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Ecclesiastes 3:1–8 ESV

3 *For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven:*

- ² *a time to be born, and a time to die;
a time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is planted;*
- ³ *a time to kill, and a time to heal;
a time to break down, and a time to build up;*
- ⁴ *a time to weep, and a time to laugh;
a time to mourn, and a time to dance;*
- ⁵ *a time to cast away stones, and a time to gather stones together;
a time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing;*
- ⁶ *a time to seek, and a time to lose;
a time to keep, and a time to cast away;*
- ⁷ *a time to tear, and a time to sew;
a time to keep silence, and a time to speak;*
- ⁸ *a time to love, and a time to hate;
a time for war, and a time for peace.*

Ecclesiastes 9:5–6 ESV

⁵ *For the living know that they will die, but the dead know nothing, and they have no more reward, for the memory of them is forgotten. ⁶ Their love and their hate and their envy have already perished, and forever they have no more share in all that is done under the sun.*

Ecclesiastes 12:1-3,6,8 ESV, abridged

12 *Remember also your Creator in the days of your youth, before the evil days come and the years draw near of which you will say, “I have no pleasure in them”;*
² *before the sun and the light and the moon and the stars are darkened and the clouds return after the rain, ³ in the day when the keepers of the house tremble, and the strong men are bent, ⁶ before the dust returns to the earth as it was, and*

the spirit returns to God who gave it. ⁸ Vanity of vanities, says the Preacher; all is vanity.

Before the evil days.

Ecclesiastes is perhaps the oddest book in the Bible. At a minimum, it embodies a somewhat odd theology. It is jaded, in that the author tells young people to honor God and live by the rules of God, while also saying that “the dead have no reward”. It begins with a passage that was a big hit in 1965 and was recorded by the Byrds. Let’s begin with some background on Ecclesiastes. I will keep it short. According to the text, the author is Qoheleth, which is not a person’s name. In Hebrew the word means “one who speaks to an assembly”, and it probably identifies the author as a teacher. When translating the Bible, Luther mis-translated this as “preacher”, which is why our third quote has the word preacher in it. In truth, the author also identifies himself as the son of King David, as well as a king himself, which would mean that the author would have to be King Solomon. But as we have seen before, ancient writers often attributed works to famous people in order to show respect, so we cannot be sure who wrote it. We should note, though, that the writing in the book is just the sort of writing we might expect of him, given what we know of King Solomon. In particular, the book shows a very scholarly knowledge of the Wisdom literature, and Solomon

was closely associated with the works of the Sages. In the book, traditional, theologically based wisdom statements are juxtaposed with very theologically jaded, negative statements about his experiences in life. Ecclesiastes was written around 250 B.C. The book was clearly written over a number of years and it is a sort of philosophical autobiography. In sum, the book tells the reader that morality should indeed be unconditional and not based on any perceived rewards from God – but the writer does not appear to believe that humans hold any exalted place in God’s universal order, and he also does not seem to believe that God will punish evil.

The book contains a passage that made the Byrds famous, who, by recording this song, made Ecclesiastes famous: *For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven; a time to be born, and a time to die; a time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is planted; a time to kill, and a time to heal; a time to love, and a time to hate; a time for war, and a time for peace.* This passage acknowledges the cycles that God has created on earth, the natural cycle of life and death being most prominent. These preset, dependable cycles give us a sense of stability in a sometimes frightening and unpredictable world. This is actually a beautiful reminder for all of us: we don’t have to focus only on just the Bible and the example of Jesus Christ in order to live with joy; we can get security

and a reminder of God's blessings simply by looking at the world around us. God created the world not just as a temporary home for us; it is also a beautiful gift in itself. Accepting God's grace can be as simple as enjoying the world around us.

Let's move onto something about Ecclesiastes that seems not so positive. Consider our second quote:⁵*For the living know that they will die, but the dead know nothing, and they have no more reward, for the memory of them is forgotten.* ⁶*Their love and their hate and their envy have already perished, and forever they have no more share in all that is done under the sun.* This is a very pessimistic, cynical view of life. It seems to say that all we can look forward to is dying, and that there is no reward for living a moral, caring, forgiving, gracious life. As Christians, we can be as much like Jesus as we can possibly be, but in the end, we are forgotten and have no part in anything God has created. But there is another way of looking at this quote, and in order to appreciate this passage properly, we need to look at the context in which it was written. Remember that the Judeo-Christian understanding of life after death evolved mostly during the Christian age, and before Christ, the Israelites and then the Jews sometimes thought of the afterlife as an unpleasant place. What the author is really saying here is that even though lots of things go wrong in life, we need to keep in mind that we will ultimately die – and God wants us to enjoy being here on Earth. We

are to celebrate life and not worry that God will hold it against us when we have fun. But indeed, the author clearly does not believe in an eternal life in the Kingdom of God. We, as Christians, see a continuity of life that spans death; in Solomon's pre-Christian world, this is not what people thought. Indeed, we should enjoy the stunning things that God has placed on our planet, and we should enjoy living among those mountains, seas, rivers, forests, and sunsets.

Our last quote comes very near the tail end of Ecclesiastes: **12** *Remember also your Creator in the days of your youth, before the evil days come and the years draw near of which you will say, "I have no pleasure in them"; ² before the sun and the light and the moon and the stars are darkened and the clouds return after the rain, ⁶ before the dust returns to the earth as it was, and the spirit returns to God who gave it. ⁸ Vanity of vanities, says the Preacher; all is vanity.*

This passage is almost as famous as our first quote, despite the fact that no rock'n'roll band ever recorded it. This is actually a warning to young people that they need to remember that they will grow old, and with age comes problems. This is what the author calls the "evil days", the problems that come with aging. So, young people should not wait until they are older to remember that they are responsible to God and God's commandment to be good to others. In the end, the author warns, nothing that has happened in life really matters. When he says

vanity of vanities, the teacher – who is not a preacher because a preacher is a post-Bible concept – says that everything is meaningless. So, pay attention to how God says we should live. That is what matters. Remember that this was written by someone who didn't have the concept we have of a beautiful afterlife, and yet, even this writer – who might have been Solomon himself – saw that we get the most happiness out of living for God. That says a lot – believing in living in a Godly way for no eternal Christian reward. The author was a truly godly person.

So, there we have it. Right now, we are living in a stressful time where there is a lot of doubt about the future. We should listen to this possible-Solomon, this teacher. There are times when I am very strongly tempted to think only of the things of this world, not the things of God's world. The two worlds are tightly intertwined, and in fact, God created both of them. But there is a difference: one is the world created by God through the hands of people and the other is the world created directly by God. The second one includes nature when it is untouched by humans. But more importantly, it includes the purity of the values taught by Christ. He was a very poor man, a brilliant person who owned virtually nothing, never traveled far from home, hung out with uneducated, illiterate people, who, like him, were denied higher places in human life because they were born into a class of people who were kept down by the Roman powers

and by the religious and political leaders of their own people. But Christ was satisfied with this life. He was offered earthly riches by Satan, or more precisely, Satan, in the desert, reminded Jesus that Jesus could wield ultimate power. But Jesus rejected this. Jesus refused to be corrupted. We know that powerful people throughout history have used their power to destroy themselves morally. When I am tempted to throw myself into the things of the human-crafted world, I try to look up at those mountains and remember that while we do need to use our abilities as creative workers to better our lives, to grow food and make clothing and build homes, and while we do need to use our skills to serve each other, the basics, the foundation of our happiness, rests on the things made directly by God and untouched by us. These include the beauties of nature, along with the abstract values taught by Christ. These matter so much more than buying a new computer or finding a way to buy a bigger house or a luxury car.

Consider some of the lines from our first quote: *a time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to seek, and a time to lose; a time to love, and a time to hate; a time for war, and a time for peace.* These are strong words. We know that the cycle of life includes a time to weep and a time to laugh. We understand that we will find what we want sometimes and fail at other times. But is there really a time for hate and a time for war? The author says there is. Remember that the

author doesn't say that these are good things, necessarily. Solomon, or whoever was claiming to be him, is simply saying that these things are going to happen in a world in which humans have so much power. We have to expect things that seem to inherently be wrong. You might argue that there are things we should hate, like evil, and that some wars are totally justified. But we know that hatred and war, when they unavoidable, are the result of humanity failing in its task of living the way God wants us to live. That's the bottom line. That is what the author is saying: humans are imperfect and do very wrong things. But, as Christians, we know that there is always a time for forgiveness and restoration. That is our answer, today. Solomon didn't have the benefit of living after Jesus. We do. We know that there is never a reason to be cynical. Evil never has to be permanent.

One of the oldest and longest pieces of literary composition from the ancient world is called the Epic of Gilgamesh, which is a story about a king struggling to obtain immortality but failing at doing so. It is perhaps two thousand years older than Ecclesiastes. There are lines in Ecclesiastes that are very similar to lines in the Epic of Gilgamesh. The Epic was certainly known to people in King Solomon's time, and he was certainly well read himself. In Gilgamesh, there is a tavern keeper who advises the hero, King Gilgamesh, that given the fact that all people will die, humans should simply try to enjoy life the

most they can. They should eat, drink, and enjoy their children and spouses. Clearly, this is something that humans have thought about since the dawn of human thought. What do we do with our lives knowing that they will end? For us as Christians, we know that God wants us to enjoy our time on this planet. But also as Christians, we know that we cannot sit around and be merry while others are suffering. We know that God has given us a special gift: our happiness in life is increased when we are able to lift others up. In fact, the best way to soften the impact of those evil days is to lessen the evil in the days of those around us. That is the heart of our faith, the core of what Jesus taught. Please pray with me.

God, please help us calm down and relax and enjoy the world you have given us - and help us remember that it is your creations that make us happy, not our creations. We appreciate those cycles of life that give us security and continuity. And thank you for a gift that we do not share with the author of the Epic of Gilgamesh or the Book of Ecclesiastes. This gift is knowing that the kingdom of God continues for eternity, that when the evil days end, there will be an infinite number of glorious days. Finally, help us remember that we have another gift that others in the past have not always shared – and that is the knowledge that by lifting others up, our evil days will not be so evil at all. Amen.