

A Time for Everything under Heaven #4

Ecclesiastes 3:4; Matthew 5:4

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King Solomon comes to us in Ecclesiastes as a penitent preacher. Having fallen away from the God of his salvation and having been restored back into that blessed communion with His Savior, he lays before us with all transparency and honesty how he sought to find joy and happiness in the knowledge, possessions, and pleasures of this life. However, what he found from all his searching was emptiness and meaninglessness. Solomon surely had the knowledge and wisdom, the wealth and riches, the power and authority, the fame and prestige to find true joy, if it could be found in the things of this life. But his testimony is clear and credible: Apart from Christ, there is no enduring joy, peace, and contentment.

King Solomon has now turned his attention from where you won't find that joy, to where you will find it, as we work our way through Ecclesiastes 3. That peace that passes all understanding, that joy of the Lord that carries us through the many changes in life, that contentment that is thankful for what one presently has from God rather than sulking over what one does not have is found only in our most holy, most wise, most loving, and most powerful Lord, who has foreordained every event that occurs in your life and mine, for His own glory and for the good of His beloved children (Ecclesiastes 3:11). And because of this, every event, every motion, and every season has meaning and purpose in the hands of our Heavenly Father.

How can you find the joy of the Lord as you and your loved ones pass through death, illness, poverty, persecution, marital problems, besetting sins, or the injustice of others? I have learned from Solomon that when everything around me seems to be falling apart, the only way to find stability and security, peace and joy is to cast myself upon my loving Heavenly Father, who has foreordained everything for His glory and for my good. The duty is mine to trust Him, love Him, and obey Him. The working out of every event for my good I must leave with Him. Dear ones, as we focus on our duties and leave the results to Him, what an amazing and blessed peace sweeps over our souls.

Solomon continues in Ecclesiastes 3 to give us a summary of every changeable event in life that has been divinely appointed from all eternity to occur, so that we might know the joy of the Lord as we cast ourselves entirely and wholly upon the Lord God Almighty. Today we shall consider the following events in life: (1) God Has Ordained and Controls Times of Weeping and Laughing as Well as Times of Mourning and Dancing (Ecclesiastes 3:4).

I. God Has Ordained and Controls Times of Weeping and Laughing as Well as Times of Mourning and Dancing (Ecclesiastes 3:4).

A. When divinely appointed times of weeping and mourning or divinely appointed times of laughing and dancing come into our lives, we are to climb by faith into the lap of our Heavenly Father, so that we might learn to be content in whatever the circumstance that comes our way, knowing He will use it for our good.

B. In verse 4, there are two sets of couplets. First, "a time to weep, and a time to laugh." Second, "a time to mourn, and a time to dance." I will not be dealing with these couplets separately, but rather will be considering them together under this main point. For it would appear the second couplet ("a time to mourn,

and a time to dance”) is not essentially different from the first couplet (“a time to weep, and a time to laugh”). Rather the difference between the two couplets would appear to be one of degree. Mourning seems to include weeping, but does so to a greater degree. The Hebrew word for “mourn” expresses grief that extends not only to weeping but even to loud wailing. Likewise, the Hebrew word for “dance” expresses joy that extends not only to laughing, but even to skipping about with glee.

1. Let us first consider those divinely appointed times of weeping in grief and even wailing in sorrow.

a. There are certainly LAWFUL times foreordained by God to weep and to wail. Let us consider a few of those times.

(1) First, we are to LAWFULLY mourn over our own sin and the sin of others.

(a) The Lord Jesus has taught us, “Blessed are they that mourn”, that is, blessed are they that mourn over sin (in Matthew 5:4). Dear ones, one aspect of repentance is a godly sorrow over how we have offended our most holy, wise, loving, and merciful God by our sin. The sins we have committed both before conversion and after conversion (whether we consider them great or small) are the very sins that sent our Savior to the cross to suffer as no man has ever suffered under the hands of wicked men and under the hands of a holy God. If it does not break our hearts that Christ bore the agony of the cross for OUR sin, then I don’t know what will break our hearts. When we consider the goodness of God and His commandments, are we not broken before Him that we would ignore, neglect, or despise that which is so holy, so wise, and so good? The work of God’s Spirit within us brings us to see our sin in rebelling against that which is so holy, wise, and good. Dear ones, where there is no mourning over sin, there can be no joy in knowing the forgiveness of sin.

(b) We should also sorrow over the sins of others as well (and that includes the sins which others commit against us). Rather than stewing in vengeance, we ought to be mourning. Rather than brewing in resentment, we ought to be sorrowing. Rather than seething in angry bitterness, we ought to be broken and contrite. For how can we ever get around to being reconciled with others who have sinned against us if we are not humbled by their sin (even as we should be humbled by our own sin)? There will be no reconciliation between us and others if we come to the table looking down our noses in pride, bitterness, or vengeance at others because they have sinned against us (or because they have committed such a great sin). We will be just like the Pharisee in the parable the Lord gave in Luke 18:10-14. Dear ones, such times of brokenness over sin are appointed by God according to Solomon. There are also divinely appointed times of collective prayer, fasting, and humiliation before our righteous yet gracious God, when the church has fallen away from the love of Christ or the doctrine of Christ, or when a nation has forgotten the solemn covenants that bind her to her God (as we see in Joel 2:12-13).

(2) Second, we are to LAWFULLY mourn over the miseries that sin has brought into this world: such as, death, war, disease, famine, natural catastrophes, divorce, and poverty (to name a few). To watch as the body of a loved one is lowered into the grave, or to suffer with a loved one whose last days in this world are filled with pain from the effects of cancer, or to read of the devastation of war, or to hear how children have suffered through a painful divorce should also be the occasion for divinely appointed times of mourning as well. Granted, in one sense, we become desensitized to the grief of others by having it brought into our homes by means of TV, radio, and the internet. However, dear ones, we ought not to forget as we watch from a distance the suffering of others that but for the grace of God, it could be you or me or one of our family members. It is also true that because of the kind of work that we do, wherein we are brought very close to suffering, we could be completely overwhelmed with grief and sorrow (and over the effects of sin all around us) if that were all that we had to fall upon. Praise God that is not all that we have (as we shall see).

b. There are also times of UNLAWFUL mourning, which likewise have been

foreordained by God from all eternity. These examples of UNLAWFUL sorrow are sinful and committed by the free acts of men, and yet they are all foreordained by God in His appointed season. In these examples of UNLAWFUL sorrow, God is neither the author nor the approver of sin. According to Solomon, our great and mighty God even takes these ugly examples of sin and works them for the beautifying and sanctifying of His people (Ecclesiastes 3:11).

(1) First, there is a type of UNLAWFUL sorrow that simply regrets the unfortunate events that have occurred because there were certain bad consequences that followed. There may be sorrow over regrettable consequences to certain actions, but there is no godly sorrow over how an infinitely holy God or an infinitely merciful God has been offended in the breaking of His good commandments. There is no actual admission of sin committed against a wife/husband, against a parent/child, against a brother/sister. Such a worldly sorrow stops short of that godly sorrow that leads to life (2 Corinthians 7:10). The sorrow of the world (when the world says "I'm sorry") usually means, "I regret that there were such bad consequences to my actions or to the actions of others." Or "I'm sorry" may simply mean, "I regret that I got caught." But such sorrow is wicked if it stops there. Such sorrow leads not to salvation, but to damnation. Godly sorrow grieves over the offence we have committed against God and our neighbor, and confesses the offence as our own, and seeks the forgiveness of those we have offended by our sin.

(2) A second type of UNLAWFUL sorrow is what might be called an obsession with mourning and grieving. If we spend so much time wallowing in grief and sorrow, how can the joy of the Lord be manifested? If all we can focus on is how sinful we are (or how sinful others are), how will the forgiveness of God ever be evidenced in our lives? How will reconciliation with others ever be achieved if we only mourn? I am not aware of any place in Scripture that states that sorrow over sin is our strength (even as necessary as that type of grief and sorrow is in our lives when faithfully exercised). However, I am aware of what God has told us through Nehemiah: "For the joy of the LORD is your strength" (Nehemiah 8:10). How can the joy of the Lord be our strength if we never quite make it to the joy of the Lord because of our obsession with sorrow? Or remember the words of Christ from the latter half of that great beatitude, "Blessed are they that mourn: FOR THEY SHALL BE COMFORTED" (Matthew 5:4). It is true that we can only know the comfort of God as we mourn over sin and its effects. But it is also true that grief over sin is always to lead to the peace and comfort that comes from knowing that there is forgiveness with Christ. "For where sin abounded, grace did much more abound" (Romans 5:20).

(3) A third type of UNLAWFUL sorrow is that sorrow which swallows up those who grieve over sin while leaving no hope. This kind of sorrow over sin brings forth despair and hopelessness (2 Corinthians 2:7; 1 Thessalonians 4:13). Dear ones, our sorrow over sin and its consequences is not to be an absolute sorrow, but a sorrow where there is always hope in Christ. Sorrow is not an end in itself, but is the means to a godly rejoicing. For our constant hope in this life is this: sin and all of its devastating effects have been defeated by our glorious Savior, who has brought life and immortality to light by His death and resurrection. If we allow sorrow to overwhelm us, we act as though Christ was still in the grave, as if there is no hope. Dear ones, the good news is that Christ not only overcame sin for us by His death, He also overcame all of the consequences of sin by His death as well. And the resurrection of Christ from the dead undeniably proves it. Although such times of unlawful grief and sorrow are foreordained by the Lord, they are sinful extremes to which we may be carried by our own self-righteousness, thinking it is more holy to grieve than it is to rejoice, or by our own unbelief thinking there is no reason to rejoice or to be thankful. The Lord is mighty to deliver all of you who are brokenhearted today. Dear ones, the Lord Jesus came for this very purpose (Luke 4:18-19).

2. Second, let us consider those divinely appointed times and seasons of laughing and dancing (Ecclesiastes 3:4).

a. Dear ones, times of laughing, dancing, skipping with joy, and having a merry

heart are not only divinely appointed according to God's most holy and wise plan, they are also LAWFUL. And I would add that they are also beneficial to our body and profitable to our soul. Medical studies have demonstrated the benefits of a merry soul, which simply corroborates what God has revealed in His own word (Proverbs 15:13,15; Proverbs 17:22). Let us briefly consider occasions of LAWFUL laughing and dancing.

(1) First, there are divinely appointed times of joy and laughing over the many blessings we have undeservedly received from the Lord our God (both material and spiritual blessings). There were not only times of mourning and fasting for sins committed that were appointed by God for Israel, but there were also times of rejoicing and thanksgiving for gracious blessings received that were appointed by God for Israel (Deuteronomy 16:11,14; Esther 9:17-19). Dear ones, our fellowship meals as a church are not to be characterized by sorrow and grief, but by joy and thanksgiving. The Sabbath day is indeed a holy day. Certainly the Sabbath ought to be kept with all due reverence. But it is not being kept with the reverence it deserves, if the joy of the Lord, if the enjoyment of our Christian fellowship, if the gladness of heart over the many blessings of God is excluded from the Sabbath. I would submit that to exclude such holy cheer from the Sabbath would be to break the Sabbath. For the very purpose of the Sabbath is to give us a foretaste of the joy, happiness, gladness, laughing, and dancing that shall fill our lives in the glories of heaven. Even the Lord's Supper must not be overwhelmed with sorrow and grief to the exclusion of joy and thanksgiving. Dear ones, if the Lord's Supper does not put a smile on our face as we reflect on the love of Christ toward us as undeserving sinners, what will or what can legitimately do so? I dare say, that though the Christian must mourn over sin, that which should characterize the Christian's life is the joy of the Lord—a joy that can be seen (as in skipping for joy), a joy that is expressed (as in laughing), and a joy that is contagious. I have known a few people whose laugh was so real and sincere that it brightened a whole room of people, who were involved in their own conversations. That is the power of a godly, wholesome laugh. Some of us have a lot of praying and diligent work to do in this area. Some of us are very good at mourning over sin, but very poor at rejoicing in the goodness of our God, who has richly blessed us with all things to enjoy to His glory and for our good.

(2) Second, there are divinely appointed times of LAWFUL laughing in response to the vain attempts of the wicked to overthrow God, to conquer His Christ, to alter His plan, or to destroy His people (Psalm 2:4; Psalm 52:6). Such laughter is uttered to show our confidence in the wisdom and power of our God, and to reveal how foolish man is to think that he can overcome our God.

b. Finally, there are times of laughing and dancing that are UNLAWFUL, but are nevertheless divinely appointed by our most holy, wise, and good God.

(1) First, there are times of UNLAWFUL laughter (ordained by God) in which that which is holy or that which is to be feared is that at which people laugh. This is a profane laughter not a godly laughter. It is treating with contempt and making fun of that which is sacred, such as, God Himself, the Sabbath, God's worship, the Church of Jesus Christ, individual Christians, the commandments of God, or the doctrine of Christ. How many times have you heard or told jokes about that holy place called heaven? How many times have you heard or told jokes about that place of torment called hell? If we can make fun of God or such things as mentioned above, we take them from their place of importance and make them common, ordinary, and even contemptible.

(2) Second, there are also times of UNLAWFUL laughter that are directed toward that which is wicked, perverse, or immoral. Ungodly humor that laughs and makes light of the sins of others is also wrong (whether it be laughing at the anger of others, or at the immorality of others, or at the foul speech of others, or at the drunkenness of others). This is to partake of the sins of others when we join in laughing at the sins of others in this way. It is to excuse their sin. It is to condone their sin. What should we do when such jokes are being told? At least, we should show some outward disagreement with what is being said. We may show our disagreement by turning away, by walking away, shaking our head, or by saying something appropriate.

As we close, notice carefully the order which Solomon follows. First, weeping and then laughing. Second, mourning and then dancing. Solomon would encourage us whenever we find ourselves in those divinely appointed seasons of weeping and mourning not to forget that there will yet be those divinely appointed seasons of laughing and dancing for the child of God (Psalm 137:1 speaks of a time of weeping; Psalm 126 not only speaks of a time of weeping, but a time of rejoicing). I don't know where you find yourself today, dear ones. You may have come today with a great burden that weighs you down. You may have come today with great discouragement over many disappointments. You may have come today in pain from some physical affliction. You may have come today battling some besetting sin that will not seem to let you go. Yes, there is a divinely appointed time of weeping and mourning, but never ever forget that there is also a divinely appointed time for laughing and dancing. There is hope in Christ, whatever the season you may be in presently. For nothing is impossible to our God. The point of this passage of Scripture is to teach us that all such times and seasons that come into our life have their divine appointment. And they have their divine appointment not for the destruction of the child of God or for the Church of Jesus Christ, but for our profit and benefit. For the Lord Almighty is able to take that which is painful, distorted, broken, even sinful, and use it in such a way that He turns it into something beautiful by His amazing grace. Dear ones, LEARNING to depend upon Christ, LEARNING to hope in Christ, LEARNING to commit all of our ways unto Christ, and LEARNING to wait upon Christ is not easy. But that is the lesson in the School of Christ that we are all learning day by day. Only as we learn those lessons will we know the joy of the Lord to be our strength. Only then will we know His peace, contentment, and comfort no matter what comes into our lives. Resting in our sovereign God and Father, who ordains all things for His glory and for our good, is the only place we will find true joy and happiness in this life. Let us by faith climb into the lap of our Heavenly Father until those divinely appointed times of weeping and mourning are passed. And when they are passed let us climb down to laugh and dance in the love, mercy, and goodness of God.

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