

**Getting Ready for Tough Times**  
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**GFC – 6-7-2020**

We are in a series titled Tough Faith for Tough Times. Today I'm speaking on "Getting Ready for Tough Times."

I wonder though...How do we ever really get ready for tough times? Tough times have a way of sneaking up on us and catching us completely off guard.

It's kind of like the seasons in Texas. You never know what to expect. Sometimes we'll have a really warm day in the middle of winter. Sometimes we'll have an unusually cool day in summer.

Wouldn't you love to always know what the weather is going to be like. Then we could prepare ourselves. But that's not how it works. Sometimes life gives us an 80-degree day in winter or a 30-degree day in summer. How do we prepare for that?

The Bible teaches us to not be surprised by tough times. They come to everyone. So, we must prepare for them.

The word "times" is synonymous with the word seasons. Seasons are periods of time characterized by particular circumstances. For example we have football season, baseball season, basketball season, hunting season, the holiday season. Seasons are a part of life. If we do not grasp this we will be constantly frustrated.

Many people seem to want a different season than the one they're in. If it's cold, they want heat. If it's hot, they want cold. If it's raining, they want it to stop. If it's not raining, they want it to start. As a result – they live in constant frustration about the season they're in.

As Christians we usually go to two extremes. One extreme is like spiritual storm chasers. Storm chasers are people who chase storms for the adrenalin rush. Spiritual storm chasers are Christians who cannot embrace the dry seasons of life – they only want excitement. So, they go from church to church chasing a new experience. But they don't grow because they don't plug in and go through the seasons of growth. They don't realize the truth of Psalm 92:13 that:

*Those who are planted in the house of the Lord shall flourish.*

The other extreme is what I call Christian snowbirds. Snowbirds is a nickname for Northerners who spend the winter in Texas because of our mild climate. Then when it starts to heat up here – they go back north to a cooler climate. This is what many Christians do – if things heat up in their church – they run to where it's milder.

If there's a cold season in their church – they run to where it's warmer. Unlike spiritual storm chasers who thrive on the extreme – spiritual snowbirds never want any extremes. The point is both of these are trying to escape whatever season God has them in and they both miss out on what God is doing.

God has a time for everything. Ecclesiastes 3:1-4 says:

*There is a time for everything, and a season for every activity under heaven: a time to be born and a time to die, a time to plant and a time to uproot, a time to kill and a time to heal, a time to tear down and a time to build, a time to weep and a time to laugh, a time to mourn and a time to dance.*

Looking at that list – some of the things are good and some are not. Yet there is a time for everything. Who determines the times and seasons? God. In Acts 1:7-8 Jesus said:

*It is not for you to know times or seasons which the Father has put in His own authority. But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you.*

In other words – God determines the seasons AND He gives us the power to make it through whatever season He sends! We have the power of the Holy Spirit to make it through:

Good times and bad times

Easy times and tough times

Rainy seasons and dry seasons.

What we must do is discern the season we are in and act appropriately.

Springtime season is a time to plant and time to prune. It's the time for breaking new ground and for taking action.

Spring is the time for new beginnings.

Spring is the honeymoon of a marriage.

Spring is the grand opening of a business.

Spring is the start of a new friendship.

Spring is not the time for harvesting. Instead it's the time when we determine... "If a harvest is to be, it's completely up to me." I can't expect anyone else to do my planting for me.

So, in the spring season of new beginnings – we must plant and prune. We must plant seeds for the harvest. We must cut away unfruitful things in our lives. If we don't plant and prune in the spring season there will be no harvest. Proverbs 20:4 says:

*A sluggard does not plow in season; so at harvest time he looks but finds nothing.*

If you have no crop at harvest time – it’s because you planted no seed in the springtime.

Summer season is a time of growth and maturing. It’s the time for watering and weeding what we have planted. Just because we plant seeds doesn’t mean our work is done. We need the continual water of the Holy Spirit and we need to pull out the weeds the enemy plants. Summer is a time for fertilizing what was planted. It’s usually associated with long, hot, stifling heat. It’s about exerting maximum effort.

Fall season – or autumn – is harvest time. This is the season we look forward to all year. It’s the time when we enjoy the fruit of our labor. The backbreaking work is done and now we reap what we’ve sown. It’s a time of celebration. There’s food on the table and money in the bank.

Our harvest depends on what we have already planted. At this point - for the most part - it’s too late to start planting. But if we’ve planted seed and waited on God, we will reap a harvest.

Winter season is a cold season – a time when it doesn’t seem like much is happening. Winter can be difficult and discouraging. The trees are bare and lifeless. The ground is cold or frozen. But winter is necessary for rest. We must rest up from the hard work of harvest, so we have energy to plant in the spring. And we can use this time of rest to dream, set goals, and re-evaluate our futures.

We need the rest and reflection of winter to determine what seed we want to plant in the spring...

The point is – we need to discern the times and seasons so we will take appropriate action.

In spiritual springtime – plant and prune.  
 In spiritual summer – water and pull weeds.  
 In spiritual fall or autumn – harvest.  
 In spiritual winter – rest and re-evaluate.

Ecclesiastes 8:5-6 says:

*The wise heart will know the proper time and procedure. For there is a proper time and procedure for every matter.*

God has an appointed time for everything. We cannot change it. We just submit to it. And – we must be ready for it.

2 Timothy 4:2 says: *Be ready in season and out of season.*

The NIV says: *Be prepared in season and out of season.*

The Amplified Version says: *Keep your sense of urgency (stand by, be at hand and be ready) whether the opportunity seems to be favorable or unfavorable. (Whether it*

*is convenient or inconvenient, whether it is welcome or unwelcome).*

God is telling us to be ready for whatever season comes our way.

Be ready for heat and be ready for cold.

Be ready to plant and be ready to harvest.

Be ready for busy times and be ready for when it seems nothing is happening.

Because though it may seem like nothing is happening – something is always happening. God is always at work. Like the song says...He never stops, never stops working.

I want to prepare you for the tough times when it seems like nothing is happening.

I want to prepare you for the winter seasons of life.

I want to show you the reasons for the seasons.

I want to show you the beauty of spiritual winter.

As a matter of fact I want to focus the rest of my message on The Three Positive Purposes for Spiritual Winter.

### **1. Winter kills the bugs of the past and keeps them from affecting the harvest of the future.**

Ask any farmer and they will tell you that a hard winter is a blessing because it kills the bugs before you plant again. This way the bugs won't kill the new growth.

For us, bugs are things in us that are sinful, unhealthy and immature. Things like unforgiveness, anger, addictions, fear, unbelief, impatience. These bugs will endanger the coming harvest.

Everybody has bugs. You know how I know? Because everyone has fruit....and bugs and fruit grow together. But God wants fruitfulness. Jesus said in John 15:5:

*I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in Me and I in him, he will bear much fruit.*

Fruitfulness, however, depends on killing off the bugs. And that happens during winter. However, when we're in a winter season it's hard to see it as a blessing. It feels more like an affliction, but the affliction of winter produces obedience to God's word.

Psalm 119:71 says:

*It was good for me to be afflicted so that I might learn Your decrees.*

I understand the truth of this.

One of the hardest parts about winter for me is the waiting. Because remember, winter is waiting. And we need to learn to wait on God's timing if we're going to grow. James 1:4 says:

*But let patience have its perfect work, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking nothing.*

In the 80's, while attending Shady Grove church, Pastor Joe and I received a call to ministry. We thought we were ready, but God knew better. That was about 35 years ago. And in those 35 years we have waited through many winters.

First, we waited two years to teach an adult class. We taught in the 5-year-old class before we were released to teach the adults. Then we waited eight years before Joe became an elder.

Then we started our own church and waited eight years for that church to thrive... but instead it died. So, we waited two more years and then we started GFC. Both of us had to work two jobs. I expected that to last about 1-2 months but instead of one month I waited 1 year before I could quit my other job. Instead of 2 months, Joe waited 2 years.

Then we waited to hire staff.

Then we waited to get this building.

Now we're waiting to build a building.

Wait, wait, wait.

For 35 years we have waited....and we're still waiting.

We've had to wait many times in the past...we're waiting in the present...and I'm certain we will continue to wait in the future.

Now don't get me wrong. During these past 35 years we have also experienced many springs, summers and falls. But much of our time has been spent waiting. Why? Because we had bugs. And bugs kill fruit. And waiting - through a long hard winter - kills bugs.

God has to do His work in us before He can do His work through us. Think about many of the great men and women of the Bible who waited.

- Moses waited on the back side of the desert for 40 years.
- Joseph waited in a pit and a prison before he was exalted to a palace.
- Esther waited through a year of preparation to go before the King.

You see many times we think we're ready, but God knows we're not. He knows if He gives us what we want we're headed for a collision.

I remember when we bought our son his first car when he was only 17. He wanted a sports car. We didn't think he was ready but we let him talk us into it.

We bought him a shiny white Camaro. He had his car 3 weeks when he totaled it. It was wintertime and the roads were icy. He was inexperienced and he lost control of the car. He wasn't ready to drive on icy winter roads.

You see, just like my son, many of us think we're ready to drive on the icy winter roads of life. But God knows we're too inexperienced. We'd end up losing control.

That's why if God says wait then...  
 It's not time for you to be in full time ministry.  
 It's not time for you to get married.  
 It's not time for you to have a baby.  
 It's not time for you to go to the mission field.

Psalm 37:34 says:

*Wait for the Lord and keep His way. He will exalt you to inherit the land.*

## **2. Winter distinguishes between annuals and perennials.**

An Annual is a plant that dies after only one growing season. Just like an annual a "fair weather friend" won't survive a hard winter. The winter shows us who the annuals are.

A Perennial is a plant that is present at all seasons of the year. It's enduring and recurring. You may think someone is your best friend. Then tough times come - winter hits - and you find out they aren't your friend after all. There's nothing like a hard winter to determine a "fair weather friend" from a loyal friend. Proverbs 17:17 says:

*A true friend is always loyal, and a brother is born to help in time of need.*

Pastor Joe and I have learned that it's a big mistake to put perennials around us in key positions. So, we watch people in the winter and appoint them in the spring.

Some people leave because they aren't given the position they desire. But we've learned to never appoint people in key positions just because they want a position.

So, remember to be careful who you trust until you've been through some tough times together.

## **3. Winter forces you to either expand your wardrobe or freeze.**

My sister lives in Florida where the winter season is usually mild. Her entire wardrobe consists of summer clothes. However, if she comes here to visit me during the winter season, she has to buy some winter clothes or she will freeze.

The same is true for us. The winter season forces us to expand our wardrobe or freeze. So, what type of spiritual wardrobe do we need for winter?

How many of you have heard of Seasonal Affective Disorder.... or S.A.D.? SAD is a condition that occurs during the winter. Due to a lack of sun, people can become depressed. Experts suggest getting as much exposure to the sun as possible during this season.

The same is true of us. If we are in a spiritual winter, we need as much exposure to God's Son (spelled SON) as possible.

We also need to put on the appropriate winter wardrobe. In the winter times of waiting, when we may feel discouraged, we must remember Isaiah 61:3 which tells us to:

*Put on a garment of praise for a spirit of heaviness.*

The garment of praise is the first garment we need during a spiritual winter. But Satan doesn't want us to praise. That's why our second garment is found in Ephesians 6:11:

*Put on the full armor of God so that you can take your stand against the devil's schemes.*

Satan doesn't want us to praise God in the winter season. He will do anything to prevent praise. That's why we need to clothe ourselves in God's armor. It's the only way to defeat Satan.

Armed with praise and wearing God's armor will prepare us for tough times. If you're in a tough time right now, remember that winter seasons are a necessary part of life.

I want to encourage you with Proverbs 13:12

*Hope deferred makes the heart sick; but when dreams come true at last, there is life and joy.*

God's word promises your winter will not last forever.  
The new growth of spring will come again.  
You will feel the warmth of the summer sun once again.  
There will be another harvest time when your dreams come true.