

How the Shifting Patterns of Your Life
Reveal His Purposes for You

the SEASONS
of GOD

RICHARD
BLACKABY

The SEASONS
of GOD

How the Shifting Patterns of Your Life
Reveal His Purposes for You

RICHARD
BLACKABY



MULTNOMAH
BOOKS

THE SEASONS OF GOD

PUBLISHED BY MULTNOMAH BOOKS

12265 Oracle Boulevard, Suite 200

Colorado Springs, Colorado 80921

All Scripture quotations, unless otherwise indicated, are taken from the New King James Version®. Copyright © 1982 by Thomas Nelson Inc. Used by permission. All rights reserved. Scripture quotations marked (ESV) are taken from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version, copyright © 2001 by Crossway Bibles, a division of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved. Scripture quotations marked (NASB) are taken from the New American Standard Bible®. © Copyright The Lockman Foundation 1960, 1962, 1963, 1968, 1971, 1972, 1973, 1975, 1977, 1995. Used by permission. (www.Lockman.org).

Italics in Scripture quotations reflect the author's added emphasis.

ISBN 978-1-59052-942-3

ISBN 978-1-60142-418-1 (electronic)

Copyright © 2012 by Richard Blackaby

Cover design by Kelly L. Howard

Published in association with the literary agency of Wolgemuth & Associates, Inc.

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying and recording, or by any information storage and retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publisher.

Published in the United States by WaterBrook Multnomah, an imprint of the Crown Publishing Group, a division of Random House Inc., New York.

MULTNOMAH and its mountain colophon are registered trademarks of Random House Inc.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

[text to come]

Printed in the United States of America

2012—First Edition

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

SPECIAL SALES

Most WaterBrook Multnomah books are available at special quantity discounts when purchased in bulk by corporations, organizations, and special-interest groups. Custom imprinting or excerpting can also be done to fit special needs. For information, please e-mail SpecialMarkets@WaterBrookMultnomah.com or call 1-800-603-7051.



*To my wife, Lisa,
who has made experiencing each new season
a joy and an adventure!*

CONTENTS

| | |
|---------------------------|----|
| Acknowledgments | xi |
|---------------------------|----|

PART ONE: EMBRACING THE PATTERN

| | |
|---|----|
| 1 Finding Our Bearings | 3 |
| 2 Making the Rounds | 16 |
| 3 Ten Laws of the Seasons of Life | 24 |
| 4 Benefits of a Seasonal Perspective | 42 |
| 5 Strengthening Your Seasonal Perspective | 57 |

PART TWO: EMBRACING EACH SEASON

| | |
|---|-----|
| 6 Spring: The Time of Beginnings | 65 |
| 7 Spring and Our Identity | 78 |
| 8 Our Relationships in Spring | 86 |
| 9 Our Roles in Spring | 92 |
| 10 Spring and Our Faith | 100 |
| 11 Summer: The Time for Work and Growth | 107 |
| 12 Summer and Our Identity | 122 |
| 13 Our Relationships in Summer | 127 |
| 14 Our Roles in Summer | 138 |
| 15 Summer and Our Faith | 142 |
| 16 Autumn: Harvest Time | 147 |
| 17 Autumn and Our Identity | 155 |
| 18 Our Relationships in Autumn | 160 |
| 19 Our Roles in Autumn | 170 |
| 20 Autumn and Our Faith | 176 |

| | | |
|---|------------------------------------|-----|
| 21 | Winter: The Time of Endings | 182 |
| 22 | Winter and Our Identity | 192 |
| 23 | Our Relationships in Winter | 196 |
| 24 | Our Roles in Winter | 200 |
| 25 | Winter and Our Faith | 206 |
| PART THREE: THRIVING IN ALL OUR SEASONS | | |
| 26 | Holding Our Seasons Together | 219 |
| 27 | Three Keys | 227 |
| 28 | With Joy Comes Laughter | 238 |
| 29 | Reclaiming Lost Seasons | 247 |
| | Notes | 255 |

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Winston Churchill, himself a prolific author, once declared, “Writing a book is an adventure. To begin with, it is a toy and an amusement. Then it becomes a mistress, and then it becomes a master, then a tyrant. The last phase is that just as you are about to be reconciled to your servitude, you kill the monster and fling him out to the public.”

This project has provided me a greater appreciation for Churchill’s observation. Writing this book required significant thought and reflection, demanding that I look from an entirely new vantage point at a subject I assumed was sublimely familiar. Perhaps the greatest challenge associated with tackling this theme was its broad scope. It’s about *life*—from birth to death—and that’s a wide swath to cut. The seasons are familiar yet filled with mystery. I assumed I was dealing with the obvious, yet the next moment I uncovered a fresh insight that caught me entirely by surprise. I found that looking at life from a fresh perspective is challenging but also infinitely rewarding, and I trust it will be that way for you also.

Throughout the course of writing, I’ve been enormously encouraged and ably assisted by numerous talented (and long-suffering) people.

My wife, Lisa, has been my faithful support and inspiration. She has worked tirelessly to add laughter into the life of her hopelessly task-oriented husband. She also has been indentured to me for three decades as my chief editor and supportive critic.

Special thanks also to my beautiful daughter, Carrie. This is the first book to which she has applied her considerable editing skills, and it has given me renewed confidence in what an English degree from college can do.

I’m immensely grateful to Mike and Daniel for allowing me to share

their struggles and foibles. They're nothing if not transparent. With them, I don't even have to exaggerate!

Special thanks also to Terry Milne Osgood, who graciously applied her impressive analytical mind to these pages and offered so many insightful comments.

To my parents, who despite numerous adversities and financial challenges, provided me a home that resounded with laughter: Thank you, Mom and Dad. It's been a great journey!

Finally, thanks to Thomas Womack for his considerable and insightful editing skills and to Ken Petersen of WaterBrook Multnomah Publishing Group for his patience and wisdom. It has been my pleasure working with you!

PART ONE

EMBRACING
the PATTERN



FINDING OUR BEARINGS



Are you sure you should be reading this book? I mean, right here, right this moment?

Now, to be honest, I'm fairly confident your best answer to that question is yes—maybe even “Yes, *absolutely!*” I asked because, you see, this book explores something that involves getting your *timing* right for all you do and where you do it. It's about being free to really enjoy what you're doing and where you're doing it—and to make the most of every experience.

Let me picture it for you.

HOW DID I GET HERE?

My son Daniel has given our family numerous reasons to chuckle. Often he makes us laugh so hard our sides hurt. He's that kind of guy.

For instance, there was that time in Hawaii. I'd been the president of a graduate school in Canada for ten years when the board of trustees surprised me. Wanting to thank me for the school's progress, they voted to send my wife and me to Hawaii. Living in Alberta, we faced January temperatures plunging to minus-forty degrees, so we enthusiastically accepted the board's generous expression of appreciation.

My three teenage children soon approached me with a grave concern. They feared we couldn't possibly enjoy ourselves all alone in the tropics, knowing that they were shivering back home in the Arctic air, parentless.

The next thing I knew, they were coming too, and our all-expenses-paid, romantic getaway became an exorbitant family odyssey.

The day we flew out of Calgary, the mercury was sitting at minus twenty-eight. Long hours later upon landing in Lihue, Kauai, we were greeted by temperatures in the seventies. We rented a car and drove to our lodging. In under a minute our pale-skinned, sun-starved offspring dashed into our beachfront town house and emerged in their swimming attire, ready for action. With nary a comment such as "Dad, is there anything we can do to help?" they sprinted to the beach.

Jet-lagged and famished, I found the nearest grocery store and stocked up on essential food supplies, including copious amounts of snacks for my freeloading teens. Lisa began nesting—sorting the bedding and assigning rooms.

Finally my wife and I trudged wearily to the beach. Daniel greeted us cheerfully. "Did you get any good food? I'm starving!" I hastily assured him I had no intention of making him lunch but that the patio door to our town house was unlocked and there was now a plethora of overpriced groceries awaiting him.

He meandered back to the town house and discovered, much to his delight, a bountiful supply of all his favorite junk food—Double Stuf Oreo cookies, nacho chips, and plenty more. He voraciously ripped open a bag of cookies and popped the tab on a can of Coke.

Flopping happily onto the couch in his soaking-wet swimsuit, my son parked his sand-covered feet on the coffee table. Spewing all manner of crumbs and debris as he inhaled his snacks, he flipped on the television and... *Could it be? ESPN? A hockey game?* Life did not get any better!

He sighed in contentment and surveyed his surroundings. To his

right he could see ocean waves lazily rolling in. In his lap lay the food of the gods. Before him a large-screen TV featured his most beloved sport.

And emerging to his left—a scowling stranger clad in only a towel.

It was at that precise moment Daniel realized *he was in the wrong town house!*

“How did I get here?” our embarrassed son wondered on that lazy, tropical day. He’d been minding his own business, enjoying what life placed before him, and simply trying to satisfy his appetite.

Now, in and of itself, that particular town house was by no means an inappropriate environment for Daniel. And it’s easy to imagine a situation in which nothing at all would be wrong about his being there. As a fun-to-have-around guy, Daniel might have eventually met that stranger’s family on the beach and received an invitation to drop by (along with his parents and siblings, I like to think). Or, on a repeat vacation to Hawaii (one can hope!), that town house might actually become the one rented by our family.

But on that particular day, those were *not* the governing circumstances. And so, to his horror, Daniel discovered that he wasn’t where he thought he was or wanted to be—and he certainly wasn’t wanted where he was!

Life can be like that sometimes. We can get our bearings confused and misunderstand the cues coming from our environment.

THE ISSUE

For Daniel, his misunderstanding resulted in his having to bolt out a patio door in serpentine fashion, mumbling apologies along the way. But for the larger and more profound misunderstanding that pertains to this book’s topic, the consequences can be tragic.

It’s an oversight that can fill our outlook on life with confusion, doubt, and stress. *How did this happen?* we end up asking ourselves. *Why*

am I here? What brought me to this point? Am I stuck in this mess forever?

Our situation seems so far from what we planned, what we expected, what we hoped. How did all that slip away?

Relationships, jobs, and opportunities that began with such promise can degenerate into lethargy, disappointment, regret, and even bitterness.

Ultimately, this huge misconception I'm speaking of can lead to wasted months, lost years—even a squandered life.

It can play out like this:

- A young husband and wife grow disillusioned about their marriage; their bliss once held eternal promise but now seems crushed under the suffocating weight of unmet expectations.
- A mother and father are bewildered by their adolescent son's anger and rebellion; the child they loved as a preschooler, who gave them so much love and joy in return, has become a stranger.
- A woman in her fifties wrestles with the depressing awareness that certain dreams, cherished since her youth, may never find fulfillment.
- A man in his thirties languishes in a difficult job, but the worst struggle of all happens every morning as he searches for a compelling motivation to embrace the day.
- An executive who has achieved tremendous success in his career now reaches the sickening realization that his ambition cost him his family.
- A talented and personable young woman who once enjoyed setting enthusiastic goals for herself now finds that she's bored with life.

How do we prevent those scenarios?

Can they be avoided?

An invaluable part of the answer is to better recognize the proper flow of our lives from God's perspective—and, in particular, to catch the

God-designed seasonal rhythms that underlie His plans for us, in everything we do.

TOTAL COVERAGE

Probably the most famous Scripture passage that addresses this issue is found in Ecclesiastes 3, beginning with the well-known words “To everything there is a *season*, a *time* for every purpose under heaven.” This and the following lines are a favorite passage for many, filled with that attractive mix of the familiar and the mysterious that so often gives memorable poetry its greatness and power.

To step back a little for a bigger view, you may recall how the book of Ecclesiastes paints a broad-stroke portrait of “everything that is done *under the sun*” (1:14, ESV)—that is, of life’s reality as considered especially from a this-world, here-and-now perspective.

I’m sure you also remember from the creation account in Genesis 1 that the sun is described there as the “greater light” among the heavenly beacons God created as markers “for signs and *seasons*, and for days and years” (verses 14, 16). So as far back as the opening page of Scripture, we see the *seasons* as a dynamic, God-ordained feature of life on earth.

This leads us to something we learned in science class at school—how the earth’s tilt on its axis is what allows the sun’s influence to bring about the seasons we experience. During our planet’s yearly orbit around the sun, the Northern Hemisphere warms up as it swings around and faces the sun more directly (reaching a peak in June); six months later it’s the Southern Hemisphere’s turn to do the same, leaving the northern regions to chill.

Maybe you’ve wondered about this. Exactly *why* did the Creator set it up this way and divide the year into seasons? Since the Bible emphasizes that God made the earth “good” (as we’re told seven times in Genesis 1), why didn’t He simply set the earth’s thermostat to a comfortable room

temperature and create a greenhouse effect year round? Why include dramatic climatic changes throughout each year, from bitter cold in the dead of winter to sweltering heat during summer? As a dad who's bankrolling a fashion-conscious daughter, I'm fully aware of the expense of maintaining separate wardrobes to accommodate four rotating seasons!

Of course, not every region of the world has four clearly distinct seasons. The Arctic and Antarctica never warm up because their latitudes are too extreme; seasons there are identified by the amount of sunlight they receive, or the lack thereof. In regions closest to the equator, where the earth's tilt is hardly noticeable, temperatures stay fairly constant, and seasons are more typically thought of as wet or dry (though even these rainfall patterns are ultimately affected by the sun's influence and the earth's tilt).

Moreover, because oceans warm up and cool off at different rates than dry land does, islands and coastal regions tend to have much more moderate seasonal changes than inland areas do. Related to this is the fact that the Northern Hemisphere has larger land masses than the Southern Hemisphere has, bringing differences in how the seasons are experienced in the north and the south. (All of which means...if you're reading this while living in a South Atlantic beach house near the tip of Argentina, you might have to take my word for some things.)

By now I've taxed the limits of my scientific pedagogical abilities. (I passed high school physics only because I was astute enough to recruit a brilliant lab partner.) My overall point here is simply this: God intentionally, right from the start, built change and variety into creation, and the upshot for you and me is that *things don't stay the same*. God loves order, but He also delights in diversity; He therefore combined the two when He created the earth.

And so, when we push farther into the Bible and reach Ecclesiastes, where we come across that repeated phrase "under the sun," we already have an awareness of these God-designed, sun-triggered seasonal features in the background of our existence.

EASILY FORGOTTEN

Let's focus again on that evocative passage in Ecclesiastes 3, beginning with the first eight verses. Read these lines carefully:

To everything there is a season,
A time for every purpose under heaven:

A time to be born,
 And a time to die;
A time to plant,
 And a time to pluck 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;
A time to embrace,
 And a time to refrain from embracing;
A time to gain,
 And a time to lose;
A time to keep,
 And a time to throw 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 of war,
And a time of peace. (3:1–8)

On the face of it, the passage seems pretty straightforward: at various points in time, different stuff happens. *Of course. So what?*

Or, if you're in a gloomier frame of mind, you might be tempted to see here "the tyranny of time," as one Old Testament scholar describes it:

We throw ourselves into some absorbing activity which offers us fulfillment, but how freely did we choose it? How soon shall we be doing the exact opposite? Perhaps our choices are no freer than our responses to winter and summer, childhood and old age, dictated by the march of time and of unbidden change. Looked at this way, the repetition of "a time...and a time..." begins to be oppressive.¹

But few of us, I suspect, respond to these lines that way, especially when we apply some sensitive reflection. In fact, as simple as the subject may seem on the surface, for thousands of years this passage has captivated human hearts. And it continues to do so because its message is, in reality, deeply profound. Our hearts instantly perceive (perhaps subconsciously) that this is a message we all too easily lose touch with. Here's something we know in the core of our being to be essentially true, a precious certainty, yet we forget it oh so quickly, to our detriment.

That message is stated straightforwardly in the opening lines: everything in our lives has a season, an appropriate time—not in some random way but in a manner that's charged with purpose. Which means we're to recognize "human experience as a tapestry woven of 'times,'" as another Bible scholar expresses it.

To further impress the message on our hearts and minds and to help

us realize how it covers life's totality, the author of Ecclesiastes goes on to express our human activities and experiences in fourteen contrasting pairs (that's twice times seven—the Bible's symbolic number for perfection or completion).

The expressions appear to mix both literal and metaphorical meanings. Birth and death, weeping and laughing, mourning and dancing—these seem clear enough. “A time to break down, and a time to build up” can easily remind us that “there are simply times in life for construction and times for dismantling” in a variety of endeavors.

A few expressions in the passage are more obscure to us today, like “a time to cast away stones, and a time to gather stones” (3:5). The Hebrew word here for “stone” can be used for precious stones, so it's possible that this phrase “concerns the accumulation and distribution of wealth.” It could have the general meaning that there are times in life when we gather and other times when we disperse. Following up on that, the focus of the next line—“a time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing”—“may well allude to the embracing of wealth.” This in turn might carry over to what comes next: “a time to gain, and a time to lose” may represent “the acquisitive search for wealth and its loss”—with the thought then completed in the next line: “a time to keep, and a time to throw away.”

That interpretation is reinforced by the strong and clear cautions against materialistic “gain” or “profit” that we read throughout Ecclesiastes (as in 1:3; 2:11; and 5:16). And it's brought up here in chapter 3 in the verse that immediately follows our list of fourteen pairs: “What profit has the worker from that in which he labors?” (verse 9). Apparently one thing the author of Ecclesiastes strongly wants us to grasp from this list is that a seasonal perspective on life helps us guard against the kind of existence that becomes consumed with amassing possessions and wealth. That's reason enough to start thinking more seasonally!

Meanwhile the lines that come later in the list appear to focus more on relationships—our conversations, loving and hating, conflict and

peace. (Even “a time to tear, and a time to sew” may serve as a picture of breaking off or mending relationships.) Our friendships and other personal associations and even the things we say to one another—all of it, like all of life, is intended to be seen in light of seasonal considerations.

AND IT'S BEAUTIFUL!

Reinforcing his message, the author of Ecclesiastes goes on to tell us this about God: “He has made everything beautiful *in its time*” (3:11). Our ability to taste life’s experiences *at their best* is governed by their seasonality. At the right time they’re not just pleasant or convenient but something far better; they’re actually *beautiful*—beautifully appropriate, beautifully satisfying for us. A perfect fit!

This passage helps us “to see perpetual change not as something unsettling but as an unfolding pattern, scintillating and God-given.” We might suppose we’d prefer a permanently stable life with fixed and comfortable routines, but “there is something better... Instead of frozen perfection there is the kaleidoscopic movement of innumerable processes, each with its own character and period of blossoming and ripening, beautiful in its time and contributing to the over-all masterpiece which is the work of one Creator.”

We’re all capable—to some degree, at least—of appreciating this seasonally unfolding beauty because of something else God has done, which this same verse declares: “He has put eternity in their hearts, except that no one can find out the work that God does from beginning to end” (3:11). The eternity in our hearts lets us start glimpsing here and now the perspective we’ll gain to the full only when we have the vantage point of heaven.

But the point is, we *can* start grasping it now. And that makes all the difference in the world.

It enables us to do what Ecclesiastes 3 immediately instructs its readers to do: “to *rejoice*, and to *do good* in their lives, and also that every

man should eat and drink and *enjoy* the good of all his labor—it is the gift of God” (3:12–13). The Bible intends for people to live life with gusto!

THE SEASONAL ULTIMATE

There’s a great deal more in this third chapter of Ecclesiastes that’s well worth our attention, but let’s consider just one thing further. The seasonal theme will be repeated once more in this chapter, this time in the context of *the* most important issues of our lives—sin and judgment and ultimately our salvation in Christ.

The author of Ecclesiastes looked around him at situations where justice and righteousness should be evident, only to observe that “wickedness was there” and “iniquity was there” (verse 16). Maybe he was thinking about courtrooms, government halls, and the marketplace, or maybe he thought primarily of the human heart. Or all the above. Evil was everywhere.

But he did not despair over this; he went on: “I said in my heart, ‘God shall judge the righteous and the wicked, for *there is a time...for every purpose and for every work*’” (3:17). Even when injustice and corruption appear unhindered in their pollution, a seasonal perspective enables us to hold on to God’s hope. He *will*, in His perfect timing, make things right—preparing the way for the triumph of every good purpose and every good work.

The believer in Christ knows something here that Old Testament saints could glimpse only faintly: the ultimate good purposes and good works mentioned here will find their glorious fulfillment in Jesus and His gospel.

Even that was profoundly a matter of correct timing. It’s “when the fullness of the time had come” that God sent Jesus into our world (Galatians 4:4)—this Jesus who came to die for us “at the right time” (Romans 5:6, ESV).

THE FULL SCOPE

This brings us to a sweeping conclusion: every aspect of our lives is governed by the ebb and flow of seasons.

That's why the truths you'll find in this book are so important. In the following pages you may gain an entirely new, fresh, and exciting way to view and understand your life.

As the chapters unfold, we'll take a look at "Ten Laws of the Seasons of Life" (chapter 3). We'll examine the particular benefits you can gain from sharpening your seasonal antenna ("Benefits of a Seasonal Perspective," chapter 4). We'll look at specific arenas of life where the seasonal perspective is especially important ("Strengthening Your Seasonal Perspective," chapter 5). Then we'll begin surveying, one by one, each of the four different seasons and see how they uniquely affect you and what promises they hold for you in each phase of your life.

But first... to help you gain a better feel for an outlook on life that may initially seem strange to you, join me in a brief retro journey through some seasons I've passed through.

REFLECT AND RESPOND

1. On a scale of one to ten, how highly would you rate your satisfaction with your life right now? What would it take to elevate your living to a higher level? What is preventing you from doing that?
2. What is your favorite season in nature? Why is that?
3. Why do you think God delights so much in diversity—as reflected in the earth's seasonal changes as well as in many other aspects of creation? Does your life reflect the diversity and change God built into nature?