Breathing the Seasons of Belhaven University

TRANSCRIPT

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To everything there is a season, a time for every purpose under heaven.

Ecclesiastes 3:1.... Belhaven University 2012-13 Verse of the Year

Intro before the song:

I've asked Chris to sing a special medley of songs tonight, because my sense is we need to be lifted up.

And tonight, rather than talking about the challenges of higher education, new initiatives for the University, or where we need a course correction as a Christian institution as I normally do, I want to focus instead on where I sense many of us are hurting – and our students are hurting - and we need God's spirit to come in a fresh way.

INTRODUCTION

It's not every day we tear down a 100 year-old building and rebuild it again.

In fact, we've never done it before – and with a little bit more structural bracing for Preston hall over the next few years, we can have assurance we'll never have to do it again.

So when it came to selecting the verse of the year, it was clear that tearing down and rebuilding Fitzhugh Hall must be the focus of our theme verse.

I first imagined the verse choices would be plentiful. I found strong scriptures about the foolishness of building on sand, or assurance that the walls of famous fortifications will crumble, or that God's foundation stones are inscribed with the words, "The Lord knows those who are his."

But those verses only brought attention to part of our challenge and didn't catch the essence of what will be the centerpiece focus of our campus this year: we won't just tear down a 100 year-old building, but with God's help, we are going to build it back up again - strong, bigger, and more useful than ever.

So the option for a verse of the year that balanced both aspects of our plans for Fitzhugh came down to one scripture choice: Ecclesiastes 3:3 "A time to tear down and a time to build up."

The time to tear it down was obvious because, as the structural engineer so bluntly put it to me, it is going to fall down if you don't tear it down – and he put extra emphasis on "evacuate it now!"

We didn't plan this, we didn't want this, we prayed this would never happen, but there came a time when it was right in God's plan to tear down this 100 year old building – Fitzhugh Hall.

But it took lots more discussion, discernment, calculating, and trusting the Lord, to make the decision that now was the time to build up. After all, taking down the building and just planting grass was a real option.

There were nine interconnected gears that turned to open God's window to let us see it was also a time to build up:

1. A science building has been a priority for years, but the campaign we started in 2005 was derailed when Hurricane Katrina hit us – but the need for quality science labs has only intensified during the past seven years.

2. Our Worldview curriculum has matured to the point that we are very ready to bring science into that same cross-disciplinary framework for non-science majors. But creatively presenting science in a new way to our students would be nearly impossible to accomplish in our current desperately-outdated science facilities.

3. Our academic quality has had remarkable success in the sciences with nearly all our pre-medical students being accepted to medical school. And they consistently report back how much better prepared they were than students coming to med-school from other universities.

4. We have also added a strong program in Sports Medicine and Exercise Science that has quickly gained reputation. And with a new facility we could open the door to expand into more science based academic programs that would broaden our reach for the Kingdom.

5. We had a trusting connection established with an architect, builder, and structural engineer, thanks to introductions made by our University architect, Michael Barranco, just months before he died in a tragic car accident. This is not the kind of project that we could bid, so this component was absolutely critical.

6. Borrowing funds for capital projects in our past have required long involved processes that take months if not years of planning.

   But in these unusual economic times Alan Waters, Finance Chair of our Board saw a unique window opening for us this spring to refinance at all-time low rates the long-term $13 million capital debt of the University, plus borrow several million dollars in addition, without increasing our annual debt service.

   It is a very complex financial transition, but when you boil it down simply, we were able to borrow at 3.29% interest, $23 million of which nearly $10 million can be used for new construction.

7. Most of you have heard the story of the insurance payment and how ever-optimistic, Virginia Henderson, along with the careful work of David Potvin and Wayne Green, we were able to move us from the expected zero to nearly $1.3 million received from the insurance company.

8. Also, part of this was the greatest loaves and fish story in our history when we relocated nearly 80 people out of Fitzhugh Hall in only days, and put them across a campus that was already busting at the seams with overcrowded office space.

But the more remarkable part of the story is that God was preparing us for the closing of Fitzhugh long before it cracked by making clear the way for us to move our adult programs into our new LeFleur campus. If we hadn't done that, it would have been impossible to absorb this loss of Fitzhugh space.

And you know, while many of you are in far less than ideal conditions, after the initial shock of moving, I've never heard one single complaint. That says something pretty amazing about the intensity of God's calling in your life, that you'll overlook the personal comforts for the greater good.

9. And finally, if you needed one more confirmation that God was going ahead of us to assure this was the season to rebuild Fitzhugh, we now have the Red Cross building – which never would have happened if the desperate moment of closing Fitzhugh hadn't sent us looking for new space.

For Fitzhugh Hall, there is a time to tear down. And for Fitzhugh Hall, there is also a time to build up.

But our verse of the year is more than about Fitzhugh Hall coming down in 2012 after 100 years of service, and its replacement going up to serve until about the year 2,200 when those who come behind us replace it and remember our faithfulness to this season.

So as you watch that hole in the ground become a wonderful new building, let the construction remind us all to understand God's purpose for each of us in the changing seasons of our lives.

You see, Ecclesiastes 3 needs to become much more than a scripture we read in the good times to sprinkle a blessing on what already makes us happy, or a passage that we turn to on occasions when unexplainable circumstances overwhelm us.

Instead, it gives us a vision for the bigger picture of our lives by framing our joys and our challenges in terms of seasons.

But to understand the season passage of Ecclesiastes 3, we must first grasp the central theme that is woven throughout the book. When we understand that concept, then the perspective of seasons becomes meaningful and applicable.

That is this: We must learn to BREATHE the seasons.

When we understand breathing the seasons, we capture the rhythm of God's purposes in our lives.

As a preacher and a university president, I take on this passage with a fairly high level of caution, not just because of the importance of this scripture to understanding God has a purpose even in our toughest challenges.

But also because one of the world's foremost scholars on the book of Ecclesiastes is Dr. Dan Fredericks, our Provost and Senior Vice President.

Now, I know the Lord forgives…and I've found that Dan does too – but just to be sure I get the explanation right, let me quote a few lines from Dan's book:

> The whole meaning of Ecclesiastes depends on this somewhat ambiguous metaphor, "breath." Here, in this closest example of a disciplined philosophical inquiry in the Bible, in the deepest of intellectual investigations of reality, we find its all–inclusive conclusions expressed poetically!
>
> To understand this metaphor (of breathing) then is to understand the book; and to understand this book is to better understand the biblical wisdom literature in its many manifestations.
>
> Inhale, exhale; inhale, exhale. The cadence of polarity and opposition.
>
> The poem's very structure expresses the 'breathing' of life, breathing not air, but breathing experiences and their opposites in and out of reality.

When we understand life as a process of breathing the seasons of life – some good, some tough – rather than continuing on our quest to expect life to be a straight line of success and happiness, it is then we begin to understand God's design for us.

Because in Christ, there is a purpose for every season under heaven.

When we assume life will always be happy, or assume the challenges will never end, then we miss God's pattern of life. Instead, the good and bad will come and go and we need to keep breathing.

If we stop breathing, one predictable thing happens every single time - we die. And while the breathing characterized in Ecclesiastes is not physical breathing, this death is even more painful as we cut off the supply of God's spirit in us – so we die spiritually, emotionally, and relationally.

Learning to breathe through the changing seasons of life is essential to Christian living.

This year, the central Truth of breathing through the seasons of life, will be magnified for us as we tear down Fitzhugh Hall and build up the new Fitzhugh Hall.

Because, the process of changing the building doesn't just represent two important seasons of tearing down and building up.

Rather, on a broader scale, this building is a visible symbol of the biblical pattern of breathing through the seasons, because we can look back and see it in the life of Belhaven's first president – Dr. Lewis T. Fitzhugh – after whom this building is named.

Dr. Fitzhugh born June 10th, 1841 and was raised in pre-civil war Jackson, Mississippi, which was a center influence as the hub of the succession movement for the Confederacy, and a place that was one of the more affluent regions of the country before the war.

Lewis Fitzhugh must have grown up in a home of some privilege as the oldest of five children, because he had the opportunity for a classical education, including a master degree. That strong educational background eventually led him to be head of two prep schools, serve on the faculty of Ole Miss, and become president of two colleges.

> It was a good season for Dr. Fitzhugh – and breathing through the seasons there was a time for every purpose under heaven.

Just a year after being married, he joined the confederate army in the spring of 1862 and left Jackson. But he returned home to a city that had been devastated by the war.

Although little fighting took place here, the city's infrastructure had been crippled to assure Jackson could not be used as a stronghold to come against Grant in the siege of Vicksburg.

Not only were so many buildings and railroads destroyed, but the poverty was overwhelming as the city tried to recover from a war time inflation that at times during the war sent the price of boots to $125, sugar was $3.50 a pound, tea sold for $7 a pound, and watermelons would cost up to $25 each.

It was into this culture this young man with a passion for education saw this as the path to a quality life returned.

> It was a confusing season for Dr. Fitzhugh – but breathing through the seasons there was a time for every purpose under heaven.

Around the state he was part of various academic entities, and of course, we all wouldn't be here if in 1894 he hadn't founded Belhaven College for Young Ladies. But why Dr. Fitzhugh started this new institution remains a puzzle.

We do know he came to Jackson to start this new college after having abruptly completed a fairly ineffective six-year presidency of Whitworth College in Brookhaven, Mississippi – a Methodist school that was notable for having Naturalist John Audubon on its faculty, as well as a very successful music conservatory.

So it could be speculated he was either fired or pushed out of Whitworth College – meaning Belhaven may have been founded only because Dr. Fitzhugh had faced a very difficult season in his professional life.

> It was a heavy season for Dr. Fitzhugh – but breathing through the seasons there was a time for every purpose under heaven.

With optimism, vision, a large number of contacts and some clout, he bought the large home of Colonel Jones Hamilton on Boyd Street, and opened Belhaven in 1894 to the first class of students that fall.

He hired nine other teachers to support 11 different academic departments, but as they did in those days, Dr. Fitzhugh not only ran the College but personally taught Latin, Greek, Logic, and Political Economy.

> It was a joyous season for Dr. Fitzhugh – and breathing through the seasons there was a time for every purpose under heaven.

But just seven months after opening, the entire facility burned to the ground the first week of February during that first academic year. All was lost, except Dr. Fitzhugh's determination, along with maybe his memory of a less than successful presidency at Whitworth College that he didn't want to repeat, and so he looked for a way forward.

> It was a desperate season for Dr. Fitzhugh – but breathing through the seasons there was a time for every purpose under heaven.

Soon the businesses and people of Jackson began sending money to rebuild, and offers of help poured in from around the state.

So only two weeks after the fire, Dr. Fitzhugh took the courageous step to trust God to rebuild Belhaven. And that new facility included such advances as indoor bathrooms, hot and cold running water, and what they called a "steam heating apparatus."

The college began to take root and grow in their new beautiful facility where the students studied and lived, and Dr. Fitzhugh's expectations of the correct way young Christian women should build a Godly lifestyle was driven into the mission of his institution.

It is especially noted that the students were not allowed to receive visits, notes, bouquets, or any other form of communication or marks of attention from persons outside the College without the permission of the president." I'm thinking of putting that rule back in – it makes more sense now that I have teenagers.

His dream of Belhaven expanded to include courses leading to the A.B, B.S, or Mistress of Literature degrees, as well as certificates in music, art, and elocution. I think it is remarkable that it was Dr. Fitzhugh who started us down a path toward leadership in the Arts, which I'm sure he'd never believe if he saw it today.

> It was a marvelous season for Dr. Fitzhugh – and breathing through the seasons there was a time for every purpose under heaven.

But just nine years after the fire, at the age of 62 Dr. Lewis Fitzhugh died just before the end of the academic year of 1904.

> To everything there is a season, a time for every purpose under heaven.

I found recently that Dr. Fitzhugh is buried in Greenwood Cemetery here in Jackson, along with many governors, mayors, and Eudora Welty.

So I went to see his grave, and on Dr. Fitzhugh's stone is inscribed this scripture from Acts which summarizes another leader King David, who was far from perfect, failed and got back up, but tried to be faithful to his Godly calling – he kept breathing through the seasons.

The inscription from Acts 13 on Dr. Fitzhugh's gravestone reads:

> "after he had served his own generation by the will of God, he fell on sleep."

Through good seasons and bad, Dr. Fitzhugh could continue to serve well because he didn't allow the season to dictate his spirit, and kept spiritually breathing through both the wonderful highs and deep lows of the many seasons he faced.

Remembering Dr. Fitzhugh's example is enough of a lesson to gain insight into our verse of the year. But I'd like to share with you three specific ideas for how God can help us, and we can help each other breathe through the seasons of life.

1) ACCEPT THE SEASONS

When I fly through the Chicago airport in the middle of winter, I'm bundled up in my heaviest coat, leather gloves, boots, scarf, wearing a sweater, and probably have hand warmers in my pockets – I do hate cold weather.

But then I'll pass a young couple getting off a plane that just arrived from one of the Caribbean vacation spots, and they come into the terminal in flip flops, shorts, tee shirts, and a hat that is totally embarrassing – as well as carrying a carton of some duty free bottles they are convinced they bought at a huge discount.

But amazingly, they never have a coat, boots, or anything else to face the 10 degree temperature outside. It's like their two-week tan allows them to defy the seasons.

We may not like it when we are thrust into the tough seasons of life, but until we accept them when they come, we're going to be uncomfortable at best, and crippled if we deny them for too long.

It's interesting that when seasons change from the ones we like to the ones we dread, most of us would rather ignore the start of a downward forecast rather than accept it.

The longer we can go without wearing a coat in the fall, or keep our new Christmas sweaters on as winter turns to spring, the more we feel like conquerors of our destiny. It is almost like giving into the coming change of season is a sign of weakness in us.

In fact, when it comes to the seasons of life, I'm convinced that many Christians are unwilling to accept this idea of seasons because we've somehow convinced ourselves that if your faith is strong, we should only have good seasons.

So if we're facing a tough time there must be a flaw or weakness in us. Thus, we hide our challenges in order to give the appearance that the weather is always perfect in our Camelot or The Truman Show, depending on your generational reference point.

Or there are others who are always at a point of strain, calling friends to pray for them through the next crisis, because they have equated the Christian life with only suffering and can't imagine that God could bring good seasons too.

But of course, this scripture teaches us the opposite. So while our failure and sin may intensify the negative impact of some seasons, God appoints the seasons and all of us will have tough times as well as good times as we breathe in the seasons of life.

Simply coming to the point that we accept that seasons will come and go, can make all the difference in our ability to live Godly lives through both the good and the overwhelming seasons.

2) ADJUST TO THE SEASONS

The good thing about seasons is that they do have a starting point and an ending point, although those changes are usually gradual.

And once we accept the idea that seasons change – and understand that like inhaling the good air and exhaling the bad, seasons will also come and go – we can then begin to adjust to the changes seasonal shifts bring.

Whether it's a welcomed season or one to where we grit our teeth and endure, if we don't learn to adapt to the change of seasons, life will be in turmoil. Because, the scripture tells us that every season has a purpose.

Think about the farmer who is raising a crop of corn. In the spring, planting must happen so that in the summer growing can be accelerated, and in the fall the harvest will come, so that winter can be used as a time of preparation for the next spring. It all works as the farmer adjusts to the seasons.

But what if he doesn't want to adjust? So he plants in the winter, but the seed will die before it could get warm enough to grow. If he plants in the summer, the crop may grow, but be very limited. If he plants on time, but waits to harvest until the winter, the crop will rot in the field.

No matter what the farmer wishes the season to be, only adjusting to what the seasons are, brings the best out of each season.

When we don't adjust to the seasons, something has to give in our spiritual lives, as well as our emotional, relational, and even physical lives. Putting our energy into blaming ourselves, someone else, or even God for the tough seasons in our life, propels us away from God, not closer to him.

And when we can't adjust, the seasons become intensified as we first despair and then attempt to maneuver through the season without God's wisdom. Instead, we need to be seeking Godly wisdom in both the good seasons when we are tempted to believe we did it all on our own, or during the tough seasons when we are convinced everything is stacked against us.

Ecclesiastes chapter 8 begins:

> "How wonderful to be wise, to be able to analyze and interpret things. Wisdom lights up a person's face, softening its hardness . . . Yes, there is a time and a way for everything, even as people's troubles lie heavily upon them."

You see, going back to the verse of the year passage, there are about as many tough seasons as good seasons.

We'd all be happy if the promise read like this:

To everything there is a season, a time for every purpose under heaven.

A time to be born ~~and a time to die~~.

~~**A time to plant and**~~ **a time to harvest.**

~~A time to kill and~~ **a time to heal.**

~~A time to tear down and~~ **a time to build up.**

~~A time to cry and~~ **a time to laugh.**

~~A time to grieve and~~ **a time to dance.**

~~A time to scatter stones and~~ **a time to gather stones.**

A time to embrace ~~and a time to turn away.~~

A time to search ~~and a time to quit searching.~~

A time to keep ~~and a time to throw away~~.

~~A time to tear and~~ **a time to mend.**

~~A time to be quiet and~~ **a time to speak.**

A time to love ~~and a time to hate~~.

~~A time for war and~~ **a time for peace.**

If that's how all life was, we'd be quick to put on our Facebook status "God is in it" the Lord is so gracious: and I'm thankful to be a child of God.

But that's not how it reads. It also says there will be

a time to die,

a time to plant,

a time to kill,

a time to tear down,

a time to cry,

a time to grieve,

a time to scatter stones,

a time to turn away,

a time to quit searching,

a time to throw away,

a time to tear,

a time to be quiet,

a time to hate,

and a time for war.

Like the first moment of shock treatment if we are traumatized with an injury or scare, we need to remember to breathe when the worst hits us.

The scripture is clear; God is working in us just as much in the worst seasons of life as he is the good seasons because there is a time for every purpose under heaven. So while our seasons change, God doesn't change and his wisdom is offered to us in all the seasons of life if we'll remember to breathe through each seasonal change.

We need to be seeking God's wisdom to adjust to each season. And as educators, when we are dealing with a student who is frustrated, confused, angry, withdrawn, failing, or disinterested, it could be that they too are facing a season without God's wisdom.

The Lord has given us the privilege of being available to help them accept and adjust to their changing seasons - and learn to breathe.

3) APPRECIATE THE SEASONS

It is easy to celebrate in the good seasons, and the others we just endure. But if every season has a purpose, shouldn't we be looking for the good in even the bad ones?

But you know, even in good seasons, we start out happy, but they too, can often wear us out as they linger. We're so glad for the summer weather when it comes, but by this time of year, we've had enough. Or can't wait until it turns cooler, until it stays cool for too long, and we're anxious for it to end.

All seasons tend to begin with optimism – even the bad ones. Have you noticed how the victims of tornados, fires, or flood disasters respond in the same predictable way when interviewed on television standing in the pile of rubble that used to be their house: "we're strong people, this community is going to pull together, and we'll rebuild and together we'll get through this."

But most often, it doesn't happen, as that surge of optimism triggered by a sudden tough seasons is overwhelmed by reality of the long season ahead.

Our appreciating seasons not only get skewed when we follow our emotions rather than wait for God's wisdom, but we also have difficulty appreciating seasons because we live at a time when seasons are no longer clearly defined as all good or all bad, because our lives are intertwined at broader levels.

We work in organizations that are larger than anyone did in generations past; we go to churches that are larger; we are connected in communities that are larger.

Many come from complex homes of blended families that are larger, and have relationships that extend far beyond the more homogenized lifestyle of times when communication and transportation didn't easily accelerate and broaden our world.

So in the complexity, fast pace, and multifaceted nature of living in 2012, we are often coping with conflicting seasons simultaneously.

- Maybe the job is great, but the challenges with kids give you sleepless nights.
- Maybe the kids are fine, but a financial jolt has thrown you into a tailspin.
- Maybe the finances are okay, but there is tension in the marriage that takes the joy from it.
- Maybe the marriage is fine, but coping with the aging parents is all consuming.

And the combinations, and cross combinations of seasons could go on and on. Which often makes us feel like we've lost all the good seasons, and all we're left with are the agonizing ones.

But whether our seasons are well ordered, or feel like a jumbled mess, there is one commonality to every season, and that is this: the sun comes up every day. Jesus, the Son of God, is present all our seasons, and the physical sun should remind us that he is there even when we can't feel him during the cold times, or the storms won't let us see him clearly.

We just need to keep breathing through the seasons.

I want to give you five quick handles to help us to spiritually breathe during our difficult seasons:

1. Never forget that God is working in all the seasons of our lives, but the scripture makes clear, "people cannot see the whole scope of God's work from beginning to end." So sometimes we just need to trust that He is still in control and release our anxiety grip.

2. Allow God's spirit to overwhelm your fight or flight reactions during the tough seasons. Our psychology department can tell you all about the reality of fight or flight that is triggered when we feel threatened. Our human nature will push us in the tough seasons to fight – resent or rebel – or take flight – escape or deny.

   Especially during these times we need to pray for God's spirit to slow us down, because the ramifications of fight or flight in those tough seasons have enormous consequences.

3. We need to broaden our focus so that difficult seasons don't become all consuming. When we are focused solely on the intensity of a tough season, it only becomes more overbearing.

   In the August heat of Mississippi, if all you talk about is the heat, plan your day to avoid the heat at all costs, and warn everyone else not to come here because it's too hot, I'll assure you that your summer will be tougher than it is for those who have learned to live in the heat, but not be consumed by it.

4. The hardest seasons can be a time of spiritual dryness, and so, like a tree in a drought, our roots need to grow deeper during these times. And these are vital seasons because without the most agonizing of times, we'd never be able to understand the grace of God like we would if the Lord only allowed us to have good seasons.

5. Even in the intensity of hard seasons, we need to ask God to help us find ways to treasure the little things. If you're waiting for a hard season to end before you allow yourself to look for joy and contentment again, it is likely you won't find it even if a good season returns.

We can learn to appreciate the tough season.

So let's look at the good seasons I'd suggest another five handles to help us breathe during those welcome seasons:

1. We need to take advantage of good seasons and focus on renewal - physically, emotionally, relationally, and spiritually. This are the times we can get life back into balance.

   You can't put energy into renewal when you're just barely hanging on by your fingertips during tough seasons, so when the good seasons come, we need to bring the harvest into the storehouse.

2. During the good seasons we need to be attentive to not become self-righteous, because we have it all together thanks to our own ability. Or we want to spread our wings in independence because we don't need God with the desperation we did during the hard seasons.

   Good seasons are used by the devil to tempt us to disconnect from God just as much as tough seasons are times of selfish temptations.

3. We need to use our good seasons to reach out with gentleness to help others who need someone to lean on as they are facing a tough season.

   Too often Christians want to come to the rescue with directives and proof-texts, rather than respond with the fruits of the spirit given to us in Galatians - love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control – which are gifts of the spirit. I can't find being a dogmatic-know-it-all in that list.

   This is the time to use the experience of our own breathing through tough seasons to be there for others. Henry Nowen calls it Listening with our Wounds, as most people need someone who listens more than they need advice.

   Our tough seasons prepare us for ministry to others in our good seasons.

4. During the good seasons we are prone to be judgmental of those who are overwhelmed with a hard season that may be of their own making. Christians are too quick to criticize and too slow to empathize.
   During the same years Dr. Fitzhugh was dealing with the challenges of growing the young Belhaven College, the insightful Scottish minister, Oswald Chambers wrote about criticizing saying,

   > Jesus' instructions with regard to judging others are very simply put; He says "Don't." The average Christian is the most piercingly critical individual known. . . .

> The Holy Spirit is the only one in the proper position to criticize, and He alone is able to show what is wrong without hurting and wounding. . . .
>
> Stop having a measuring stick for other people. There is always at least one more fact, which we know nothing about, in every person's situation. . . .
>
> I have never met a person I could despair of, or lose all hope for, after discerning what lies in me apart from the grace of God.

Sounds like the sin of judging hasn't changed much in the last century.

5. The good seasons are the time to assure we are living in Godly humility – or to use the more accurate description from Ecclesiastes, "to fear the Lord."

   Because the nature of seasons is that they not only have a starting point, but they all have an ending point as well. So too, the good seasons will end and the overwhelming seasons will return.

When we learn to breathe in and out the seasons of life...

- panic is replaced with contentment
- selfishness is replaced with gratitude, and
- struggle is replaced with trust.

While we already enjoy a deep spiritual maturity among our faculty and staff, imagine how much more could the Lord use us, if the people of Belhaven University learned to help each other develop deeper spiritual breathing?

Belhaven University is only as strong as we each are in our personal walks with Christ. And we can't share with students the transforming power of God, unless we are experiencing it ourselves in both the good and bad seasons of life.

May we each better learn to breathe through the seasons by accepting, adjusting to, and appreciating the seasons. And when we do, God will have us properly prepared to teach and support our students to find their satisfaction in knowing God has a time for every purpose under heaven.

Let me close by telling you of a remarkable two hours I had this summer when God allowed me to enjoy a fresh understanding of Belhaven's breathing through the seasons.

In June we hosted for a week the Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization on our campus, bringing together some of the most influential evangelism leaders from around the world.

They were overwhelmed by Belhaven's hospitality to them. So through the week they wanted to understand more about the uniqueness of Belhaven, because as many told me, they had never been on a campus like this before.

We even gave them our tee shirts that say Mississippi is Hot on one side, and Belhaven is Cool on the other side, which I've heard through their emails are now being proudly worn all around the world.

Several of them wanted a campus tour, and so we borrowed several of the golf carts to show them around. It has been years since I've given anyone a full campus tour so to take that much time and cover this campus from end-to-end, was a remarkably encouraging time to reflect on the seasons of Belhaven and remember God's provision through each time of joy and trouble.

We started at the student center and I told them how we decided to build it when many were less than convinced we needed a student center, and the school had never attempted to raise that much in our history.

I told them of a pivotal meeting half-way through the campaign with some of our board leaders when we felt we'd exhausted all our options, and it would be impossible to raise the money.

At that time we talked about the success of this not being our reputation, but it was the Lord's reputation at stake. And somehow the dollars came in – and that building permanently changed our campus culture.

We kept breathing, because to everything there is a season, a time for every purpose under heaven.

We drove through the parking lot between the gym and the pavilion and stopped where the old auditorium once stood until Tom Phillips tore it down.

I showed them the exact place in that basement where I was standing when in 1996 the SACS accrediting team pulled me aside privately to tell me that they would give us only one year to turn this place around and if we didn't, they would put us on probation. I never told anyone of that conversation for a dozen years, and somehow we weathered that dark season.

We kept breathing, because to everything there is a season, a time for every purpose under heaven.

We drove by Gillespie Hall and I told them how we desperately needed that residence hall during a time when the school was in such financial trouble we couldn't imagine anyone would lend us money to build.

But our friends on the board twisted the arms of nearly every bank in town to get them to build a coalition of banks to stand with us during such a tough time.

We kept breathing, because to everything there is a season, a time for every purpose under heaven.

We drove our golf carts back behind the gym and I told them of the fun of starting intercollegiate football, when we filled in a big portion of the lake to make a practice field and added onto the gym for football and dance.

And I told them how those changes spring-boarded our incredible achievement in the Arts as one of only 30 schools in America independently accredited in all four arts, and put our athletics into a new arena that then eventually opened up for us a new academic reach in athletic leadership that could be enormous for the Kingdom work.

We kept breathing, because to everything there is a season, a time for every purpose under heaven.

We went into the Bitsy Irby building, and I shared the remarkable story of that being a “one check” building. How Charles Irby called me on a Monday before Thanksgiving to tell me he had good news and bad news.

He reminded me his family was selling their company and on that Sunday evening they got into an argument over what they should do with the company owned insurance policy on their father. Charles said, we all stopped and said, we don’t argue about money in this family, so let’s just give it to Belhaven if we can’t decide.

So, Charles was the one designated to call me and report the good news we were going to become the beneficiaries of a $6 million insurance policy on 80 year-old Mr. Irby. The bad news was that we have to buy out the cash value and make the annual premium payment.

I did a quick calculation and weighed the half-million dollar buy out against receiving $6 million someday, and said, okay, we’ll take the deal. Well, Charles said, I’m going to give you a quarter million and my brother Stuart will match it, so that should take care of that.

But he was quick to remind me, you have to make the $180,000 annual premium payment every year, or the policy will have no value. That computation was easier and I said yes. But Charles added, well, Dad is going to give you a million dollars and he figures that will last as long as he does.

Only seven weeks later Mr. Irby died, and not only did we receive the $6 million from the life insurance, but we never touched the $1 million set aside for the premium, so the gift was $7 million in total, and we built the Bitsy Irby building.

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I next brought the group up to this Center for the Arts and while standing together on this stage, lighted only by the stained glass windows, I told them the remarkable story of how this building came to us.

How we desperately needed a significant Arts Center but the cost would be $25 million and we had no place to put it.

Then impressed by the Lord one afternoon I pulled in the parking lot of this church, met the pastor for the first time, introduced myself and said, “I want to buy your church.” He said it’s not for sale, and I said that’s alright, I haven’t got any money anyway, but I still want to buy it.

But after a brief tour I’d never seen a facility so perfectly designed as an arts center. Long story made shorter, the congregation thought they would need to wait 7 years in order to sell the building because of some of their elderly members. But 7 months later we owned it, and paid about 10 cents on the dollar for what it would have cost to build new.

One of my favorite parts of the story was that after the first chapel held here, with every seat filled and students sitting on the floor, the chairman of their board had tears running down his face at the end of that service as he told me that for 30 years he prayed God would fill this church – he just never expected it to happen this way.

The Lord built this facility as an arts center and let that congregation use it for 30 years until we were ready for it.

We kept breathing, because to everything there is a season, a time for every purpose under heaven.

While we were here, I broadened our tour beyond what they could see from the golf carts and explained to them

- how we have a heart for adult and graduate students and have campuses in six cities.
- how the Chattanooga and Atlanta campuses came about through an off handed hallway conversation with the Covenant College president
- how we now train 100 intercity pastors in Memphis
- how we stepped out on faith to do online education right
- how our worldview curriculum set a new standard for Christian higher education
- how our faculty run counter to the rest of the academy in their Godly service
- how we don't have a long-range plan but trust God's wind to blow
- how we'd grown in numbers, influence, and academic programs so that it was appropriate to change our name to University.

And I shared with them why our Standard is Christ.

We kept breathing, because to everything there is a season, a time for every purpose under heaven.

Our tour ended on the steps of Preston Hall where I told them how our second president, Dr. Preston gave Belhaven to the Presbyterian church after another fire in 1910, six years after Dr. Fitzhugh's death.

I recounted how the Presbytery of Central Mississippi took such a bold step to come out on this dirt road and build a brick structure that was three stories high and 250 feet across, plus two wings.

And then I told them the story of 1927 when President Gillespie was in New York City taking a course in college architecture at Columbia because he knew Belhaven would need to go beyond our single building if we were to grow as a college.

While there, the course required that he develop a campus master plan, and he developed a design that removed the center section of Belhaven's one building in order to create the open campus feel we enjoy today between Preston and Fitzhugh Halls with the fountain in between.

At the end of that course, while on the train to Princeton to visit the president of that Presbyterian University, he received a telegram reporting there had been a terrible fire at Belhaven and there was no chance to save the building.

After the most important three hours in Belhaven's history, he received another telegram saying the board had met and were making plans to rebuild.

And a few days later Dr. Gillespie arrived on campus to find the original center section of the building destroyed. So rolled out the plans he'd drawn weeks earlier to remove the center section to make it into the buildings we know today.

We kept breathing, because to everything there is a season, a time for every purpose under heaven.

After that final story of our tour, it got quiet among the group – maybe it was the story or maybe it was the heat at the end of an afternoon. But one of them looked across the fenced off Fitzhugh Hall, and asked, what was going to happen there?

I shared with them the set of events I shared with you earlier, and when I finished, one of my European friends asked how much your government was going to give us to build Fitzhugh Hall?

Shocked that the answer was zero, he then asked what trusts are going to help us? I explained we don't have that kind support here in Mississippi.

Then, as the enormous challenge before us sunk into him, he almost shouted, "then where are you going to get the money!!!

I told him – I don't know, but through all the good and the bad seasons of Belhaven, God has never shown up late on our campus.

> We just need to keep breathing, because to everything there is a season, a time for every purpose under heaven.

So we are confident, God will be with us in this season. Just as he has been with us in all the seasons since 1894 when God inspired Dr. Fitzhugh to not be fearful to breathe through the seasons of challenge to starting a brand new Christian college in Jackson, Mississippi.

To everything there is a season, a time for every purpose under heaven.