

"When Winter Comes"

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 Title: When Winter Comes and the Sovereignty of God
 Text:
 Theme: The control of God sustains us during the winter seasons of life.
 Introduction:

Why am I teaching this?

I received this email from one of my former students. Listen carefully and see if you do not hear your own voice whispering these same thoughts.

I guess I really miss that super spiritual atmosphere of college where people were talking God-talk all over campus. It set the bar too high, and I can't keep up the feeding level that I had back then. I am like the sluggard you read about in Proverbs who realizes they are starving but doesn't take the initiative to raise their hand to their mouth. The biggest spiritual intake I have had recently has been through CCM. I always feel super rebuked when I hear those songs and think of where I was in college and all the ministry I was involved in and how now I feel like God has set me on a shelf - like he did with Saul in the OT, but I don't want it to make me bitter like it did to him. I want to keep the faith and keep fighting a good fight, but find myself without leadership. Again - I am getting to my ropes end with the single life. I am not like Paul who preferred single life.

I miss my home church and I know that they are praying for me, especially the kids, but this is my third year over here and this year things have just been harder. Not as far as work goes, but just inward struggles. I am turning 26 and feeling like an old maid, and I just spend 3 weeks in a [foreign] hospital where I had 2 surgeries, and I don't have anyone set up in leadership over me right now but God and He doesn't seem to be doing anything. I feel like I am running a holding pattern. I am busy, but bored. I am working, but unchallenged. I am spiritually alive as a positional truth, but can't find an outlet to express it or share it with others. Can you relate to my frustrations?

I presume that as a pastor there is nothing new under the Sun, and that there is nothing happening to me that have not happened to thousands of others behind me. I know that. I guess I just need some encouragement to keep on keeping on, and to keep clinging to the positional truths and ignoring the discouragements of this world knowing that once it is over this vapor of life was all according to His perfect will anyway. I know what you preach, and I know 100% that it is true and accurate according to the Bible, but it doesn't stop the hungers, the thirsts, and the desires that come with life on this earth.

Every believer has gone through periods when they simply do not have the motivation to read their Bible, pray, or even want to attend church. Listen to the words of the Psalmist.

What is the biblical idea?

Psalm 42:1 as the deer pants for the water brooks, so my soul pants for You, O God. 2 My soul thirsts for God, for the living God; when shall I come and appear before God? 3 My tears have been my food day and night, while they say to me all day long, "Where is your God?" 10 As a shattering of my bones, my adversaries revile me, while they say to me all day long, "Where is your God?" 11 Why are you in despair, O my soul? And why have you become disturbed within me? Hope in God, for I shall yet praise Him, The help of my countenance and my God.

Psalm 63:1 O God, You are my God; I shall seek you earnestly; my soul thirsts for you, my flesh yearns for you, in a dry and weary land where there is no water. 2 Thus I have seen you in the sanctuary, to see your power and your glory. 8 My soul clings to you; your right hand upholds me.

Many times Christians find themselves in an emotional desert. We refer to this as spiritual dryness only because it relates to the spiritual aspect of our being. But what exactly is going on and how are we to view these periods in our life?

For those of us in the Midwest we are very much accustomed to the 4 seasons of the year. Winter is that season of the year where everything lies dormant and appears dead and unyielding. The two bookends to winter's tenure are the seasons of transitions; fall and spring. Fall leads us into winter and spring leads us out of winter. Summer is somewhat enigmatic. Because of our present schooling year, summer becomes a time of family vacations, cook-outs and visitation.

I enjoy the seasons. Each one makes me glad for the other three. In the summer I look forward to winter and in the winter I look forward to the summer.

One of the tremendous beauties in our seasons is the changing of the leaves. Many in the Mid-West take time out to run up North for the changing of the colors. Even here in our own communities we find the color of the leaves breath-taking.

We have come to appreciate the colorful Maple tree. The Maple leaf turns bright red and yellow and ignites the entire landscape with its transitory beauty. Within a few short weeks all of its leaves will fall away and it will stand as a naked sentinel over the snow covered ground. Its life seems all but gone. Nothing appears to move from either within or without. Yet soon enough spring happens and new life is brought forth.

It is at the end of the winter season and before full spring that the Maple tree yields its sugary treasure of Maple syrup.

The Christian life is very much like the Maple tree and its seasonal life cycle. All of us have a fall where our leaves begin to drop off and we enter a period of time that appears to be barren and unfruitful. The winter months of life are often preceded by a brilliant display of activity.

Yet how are we to understand our winter seasons? Winter can be a time of tremendous dryness. Our skin cracks and flacks and moisture is crucial during this period of time. We become depressed and we struggle against this season of the year.

When I find myself struggling spiritually and/or emotionally drained, how am I to find comfort and rest? The issue for me is making sure I understand what is happening in my life from the perspective of God and not that of my circumstances or feelings.

Over the next several Sunday's I desire to address this idea of the winter season and the means of resting in it. There are four areas that I will address at this time. It is a topic I hope to speak on every six months.

1. The Sovereignty of God. Where is God in the midst of this? Has He absented Himself from these moments of the winter season?
2. The Sacrifice and Satisfaction of Christ. What has He done in my behalf and is it enough or do I need more?
3. The Supplication of the Holy Spirit. Is He right now unconditionally ministering in my behalf?
4. The Sufficiency of Scripture. Do the Scriptures have an intrinsic value that benefits the reader?

Today, I would like to address the issue of God's Sovereignty and the winter seasons of life.

James McDonald pastor of Harvest Bible Chapel in Rolling Meadows, Illinois provides this pastoral observation concerning the sovereignty of God.

God's sovereignty is first painful, then slowly powerful, and only over much time seen to be profitable. (James MacDonald, Gripped by the Greatness of God, 66).

I. The Sovereignty of God is necessary to His existence.

"God's display of His sovereignty is scary sometimes, but only because it's so not like us. Sovereignty is all about being God." (James MacDonald, Gripped by the Greatness of God, 68).

There are two conclusions this statement has as we note His sovereignty being necessary to His existence.

A. God has no equal

Exodus 8:10 Then he said, "Tomorrow." So he said, "May it be according to your word, that you may know that there is no one like the LORD our God.

Exodus 9:14 "For this time I will send all My plagues on you and your servants and your people, so that you may know that there is no one like Me in all the earth.

Nothing created compares to God. Man is like God in that he bears His image, but man is not God.

B. God has no superior

Isaiah 45:5 "I am the LORD, and there is no other; Besides Me there is no God. I will gird you, though you have not known Me;

Isaiah 46:9 "Remember the former things long past, For I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is no one like Me, 10 Declaring the end from the beginning, And from ancient times things which have not been done, Saying, 'My purpose will be established, And I will accomplish all My good pleasure';

In saying man has no equal it can be equally said that God has no superior. There is no authority over God. God's purposes can never be trumped.

Romans 9:18 So then He has mercy on whom He desires, and He hardens whom He desires. 19 You will say to me then, "Why does He still find fault? For who resists His will?" 20 On the contrary, who are you, O man, who answers back to God? The thing molded will not say to the molder, "Why did you make me like this," will it? 21 Or does not the potter have a right over the clay, to make from the same lump one vessel for honorable use and another for common use?

And although God will not be understood fully by finite man neither can He be challenged. "God is able to do *whatever* He pleases *whenever* He wishes." (James MacDonald, Gripped by the Greatness of God, 68).

Psalm 115:3 But our God is in the heavens; He does whatever He pleases.

Psalm 135:6 Whatever the LORD pleases, He does, In heaven and in earth, in the seas and in all deeps.

God has no competitor. "What God plans, He delivers. What God wants, God gets – His way and His timing, on time, every time." (James MacDonald, Gripped by the Greatness of God, 69).

II. The Sovereignty of God assures me that man's choices are meaningful and necessary.

"God is the ruler of the universe, and He is the king of human history. *Nothing* happens in this world by chance." (James MacDonald, Gripped by the Greatness of God, 71).

A. The sovereignty of God eliminates random acts.

1 Kings 22:34 Now a certain man drew his bow at random and struck the king of Israel in a joint of the armor. So he said to the driver of his chariot, "Turn around and take me out of the fight; for I am severely wounded."

The sovereignty of God negates accidents. This is so because of the nature of what constitutes an accident. This forces us to ask the question, "What is an accident?" An accident is "an unforeseen and unintended event." It is "anything that happens by chance without an apparent cause."

B. The sovereignty of God eliminates unconnected activity.

Luke 22:10 And He said to them, "When you have entered the city, a man will meet you carrying a pitcher of water; follow him into the house that he enters.

I do not think many of us actually consider how we view life. If God is not in control, and in some sense each individual is, then one's worldview is best represented by a pane of glass that has shattered and splintered into a million unconnected pieces.

If God is in control, then life is to be viewed as a mosaic or multi-pieced puzzle that has a singular over-arching picture comprised of a million distinct though connected parts.

The season we call winter is an intentional and connected part of God's singular over-arching picture. If for no other reason, winter makes us appreciate the other three seasons of life.

III. The Sovereignty of God gives me comfort in hardship and assurance in calamity.

A. In the midst of my emotional instability God assures me that He is in control.

What is emotion? Before I progress let me clarify who I am as I go about defining emotion. I am not a secularist, a psychologist, or a professional counselor. I am a Christian, a biblical theologian, and the pastor of this local church. The definition I am going to give you is not necessarily the language of the psychologist, but of the theologian. With that said, let us define emotion.

Emotion is the language of a person's non-physical state of being. Emotion describes for us non-tangible expressions of our spiritual existence.

When you ask someone how they are doing, they might respond by saying, "I feel sick." There are two ways of understanding that one statement. Physically, they might have a head-cold or a stomach ache. It is an organic problem. Or we might understand them to mean that they have just received some information or are wrestling with a certain issue that has made them sick with worry or anxiety.

Because of physical ailment or fatigue we can find ourselves emotionally drained or spent. What does this mean?

ILLUSTRATION:

It means that we have overloaded our circuit breakers and have blown a fuse. No more power is running to the outlets. You can do whatever you like but until you reset the circuit breaker no power will be forthcoming.

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How do you reset the circuit breaker? You reset the circuit breaker by embracing the control of God in the midst of my emotional upheaval. Somehow in ways I cannot understand God is in control.

B. In the midst of my circumstantial uncertainty God assures me that He is in control.

Our previous thought dealt with emotional instability. This idea deals with circumstantial uncertainty. Both of these thoughts work in tandem since one often leads to the other.

What happens when everything around you collapses? Every day our daily news stations report of new calamities visiting the world. Even in our own world people lose their jobs and financial needs become tantamount. Death often comes as an unwelcome intrusion into families. People's lives are completely turned upside-down and the familiar is utterly removed.

Again, we are called to remember the Scripture. I will note only three passages all are biographical.

1. Joseph (Genesis 50:19-21)

19 But Joseph said to them, "Do not be afraid, for am I in God's place? 20 "As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good in order to bring about this present result, to preserve many people alive. 21 "So therefore, do not be afraid; I will provide for you and your little ones." So he comforted them and spoke kindly to them.

2. Job (Job 1:20-22)

20 Then Job arose and tore his robe and shaved his head, and he fell to the ground and worshiped. 21 He said, "Naked I came from my mother's womb, And naked I shall return there. The LORD gave and the LORD has taken away. Blessed be the name of the LORD." 22 Through all this Job did not sin nor did he blame God.

3. The early disciples (Acts 5:40-42, [Paul and Silas] Acts 16:22-25)

It is possible to be faced with circumstantial uncertainty and still find joy in God. A key to having this happen is to see God controlling the moment/event.

Application: (What does this look like?)

In January 1997 God opened my eyes to the centrality of Christ in all things. As a result of that revelation, where I was currently employed became more difficult to the point of becoming divisive. Instead of becoming contentious, I made the decision to leave the place that we as a family had lived for 17 years. This was the place of my daughter's birth and was all she knew. My decision to leave was during her senior year of high school. She was

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supportive of the decision although neither of us could fully understand the ramifications of my decision.

Based on the options before me I accepted the position at a Bible college of being Dean of Bible. I had mistakenly assumed that minds would be more open to 'outside the box thinking' on a college campus than on a local church level.

I had also purchased a home near the college that Kirsten did not think was wise and gutted it to the studs. We lived in a home with no kitchen in the middle of nowhere for several months. No sooner did we get there that I began to realize that this was not the place for us to be (at least not in my mind).

My daughter adjusted but the loss of all she knew and 'breaking' into a different context where everyone knows each other was difficult. One night while talking with her as she struggled with the situation she said to me, "Dad, I know God is good, but I just do not feel it." I remember everything draining from me. It was the most heart-wrenching moment of my life.

My family and I have a pretty good grip on God's sovereignty. It does not mean we do not struggle with understanding why He does what He does, but we do not struggle with understanding who is in control.

As painful as those moments were for us as a family for 2 years between 2000 and 2002, God made His sovereignty sweet to us.

Jonathan Edwards (1703-1758) is considered the greatest theologian produced on American soil. In the Memoirs of Jonathan Edwards he penned these words,

"God's absolute sovereignty and justice . . . is what my mind seems to rest assured of. I have often since had not only a conviction, but a *delightful* conviction. The doctrine has very often appeared exceedingly pleasant, bright, and sweet. Absolute sovereignty is what I love to ascribe to God." (The Works of Jonathan Edwards, 1:lv).

Many of us are familiar with Corrie ten Boom.

"Before Corrie's sister Betsie died, she had described God's sovereignty in a way that changed Corrie forever. 'I don't know why God allows suffering, Corrie; all I know is across the blueprint of our lives, God wrote the word *Ravensbruck* . . . Tell the, Corrie – tell them that no pit is so deep that God's love is not deeper still. They will listen to you because we have been here.'" (James MacDonald, Gripped by the Greatness of God, 82).

"Corrie later said, 'The higher the view we have of His sovereignty – that our times are in His hands – the greater will be the possibility to live in His victory.'" (James MacDonald, Gripped by the Greatness of God, 82).

James MacDonald concludes his study of God's sovereignty with the following thoughts.

“When you willingly take from God’s hand whatever He allows, believing that eternity will prove His wisdom and goodness even though you can’t see it now, you are embracing sovereignty at the deepest level. And you are preparing your life for a joy so immense that few ever truly experience it. (83, 84). If that truth does not comfort you, it is because you are still fighting a way you can never win. When you embrace that fully in the deepest part of who you are, only then do you know what it means to be gripped by the sovereignty of God.” (James MacDonald, Gripped by the Greatness of God, 86, 87).

My response:

“Our only real choice is whether we are for Him or against Him. And amazingly He can work His purposes regardless of the choice we make.” (James MacDonald, Gripped by the Greatness of God, 72). “You can harden your heart and refuse the sovereign purposes of God that will one day prove good, or you can run to Him and participate in the blessing God has planned.” (James MacDonald, Gripped by the Greatness of God, 79).

1. Stop trying to figure out how to resolve the problem.
2. Trust God to be God.
3. Rest in His control.

We know what God can do, but we do not know what God will do.

Can God heal the sick? Can God restore fallen relationships? Can God remove addictions that take what is good and replace what is best? Can God give me contentment and joy in Him in the midst of circumstances that are difficult and even horrible? Can I have real unbridled joy in this life? Can I really mount up with wings as eagles?

Today we need to repent, not of our sin, but of our unbelief in God that led us to this sin. We have chosen sin because we do not believe that He is enough in this life and in the life to come. This is our besetting sin.

I need a fresh visitation that makes me

- A pilgrim and not a resident of this world.
- Sees the giver and not the gift.
- Me loath sin because it robs me of Him.

I need a fresh visitation that

- Replaces food with fasting
- Replaces play with prayer
- Replaces getting with giving
- Comfort with consecration
- Building with brokenness
- Vacation with vision
- Books with the Bible
- Sight with faith
- Flesh with the Spirit
- The temporal with the eternal
- Preferences with principles
- The good with the best.

Friends, we need a fresh visitation from God that shakes us to the core of our being and sets our sights on Him and puts in hot pursuit of Him above all programs, methods, comforts, and sensual stimulations. Friend, we need Him in ways that presently escape us, but let us not be deceived or lulled into a spiritual apathy that somehow believes everything is all right when in fact we do not see, nor taste, nor touch, nor hear, nor smell Him.

Guide Me, O Thou Great Jehovah

Guide me, O Thou great Jehovah,
 Pilgrim through this barren land.
 I am weak, but Thou art mighty;
 Hold me with Thy powerful hand.
 Bread of Heaven, Bread of Heaven,
 Feed me till I want no more;
 Feed me till I want no more.

Open now the crystal fountain,
 whence the healing stream doth flow;
 let the fire and cloudy pillar
 Lead me all my journey through.
 Strong Deliverer, strong Deliverer,
 Be Thou still my Strength and Shield;
 Be Thou still my Strength and Shield.

4. Be still implies slowing down.
5. Stop trying to figure out how to resolve the problem. Most of the time where you find yourself is bigger than you.
6. Trust God to be God.
7. Rest in His control.