

Day 3

Barrenness



Individual Reflection

Ecclesiastes 1:2 HEVEL of HEVEL says the Teacher. HEVEL of HEVEL. Everything is HEVEL.

HEVEL is a Hebrew word used over and over again (38 times to be exact) in the book of Ecclesiastes. "HEVEL" is commonly translated as vanity, meaningless, vapor, or smoke. It can also mean breath or nonsense. The main speaker in Ecclesiastes seems to use it in an understanding of life's unclear, constant reshaping characteristic. Like smoke or vapor, it looks solid, until you reach to grasp or hold it. The main speaker in Ecclesiastes goes deep and wide into this understanding of how fleeting our actions and efforts, and even lives are. Not can be, but *are*. It is not to undervalue the deep richness and sacredness of the gift of life or our best efforts, but it simply zooms out on our life and displays the vastness of time and acknowledges how one day, time, and everything with it, will march right on past us.

It can be dark and lonely to reflect on this understanding of the world. Similarly, dark times in our lives can have a unique way of bringing about this sort of understanding, this realization, that things change. Things change for the better and for the worse. Everything changes, and not just in a slight modification or alteration, but eventually, all that we know will be different, and all that we care about will fade into things unrecognizable to us, and then vanish with little to no trace. Just like the smoke from a campfire fades, so will everything, literally everything.

This uncomfortable and dark place to be is not void of meaning ironically. It brings about a new understanding, new awareness. The gifts we have today will not last forever. They may last another day, or another decade, but they will not last forever and we don't have much control over that at all.

In those dark times, in those seasons of barrenness we know this best, or better said, hardest. When disaster strikes, when plans evaporate, when the floor of our lives falls through we begin to see just how much like vapor and smoke things around us are.

All that said...

All is NOT lost. Even in the seasons of barrenness that are as cold as winter and yet as blistering as the desert. All is not lost in these seasons, and there is plenty to learn in the dryness. In the barrenness, the underwhelming loneliness of sleeping trees and unpresent wildlife, there is grace.

The last verses (12:13-14) of Ecclesiastes reads:

The end of the matter; all has been heard. Fear God, and keep his commandments; for that is the whole duty of everyone. For God will bring every deed into judgement, including every secret thing, whether good or evil.

You see, the season of winter is not the end, it is not a punishment, it is not a time when God abandons us. A spiritual season of barrenness is a place on the journey we find ourselves now and again that provides its own insight into what things look like at the end of their time. This season can be a time to reflect on these things, and a time to begin preparing to prepare our hearts for the bloom of a new thing as we hold life and all its intricacies with an open hand and a grateful heart.

Response

- 1) Be honest with yourself. Make a list of the things you worry, stress, and spend time thinking about and write them down.
- 2) Take a moment to look at your list. Begin to separate and organize them into what matters most and least to you on this list. Which ones matter at all? Which ones don't? Pray about them and work towards giving them over to God, the One who will not change on you.

What matters to me?

Small Group Discussion

Materials Needed

- A tarp, blanket, or some sort of big cloth rectangle that everyone can fit on.
- Enough blindfolds for everyone
- Friends!

Matthew 14:16-19

Jesus Said to them, "They need not go away, you give them something to eat." They replied, "We have nothing here but five loaves of bread and two fish." Then he ordered the crowds to sit down on the grass. Taking the five loaves and the two fish, he looked up to heaven, and blessed and broke the loaves, and gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the crowds.

Imagine all the good that would not have been able to happen that day if the disciples were not willing to listen to a seemingly unreasonable request from Jesus. But because they knew Jesus, and because they knew the character of Jesus they could put their faith into Jesus and let their actions follow through.

- 1) Randomly select one youth to read the rest of the directions and be the leader. For an extra challenge, don't let the participants know what the goal is.
- 2) Have all the participants close their eyes and then move them on to a tarp or blanket flattened out.
- 3) Guide them and move them around in an attempt to flip the tarp over but DO NOT let them step off the tarp. If anyone steps off they have to restart. Remember to keep your eyes closed! Only the leader may have their eyes open.
- 4) No one is allowed to talk except for the leader and no one is allowed to move without the guidance of the leader.

This activity is complete when the tarp is fully turned around and back in a neat rectangle but on the opposite side that it started with.

Debrief questions

How did it feel to have to listen to the leader?

How did it feel to not be able to see what was going on?

How did it feel to be the leader?

What was easy? What was hard?

Does it ever feel like you're playing this game with Jesus?

Worship Outline

Supplies Needed

- Call & Response sheets
- Music playing device/speaker

Gathering

Psalm 42:1-3 (The Voice) reads:

My soul is dry and thirsts for You, True God,
as a deer thirsts for water.

I long for the True God who lives.
When can I stand before Him and feel His comfort?

Right now I'm overwhelmed by my sorrow and pain;
I can't stop feasting on my tears.
People crowd around me and say,
"Where is your True God whom you claim will save?"

In seasons of barrenness, we can feel drained, dry, and beaten down. We yearn for God's love and comfort. As we begin worship, reflect on the ways in which God has given you comfort during difficult seasons of your life.

Call & Response

Leader: God, where are you?

People: We know you are here but it is hard to feel your presence right now.

Leader: God, why?

People: We know you are good but it is hard to understand that right now.

Leader: God, help.

People: We know you care but it is hard to be patient and see that right now.

All: We feel spent, tired, and cold. God find us here and hold us close.

Music Suggestions

10,000 Reasons by Matt Redman

All the Poor and Powerless by All Sons & Daughters

Do It Again by Elevation Worship

Message

Watch here: <https://youtu.be/YZXYuGs1IbQ>

Sneak peek: Have you ever been in a season of winter and felt like God has hurled you into darkness, loneliness, and difficulty? It is in these seasons of barrenness that we have no choice but to listen. When we stop and listen for God's voice, He will provide for us. Jonah remained steadfast in his faith and kept his eyes and ears on God. When he prayed, God answered. When he called out in distress, the Lord lifted him from the pit.

Time of Prayer

We now invite you to spend time alone with God. Reflect on your relationship with the Lord: what season are you currently in? If you are in a time of barrenness or struggle, ask God for guidance, hope, and comfort.

Play music quietly as you allow a few minutes to pass for silent individual prayer. After some time, you may fade out the music and move into small group/partner prayer.

Please turn to one or two people sitting near you. Openly share with one another any difficult emotions, situations, or prayer requests you have at this time. This is a time to find strength in each other and build a supportive community. We encourage you to pray aloud for one another, or you may pray silently for your partner as you are comfortable.

Again, play music quietly as you allow a few minutes to pass for partner prayer. After some time, you may fade the music and invite the community to utilize the prayer stations, continue partner/group prayer, or return to individual prayer.

Even when we feel alone, we will always have God there to support and guide us. Leaders/staff will now be available to pray over you. Please go to them as you feel lead. You may also continue a time of worship and reflection in your small groups or on your own.

This will be the longest time of prayer; play music quietly as you have done the past two times. As the group seems to be finishing up, once again fade out the music. It is okay if a few people are still continuing individual or small group prayer.

Benediction

Romans 5:1-5 (NIV) reads:

Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand. And we boast in the hope of the glory of God. Not only so, but we also glory in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope. And hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us.

Our troubles and seasons of barrenness are necessary for us to grow in faith and strength. They are not easy to go through, but God has prepared us to take on any challenge with Him. We must anticipate God's grace and hope through all seasons.