

Voices: Spiritual formation one season at a time

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Ecclesiastes 3:1 (NKJV) says, “To everything there is a season, a time for every purpose under heaven.” This scripture and those following it set the context for our lives in spiritual formation. The writer of Ecclesiastes makes a strong case that *everything* has a time and purpose.

The season of childhood

I was born into a non-Christian family. That is an interesting part of my spiritual journey. When I was a kid in my elementary-aged years, I was a faithful participant in an afterschool children’s program on Friday afternoons known as the Jolly Juniors.

We met every Friday afternoon after school and learned about characters from the Bible. We were taught many Scriptures about God loving us. We learned that, no matter what, we were each important to God. We learned songs like “Jesus Loves the Little Children” and that we were all precious in his sight. We were taught clearly that God loves all people.

In addition, we were taught to love all people, no matter what. We memorized John 3:16, which says, “For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son that whoever believes in him will have everlasting life.” I believed that then, and I believe it to this day.

During those days, I accepted Jesus as my Lord and Savior. My parents and brother did, also. What a beginning we had in the word of God taught in that little American Baptist church that cared about immigrants—like us—and by a godly after-school leader who believed in visiting the homes of

the children in that after-school club!

The teenager and young adult season

By the time I was teenaged and college-aged, we had moved to Texas, where we joined a large Southern Baptist church in our neighborhood. My family was so new to Christian faith that we didn't consider the type of church, just that it proclaimed Jesus.

In that church, I was highly involved in mission education for girls, teens and young adult women. There, I experienced my call to serve God in Nigeria, a call I knew clearly for over 10 years of my life as I attended college and seminary. This call was a natural fit for what I understood God desired for me.

During high school, two major events happened. Sports was very important to my whole family, and a girl on one of the teams at my school revealed she was gay. At another time, a girl in our high school got pregnant and was not married.

These events were a test of all I'd been taught. I heard consistently, "Love and accept all people." I also learned not to have anything to do with people who were in "sinful" behavior because their sin would rub off on us.

During this season, Romans 10:11-14 influenced my spiritual life. It says: "For the Scripture says, 'Whoever believes in him will not be put to shame.' For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek, for the same Lord over all is rich to all who call upon him. For 'whoever calls upon the name of the Lord shall be saved.' How then shall they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how shall they believe in him of whom they have not heard? And how shall they hear without a preacher?" God used this passage in my heart as I experienced my call to vocational missionary service.

The season of adulthood

Finally getting to minister where I felt called was extremely meaningful. I never made it to Africa but was led to minister in Philadelphia (Acts 9:1-6), working and living alongside people in economic poverty.

Unexpectedly, I wrestled with God for the first three years I was there. I had never experienced living in a community with such deep poverty or of being in day-to-day contact with people with minimal resources to even make it through a day. Everything was different.

In those first three years, God seemed to line up people in every type of social issue possible. It was like God kept saying to me, “What are you going to do about showing this person that I love him/her?”

I struggled and struggled. I prayed that God would lead me back to Texas, which didn’t happen. The challenging words of James seared into my every waking moment. The verses of Mark 8:23-25 served as constant reminders from Jesus that we are to see all people clearly—through Jesus’ eyes—and are to love all people with no strings attached. I thought I was doing that but, obviously, was missing the mark.

A hard lesson in adulthood

At the end of that long three years of struggle with the Lord and in addition to feeling turned inside-out, I realized an important life lesson. I had been faithful in my worldwide witness about how much I loved Jesus and how much Jesus loved us. The harsh reality and extreme sadness for me, however, was I had shared Jesus only with people who were just like me.

It was like I had taken Jesus—who I love with all of my heart—and put him in a box on the shelf, only to be taken down when I was around someone just like me.

The practical application of the gospel became real to me in this season. The gospel is about people and the relationships we have with each other. Loving God first and then loving people was the foundational message Jesus kept trying to get the religious leaders in his earthly ministry to understand. Loving Jesus still is about relationships with people—all people.

Seasons and their opportunities

All of these Scriptures and more still impact my life as I continue to be formed into the believer God desires me to be. Spiritual formation is a lifelong process and commitment of ourselves to becoming all God wants us to be.

My prayer is no matter where we are in the spiritual formation process, we will be encouraging, patient and supportive of each other as we seek to follow the way of Christ in loving all people, regardless of the roles or labels identifying us.

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