

TO EVERYTHING THERE IS A SEASON

SERIES: STUDY 1

A TIME TO MOURN: RECEIVING GOD'S COMFORT, AND COMFORTING OTHERS (ECCLESIASTES 7:2-4; 2 CORINTHIANS 1:3-7)

TIPS TO SHARE WITH LEADERS

As you discuss comfort with your group today, make a deliberate effort to be a comfort to your group members. Don't single out anyone to share if they haven't volunteered, and thank all who do share. Not all group members will be equally open or vulnerable, and some may have any number of reasons to be uncomfortable with sharing. Your priority should be maintaining a place of comfort and acceptance for whomever wishes to contribute to the discussion.

BIBLE PASSAGE REFERENCE 1

Ecclesiastes 7:2-4

²It is better to go to a house of mourning
than to go to a house of feasting,
for death is the destiny of everyone;
the living should take this to heart.
³Frustration [or alt. "vexation,"
"sorrow"] is better than laughter,
because a sad face is good for the
heart.
⁴The heart of the wise is in the house
of mourning,
but the heart of fools is in the
house of pleasure.

BEFORE THE LESSON

Today's passage from Ecclesiastes is a form of Hebrew poetry, and the wording and arrangement of ideas in the passage may be harder for the group to connect to than Paul's more familiar style in today's passage from 2 Corinthians. It would be helpful to read Ecclesiastes 7:2-4 in the New American Standard Bible, The New Living Translation and The Message in preparation for leading this lesson. This variety of translations, along with the New International Version included here, will give you better perspective on the text as you lead.

STARTING THE LESSON

Ecclesiastes 3 tells us, "There is a time for everything, and a season for every activity under heaven." This series will help us to explore how we can grow closer to Jesus in whatever season of our lives we may find ourselves. Today's lesson will ask us to explore the role of death, sadness, and mourning in our lives, and as we do so, it's very important to note that finding meaning in our pain does not mean we are expected to explain it away, or minimize it. Jesus himself had an unparalleled closeness to God and understanding of His will, yet even Jesus wept at the suffering of his friends, and Isaiah prophetically refers to Jesus as "a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief." (Isaiah 53:3 NAU).

STARTER QUESTION

- Have you ever been grateful for sadness? Explain a bit about the answer you have given.
- Is it easier for you to receive comfort, or to give comfort to someone else?

BIBLE PASSAGE REFERENCE 2

2 Corinthians 1:3-7

³ Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, ⁴who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves receive from God. ⁵For just as we share abundantly in the sufferings of Christ, so also our comfort abounds through Christ. ⁶If we are distressed, it is for your comfort and salvation; if we are comforted, it is for your comfort, which produces in you patient endurance of the same sufferings we suffer. ⁷And our hope for you is firm, because we know that just as you share in our sufferings, so also you share in our comfort.

OPENING PRAYER

Holy Spirit, fill this room and our hearts. Draw near to us and draw us nearer to you and to one another. Help us to both give and receive comfort today and help us to know and experience the ways that we are deeply and perfectly loved by you.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

QUESTION 1

- Why does the author of Ecclesiastes say that it's better to mourn than to feast?

Because death is the destiny of everyone, the living should take this to heart, meaning to think seriously about this inescapable reality and prepare for it. By juxtaposing mourning and feasting like this, the author is suggesting that mourning helps us deal with the reality of death, while feasting may be a distraction from it.

QUESTION 2

- Do you agree that it's better to mourn than to feast? Why or why not?

This is a discussion question. Some may feel that feasting is a way to affirm and appreciate the life we have, while some may feel that distracting ourselves from the realities of life is unhealthy. There are no wrong answers here.

QUESTION 3

- Why does the author say frustration is better than laughter?

You may want to utilize multiple translations of verse three here. The NASB says, "when a face is sad a heart may be happy," while the NLT says, "sadness has a refining influence on us." The sense of this verse is perhaps more like: "Though our face may betray sadness, it may nonetheless be well with our soul." God often uses sadness to shape our hearts and souls in beneficial ways.

QUESTION 4

- Why would the author think sadness is good for our hearts?

Remind your group of Ecclesiastes 3, quoted earlier. If there is a season for everything, it means we can't look to happiness or prosperity for meaning in our lives, because those things are fleeting. Sadness forces us to examine what our priorities and convictions are in the worst of times, and in doing so we can see the state of our hearts, and how badly we need to surrender our hearts to God. His presence and love are unchanging.

QUESTION 5

- Can you think of a time when sadness has proven to be good for your heart?

This is a discussion question, an opportunity for the group to share experiences.

QUESTION 6

- What do you think the author is saying about pleasure and pain in this passage?

Pain is clearly shown as a path to wisdom here, and wisdom is shown to be of more value than pleasure. Pleasure makes us feel good, but pain is often more valuable in shaping our lives.

QUESTION 7

- Which is more important to you: being happy or being wise?

This discussion question can have any variety of answers, but you may want to bring the discussion back to Ecclesiastes 3. If there is a time and a season for everything, it means that happiness isn't permanent in this life—but it also means happiness has a place in this life. In other words, the author isn't saying we can't be happy if we choose to pursue wisdom; instead, he's urging us to prioritize wisdom over happiness when we are unable to have both.

QUESTION 8

- Is it easy for you to view God as the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, as Paul says in 2 Corinthians? Why or why not?

This is a discussion question.

QUESTION 9

- Is there anything that you feel gets in the way of you receiving comfort from God?

This is a discussion question.

QUESTION 10

- According to Paul, how is God’s comfort to us related to how we comfort others?

God comforts us in our troubles so that we can comfort others with the comfort we ourselves receive from him.

QUESTION 11

- Based on what we’ve discussed today, what kind of value do you think our suffering has?

Ecclesiastes argues that our suffering brings us wisdom. Paul would say suffering creates an opportunity to receive comfort from God and then give it to others.

QUESTION 12

- How can your suffering bring comfort to you and others around you today?

This is a discussion question that will lead into prayer ministry.

PRAYER MINISTRY

- Lead the group in a time of prayer, followed by a time of waiting on the Lord for several minutes. Encourage the group to pray that God would reveal two things:
 - Areas of their life in which they are currently avoiding their pain and suffering.
 - Areas of their life in which they can be a comfort to someone else.

After the prayer and waiting has ended, give the group an opportunity to share what they heard from the Lord, but don’t make sharing mandatory. Encourage your group to pray about these two areas throughout the coming week, and also to make note of what God reveals to them. When you meet again, make time for the group to share the results of their prayer.

- Take time to comfort one another. If you’re able to break down into groups of two or three, have each person share a way in which they’re in need of comfort, and then have the person who shared receive prayer from the rest of the breakout group. If your group meets via video chat and is unable to break into smaller groups, you can pray as a large group for any members in need of comfort. Whether in one large group or many breakout groups, encourage your members to comfort through shared experience—for instance, if somebody is struggling with the isolation brought on by the global pandemic, there will likely be others in the group who are also experiencing that isolation and can relate, commiserate, or reassure. Let the Spirit lead you as you lead your group, and make sure that prayer is a component of whatever you decide to do.

Note: This study was written as an act of service by Jason Dutton.