

This year, we have all had moments of laughter that filled our hearts with joy, just as we have faced times of sorrow that brought us to tears. Think about your own life: the joy you felt at a friend's wedding, the grief of losing someone close, or the satisfaction of overcoming a personal challenge. These are not just abstract ideas but real moments we all experience. They are not just random events; they shape who we are, teach us important lessons, and remind us that life is always changing.

As we reflect on these ever-changing seasons of life, our thoughts naturally turn to how we respond to them. As we stand at the threshold of a new year, let's focus on two vital responses: gratitude for what has been and hope for what is to come.

To speak to this, today we are turning our minds and hearts to the wisdom of Ecclesiastes 3, a scripture that speaks profoundly to moments like these: beginnings and ends.

This is the reading of Ecclesiastes 3:1, "For everything there is a season and a time for every matter under heaven..."

This passage, often attributed to the wise King Solomon, is a profound statement about how time and our personal experiences are intertwined. If we keep reading, he does this by listing various life experiences as pairs of opposites – birth and death, weeping and laughing, war and peace – symbolizing the natural rhythm and cyclical patterns of the world and human existence. In essence, every beginning has an ending, and every ending is a new beginning.

Drawing from this passage on this New Year's Eve, I find it resonates deeply with my own journey, just as it might with yours. It is not just an ancient text but a mirror reflecting our lives, full of diverse experiences and emotions. All of us are well aware of life's ever-changing nature and the many seasons we traverse—moments of joy and sorrow, gain and loss, building up and breaking down. So, when we see how life is always in flux, it becomes clear that time can seem pointless without a deeper connection with God and each other. Think of the difference between just watching the clock and feeling each moment enriched by faith and purpose.

My friends, we are not mere bone and flesh but also soul and spirit, created in God's image. Our time here matters, our decisions here matter, and we have been given an eternal purpose beyond this life if we make wise life-giving choices.

For this, these words invite us to contemplate the seasons of our own lives and how we embrace them— the joys and challenges, the beginnings and endings, the constant change, and the promise of a future. How we deal with the good and the bad and choose to live here and now is a glimpse of what we are hoping to become tomorrow. If we are bitter, angry, or resentful, that will be our future if we don't resolve it today. In the same way, if we are grateful, hopeful, and resilient, that will be in our future just as well. Both joys and sorrows are a part of life; what makes the difference is how we deal with them.

This is what King Solomon tells us: We must fully embrace all parts of life – the happy and the sad, the triumphs and the failures. If we don't, we might get stuck in the past, held back by negative feelings like bitterness or anger. Imagine letting go of these burdens and embracing every part of your journey with open arms. No wonder Jesus talks about forgiveness so many

times, including praying for forgiveness for his enemies while hanging on the cross. Jesus' life is an example of what Ecclesiastes says: his birth, death, and resurrection.

The point I am getting at with this is that in recognizing and embracing each season of life for what they are, we learn to live more fully, appreciating the present but also eagerly setting our sights on the journey ahead. This is about the importance of maintaining a balance between being thankful for the present and striving for future goals. Think of it this way: While gratitude roots us in the now, helping us recognize and appreciate what we currently have (despite the challenges and struggles), hope propels us forward, fueling our aspirations and dreams.

So, as we leave behind 2023 and set our eyes on 2024, let us be grateful for the blessings we already have, but don't stop growing and working for the ones yet to come. Let the hope for a better tomorrow be our driving force. Gratitude will keep us grounded and safe from resentment and bitterness, and hope will guide us and make us resilient to work for new blessings.

As we say farewell to this year, I encourage each of you to embrace every season that 2024 brings – not just with acceptance but with the active realization that each moment is a divine gift. Let us do this by approaching each day with a heart open to giving and receiving joy, learning from our trials, and cherishing our triumphs. Let us do this by celebrating achievements but also finding meaning and strength in challenges. Let us do this by cherishing the good and learning from the bad. Let those difficult moments give you the gift of insight and wisdom, for they will give you foresight, meaning that by learning from the past, you can see the future more clearly and make better choices. People usually call that “experience” or “maturity.” So, don't rush to get away from the past before learning what it has to teach you; otherwise, you will repeat the same mistakes as you move forward.

All of this, embracing life with the blessings and the struggles, is the key to building a better and healthier life today for a better and healthier life in the future.

Here is the invitation and good news: I challenge you, as we move forward, to not only believe in the possibilities that lie ahead but also to act on them. Don't give in to resentment, don't get stuck in the past, move on and make things better for yourself and those around you. Plant the seeds of kindness, nurture the gardens of your relationships, and harvest the fruits of your faith and hard work. Remember, while we may not control every aspect of our lives, we hold the power to influence our attitudes and actions. So, let us choose hope over despair, gratitude over discontent, and faith over doubt.

May 2024 be a year where we see beauty in every season, our lives get enriched with profound gratitude, and our hopes guide us toward greater fulfillment and purpose.

Blessings to all for a year filled with growth, joy, and the unwavering presence of God in every season of our lives. Amen.