:** Song of Songs 4–8
- ☐ **Day 6:** Psalm 34



Scan this QR code to access
this session's Scripture passages.

THERE ARE SEASONS AND TIMES FOR EVERYTHING, GOOD AND BAD (ECCLESIASTES 3:1-11).

Circle a line from the passage below that resonates with you this week.

1 There is an occasion for everything, and a time for every activity under heaven: **2** a time to give birth and a time to die; a time to plant and a time to uproot; **3** a time to kill and a time to heal; a time to tear down and a time to build; **4** a time to weep and a time to laugh; a time to mourn and a time to dance; **5** a time to throw stones and a time to gather stones; a time to embrace and a time to avoid embracing; **6** a time to search and a time to count as lost; a time to keep and a time to throw away; **7** a time to tear and a time to sew; a time to be silent and a time to speak; **8** a time to love and a time to hate; a time for war and a time for peace. **9** What does the worker gain from his struggles? **10** I have seen the task that God has given the children of Adam to keep them occupied. **11** He has made everything appropriate in its time. He has also put eternity in their hearts, but no one can discover the work God has done from beginning to end.

There is an occasion for “everything,” which encompasses every part of life, even those we don’t like to acknowledge or walk through. The list of various “times” in verses 2-8 is not exhaustive because life is complex, but it represents all of life. Given the whole counsel of Scripture, we should not read this list as a justification for sin at any point; rather, God appoints to us times that we will enjoy and times we might wish to do without. Whether good or bad from our perspective, these are all times for faith and faithfulness because God is good.

LEADER NOTE: None of these phrases can be understood apart from the rest of Scripture. “A time to kill” (Eccl. 3:3) isn’t permission to murder (Ex. 20:13; Deut. 5:17). “A time for war” (Eccl. 3:8) is not a blank check to wage violence but may refer to war executed for the goal of swift and godly justice. Recall that God used Israel to carry out His holy judgment on the Canaanites (see Gen. 15:13-16).

VOICES FROM THE CHURCH

“[H]arvest is not the only good season. We would not have harvest without the planting season. [Farmers] see the whole, not just the parts. Likewise, Ecclesiastes 3 reminds us that all elements of life are gifts from God and that he sees the ‘whole’ of our lives, even when we cannot.”¹

—Africa Study Bible

This passage is both a reminder of hope and a warning against wrongly-directed dependence. In the hard seasons of life, we have hope that God will redeem our struggles and toil with a God-ordained purpose. In the good seasons, we must not become dependent on created, transient things, which ultimately should point us to the Creator, the unchanging God.

What are some times you are currently in, and how do you need to respond in them?

In verse 11, Solomon says that God “has made everything appropriate in its time.” Again, as in verse 1, this means “everything,” even the bad or hard. This requires us to acknowledge and trust in the sovereignty of God, believing that He doesn’t cause evil in the world but that He is able to and does work through it for the good of His children. Rather than knowing how God works in eternity, we must rest in the knowledge that He does work in eternity and that our lives are a part of that work.

LEADER NOTE: If everything is appropriate in its time, then there must be times when even good things we could be doing aren’t appropriate. It may be necessary to say no to some good work because of the season you are in. This is where wisdom that comes only from God is necessary. If we don’t rely on Him through His Spirit and His Word, we will operate on our own sin-tainted understanding, which Scripture discourages and commands against (Prov. 3:5-7).

What are some ways you have recognized a sense of eternity in your heart?

THEOLOGY CONNECTION

THE PROBLEM OF EVIL: Many nonbelievers have argued that if God is all-powerful, all-loving, and all-knowing, then evil would not exist in the world. They argue because evil exists in the world, God must not exist (or He is not good or all-powerful). Despite its powerful rhetoric, appealing to evil as an argument against God fails: first, because outrage over bad things in this world presupposes a moral standard that does not exist apart from God, and second, because God could have a good reason (though unknown to us) for allowing evil and suffering to continue for a season. Given what we know about God’s character and purposes, Christians can rest assured that even in the midst of evil, God is working all things for our good (Rom. 8:28).

WE ARE NOT TO TAKE FOR GRANTED THE EVERYDAY GIFTS GOD GIVES (ECCLESIASTES 3:12-15).

Highlight what God does in this passage.

12 I know that there is nothing better for them than to rejoice and enjoy the good life. **13** It is also the gift of God whenever anyone eats, drinks, and enjoys all his efforts. **14** I know that everything God does will last forever; there is no adding to it or taking from it. God works so that people will be in awe of him. **15** Whatever is, has already been, and whatever will be, already is. However, God seeks justice for the persecuted.

Although we can't know eternity like God does (v. 11), He gives us gifts in our time-bound lives to enjoy for ourselves and to use for the benefit of others. He is a kind God who delights in our delight of His created world. We experience seasons of life that are good and some that are challenging, but through them all, God supplies all our needs, and for that we should be thankful (Phil. 4:19).

This brings to mind the garden of Eden (Gen. 1–2). God gave Adam and Eve an abundance of resources and good work to do. Their fall into sin corrupted creation (Gen. 3), but the fall didn't thwart God's purposes in His creation. When we reject or misuse good gifts, such as food or work, we reject God's pre-fall design for the world. Essentially we claim we know better than Him or that our purposes are holier than His. We shouldn't push away God's gifts as indulgent or sinful, but neither should we squander them through misuse or overindulgence. Abusing God's gifts is how they become instruments of sin.

We're saved by God's grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone, but part of being in covenant with the Lord includes living according to His Word. Motivated by the hope we have in Him, we believe we will one day be redeemed from the brokenness of the world and dwell in His presence forever, and that faith leads to obedience to how the Lord has said we should enjoy His world. Faithful obedience and growth (not perfection) in rightly using God's gifts are evidence of true saving faith.

LEADER NOTE: Some people interpret Ecclesiastes 3:12-13 like the rich man from one of Jesus's parables: "You have many goods stored up for many years. Take it easy; eat, drink, and enjoy yourself" (Luke 12:19). Such people believe nothing really matters, but that's because they have ignored the yearning for eternity that God has placed in our hearts (see Luke 12:20-21). What we do with the gifts God has given us matters very much, since "we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared ahead of time for us to do" (Eph. 2:10). Philip Ryken wrote, "When he says that there is 'nothing better' than doing God's business, he is not settling for something second best but is telling us that there is meaning and joy in the regular things of everyday life."²



What are some ways you can remind yourself that work, food, drink, rest, and nature are gifts from God?

Because earthly life is seasonal and temporary, we can struggle to find meaning and hope in this world. But we find those things in the Lord precisely because He does not change. Our works and our joys fade over time, but “everything God does will last forever” (Eccl. 3:14). We see changes in this world—“whatever is, has already been, and whatever will be, already is” (v. 15)—but the Lord sees it all, and He works through it all so we will praise Him. God is awe-inspiring, in control, and just in all His ways, even when those ways don’t make sense to our finite minds.

LEADER NOTE: There is much comfort we can find in God’s eternal and unchanging nature and His sovereignty over all He has created. We can trust that God is good and does what is good (Ps. 119:68). As Danny Akin puts it: “He knows all of your days, and He is sovereign over the details and seasons of your life. He mixes the good and the bad—the joys and the pains—together to make something beautiful.”³

What reasons do you have to be in awe of the Lord?

GOSPEL CONNECTION

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God’s perfect timing for Jesus made it possible for salvation to come through Jesus’s suffering, death, and resurrection that fulfilled prophecies. Throughout the history of the world and our lives, both victories and struggles are gifts to be used for the proclamation of Christ for His glory.

Notes

| SOLOMON'S WISDOM | | | |
|-------------------|--|---|---|
| WISDOM LITERATURE | STORY | PRINCIPLE | HOW WE CAN LIVE |
| Proverbs | Adapted from the story of the blind men and an elephant. Each person touches a part of the elephant and makes a conclusion based on that part. One says it's like a wall, another like a snake, another like a fan, etc. | Don't judge a book by its cover. Don't judge a person by their appearance. Don't judge a situation by its first impression. | Be open-minded. Listen to others. Don't jump to conclusions. Be patient. Wait for the full picture. |
| Ecclesiastes | A man who has everything (wealth, power, wisdom) finds that it is all meaningless. He says, "Vanity is the lot of all of us. There is nothing new under the sun." | Nothing we can do or have can give us lasting meaning or happiness. Only God can give us meaning and happiness. | Find meaning in God. Don't rely on worldly things. Be content with what you have. Don't be greedy. Be generous. |
| Song of Songs | A love story between a man and a woman. They express their love and desire for each other. | Love is a gift from God. It is the greatest of all gifts. It is the power that can change the world. | Love God. Love others. Be in love with God. Be in love with each other. Let love guide your life. |

ARRIVAL

WRITE: On a board, write “Out of Season.” As the group arrives, invite them to record an example of this idea on the board. Start by adding one of your own, such as an out-of-style fashion trend or a product no longer on the market.

TRANSITION: We may no longer want to embrace a trend that is out of season, or we may be unable to enjoy an item that is off the market, but we must admit that we enjoyed these for a time. Our study today will help to give us insight into how to approach the various seasons of life, no matter what stage we are in.

CONTEXT

ILLUMINATE: Distribute copies of **Pack Item 12: Solomon's Wisdom**, and briefly review Solomon's writings. Note that the book of Ecclesiastes records Solomon's testing of all the world has to offer, and in general, the book has a pessimistic tone, though there are some encouraging spots, as we see in this session's core passage. For all his pessimism, Solomon does settle on the meaning of life, and that is to “fear God and keep his commands” (Eccl. 12:13). We find this conclusion meaningful because we believe the Lord is sovereign, eternal, and good.

RECAP

RECALL: Ask the group to scan back over their personal preparation notes and to highlight a phrase from Ecclesiastes 3:1-15 that stood out to them this week. If comfortable doing so, allow group members a moment to express why they chose their phrases.

TRANSITION: Seasons come, and seasons go. Some we welcome, and some we don't. But Solomon in his wisdom reminded us that all of life is a gift from God, all of it has purpose, and we should enjoy each of the times of our lives. Let's look at how we can apply this, especially as we struggle with the harder times of life.



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GROUP ACTIVITY

BLANKS: Direct the group to page 112 in the Personal Study Guide (PSG) for an activity space titled "Season and Purpose." Encourage your group to fill in the blanks with words or phrases at the appropriate times. Discuss the group's responses as they interact with the Scripture text.

Season and Purpose

Reflect on these phrases from Ecclesiastes 3:1-8, and fill in the blanks with a word or phrase that fits the season of life you are in right now.

A TIME TO PLANT _____ AND

A TIME TO UPROOT _____ .

A TIME TO TEAR DOWN _____ AND

A TIME TO BUILD _____ .

A TIME TO EMBRACE _____ AND

A TIME TO AVOID EMBRACING _____ .

A TIME TO KEEP _____ AND

A TIME TO THROW AWAY _____ .

A TIME TO BE SILENT _____ AND

A TIME TO SPEAK _____ .

READ: Call on a volunteer to read Ecclesiastes 3:1-11 aloud to review Solomon's list of in-season and out-of-season descriptions. Note that this passage is famous in part because of its lyrical poetry.

APPLY: Lead the group to think about practical applications derived from the passage. Assign one sentence in the activity to a volunteer or small groups of 3-4 to reflect on and to consider general applications for the group as a whole. Call for volunteers from each small group to share some responses to each wise saying.

PERSONALIZE: Encourage the group to take a few moments to record personal responses to each wise saying in the activity. Allow the group some time to share their responses aloud, if they would like. If fitting, identify prayer requests the group can record in their PSG on page 113 so they can pray for each other throughout the coming week.

Notes

CONTEXTUALIZE: Encourage your group with the truth that while the seasons of our lives may fluctuate between good and bad from our perspective, we still have an eternal God who works through them all. He has placed eternity in our hearts (v. 11) so that we will be drawn to Him for salvation and comfort.

READ: Call on a volunteer to read Ecclesiastes 3:12-15 aloud.

HIGHLIGHT: Emphasize our responsibility to savor life in and out of season but also to trust in the truths Solomon was sharing: God gives good gifts, God is sovereign, and God is just. Point to the wisdom of enjoying food, drink, and other aspects of life as gifts from God to be valued and appreciated, even during the hard times. Lead the group to consider the consequences when such gifts are not valued appropriately through rejection or overindulgence. Finally, encourage the group to record in their activity space the purpose for which God works in our lives and all its varying seasons—so we will be in awe of Him (v. 14).

DEBRIEF

Given what you know about God’s timing and sovereignty, how might you counter the argument that an all-loving God would not allow suffering?

(PSG p. 112) When you or someone close to you doubts the goodness of God, how can you point them back to truth?

SUMMARIZE

Solomon in his wisdom outlined for us the importance of recognizing the varying seasons of life and acknowledging God’s purpose in each. While we may not always be able to understand or explain the “times” of our lives, we can accept by faith that God is working through them and that we can still enjoy every bit of life as a gift from God.

HEAD, HEART, HANDS

Walk the group through the Head, Heart, Hands section in the PSG (p. 113). If running short on time, specifically highlight the **Heart** section in this week’s study, inviting volunteers to share their responses to the question in this section.



HEAD: Most of us lean in one of two directions when it comes to Scripture’s wisdom books: we avoid them because they feel confusing, disjointed, or pessimistic, or we favor them because they are easily digestible. Yet God calls us to feed ourselves with the whole counsel of His Word. *(Pass out copies of Pack Item 13: Work and Wisdom.)* As is the case with the subjects of “work” and “wisdom,” we must study God’s wisdom literature in light of the rest of Scripture and vice versa to have a full understanding and perspective of God’s teaching and our responsibilities in faithful obedience.

What steps can you take to read, understand better, and apply the whole counsel of Scripture?

| WORK AND WISDOM | | |
|---|---|--|
| PROVERBS | ECCLESIASTES | WISDOM LITERATURE |
| <p>Proverbs 1:1-7</p> <p>Proverbs 8:1-21</p> <p>Proverbs 9:1-12</p> <p>Proverbs 10:1-11</p> <p>Proverbs 11:1-10</p> <p>Proverbs 12:1-10</p> <p>Proverbs 13:1-10</p> <p>Proverbs 14:1-10</p> <p>Proverbs 15:1-10</p> <p>Proverbs 16:1-10</p> <p>Proverbs 17:1-10</p> <p>Proverbs 18:1-10</p> <p>Proverbs 19:1-10</p> <p>Proverbs 20:1-10</p> <p>Proverbs 21:1-10</p> <p>Proverbs 22:1-10</p> <p>Proverbs 23:1-10</p> <p>Proverbs 24:1-10</p> <p>Proverbs 25:1-10</p> <p>Proverbs 26:1-10</p> <p>Proverbs 27:1-10</p> <p>Proverbs 28:1-10</p> <p>Proverbs 29:1-10</p> <p>Proverbs 30:1-10</p> <p>Proverbs 31:1-10</p> | <p>Ecclesiastes 1:1-17</p> <p>Ecclesiastes 2:1-17</p> <p>Ecclesiastes 3:1-15</p> <p>Ecclesiastes 4:1-12</p> <p>Ecclesiastes 5:1-12</p> <p>Ecclesiastes 6:1-12</p> <p>Ecclesiastes 7:1-14</p> <p>Ecclesiastes 8:1-17</p> <p>Ecclesiastes 9:1-12</p> <p>Ecclesiastes 10:1-10</p> <p>Ecclesiastes 11:1-6</p> <p>Ecclesiastes 12:1-14</p> | <p>Job 1:1-22</p> <p>Job 2:1-13</p> <p>Job 3:1-26</p> <p>Job 4:1-21</p> <p>Job 5:1-27</p> <p>Job 6:1-25</p> <p>Job 7:1-10</p> <p>Job 8:1-10</p> <p>Job 9:1-35</p> <p>Job 10:1-22</p> <p>Job 11:1-6</p> <p>Job 12:1-25</p> <p>Job 13:1-28</p> <p>Job 14:1-17</p> <p>Job 15:1-35</p> <p>Job 16:1-22</p> <p>Job 17:1-16</p> <p>Job 18:1-21</p> <p>Job 19:1-29</p> <p>Job 20:1-29</p> <p>Job 21:1-34</p> <p>Job 22:1-30</p> <p>Job 23:1-21</p> <p>Job 24:1-24</p> <p>Job 25:1-6</p> <p>Job 26:1-14</p> <p>Job 27:1-23</p> <p>Job 28:1-28</p> <p>Job 29:1-25</p> <p>Job 30:1-31</p> <p>Job 31:1-34</p> <p>Job 32:1-34</p> <p>Job 33:1-33</p> <p>Job 34:1-37</p> <p>Job 35:1-13</p> <p>Job 36:1-38</p> <p>Job 37:1-40</p> <p>Job 38:1-41</p> <p>Job 39:1-40</p> <p>Job 40:1-24</p> <p>Job 41:1-34</p> <p>Job 42:1-17</p> |



HEART: In an individualistic culture like ours, it's easy to become consumed by our day-in-day-out responsibilities, performing them without much thought or enthusiasm. The book of Ecclesiastes is a gift to us as it don't shy away from the frustrations of life, feelings of depression and apathy, or seasons of burnout, yet it also frames these in light of our purpose—to be in awe of God and obey Him.

How will you praise the Lord in your current season, whether good or bad?



HANDS: We are complex creatures affected by sin, and that includes our emotions. If God's Word doesn't brush the unpleasant parts of life under the rug, neither should we. It's important to recognize our emotions, pleasant or unpleasant, and get to the root of them with the help of the Spirit and wise counsel from fellow believers. This is part of why God has given us His church!

Who is a wise and trusted brother or sister in Christ you will confide in for support during your good and bad times?

NEXT STEPS

Challenge the group to consider these actions as responses to this session.

- If you have not already learned it, commit to memory Ecclesiastes 3:1-8,11-14.
- Examine your thoughts about the stage of life you are in now. Write a personal pledge to help you focus on God's good gifts (Phil. 4:8).
- If you are experiencing problems or persecution, meditate daily on the wisdom of Ecclesiastes 3:14-15. Share this passage with others, if needed.

Invite volunteers to share prayer needs for this week. Encourage them to record these in the space on page 113 in their PSG so they can pray for others throughout the week.

PRAYER REQUESTS AND PRAISES

PRAYING SCRIPTURE

CLOSE: Pray through Psalm 34:15-18 with your group, thanking God for His care.

References

1. Africa Study Bible (Chicago, IL: Oasis International LTD, 2016), 956.
2. Philip Graham Ryken, *Ecclesiastes: Why Everything Matters, Preaching the Word* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2010), 94.
3. Daniel L. Akin and Jonathan Akin, *Exalting Jesus in Ecclesiastes* (Nashville, TN: Holman Reference, 2016), Ec 3:10–15.

