

A Time for Everything under Heaven #5

Ecclesiastes 3:5; Matthew 5:23-24

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We witnessed a couple weeks ago, in the devastation of hurricane Katrina, just how quickly the earthly hopes and dreams of people may be suddenly snatched from out of their hands. One week the streets of New Orleans are filled with the noise of people shopping, laughing, and living; and the next week those same streets are filled with the noise of people fleeing, weeping, and dying. All that for which they had worked was swept away in a few short hours.

Dear ones, how this illustrates for us in graphic colors the utter futility of placing all of our hope in anything in this world. For everything in this world will perish. It will be destroyed. It will be snatched from us whether before or at the time of our death. Jesus spoke of a foolish man in one of His parables who chose to build his house upon sand as opposed to a wise man who chose to build his house upon bedrock. The house built upon sand may have been more beautiful, more costly, and even larger than the house built upon bedrock. But Jesus taught when the floods come, everything in the house built upon sand will be lost, as the water eats away at that sand. Not so with the house built upon that firm foundation of bedrock.

What is your life built upon today? Is your hope in your family, your home, your job, your car, your financial security, or your health? If so, I tell you in love that you are foolishly building your life upon sand, and you will lose your life for all eternity in hell. Or is your hope in Jesus Christ and His unfailing forgiveness, righteousness, and life? If so, I tell you in love that you are wisely building your life upon Christ, the Rock of Gibraltar, and you will never lose your life, but will gain it now and for all eternity.

King Solomon, the wisest man to ever live (except for Jesus Christ), has written this book of Ecclesiastes by inspiration of the Holy Spirit to warn us that everlasting life, joy, peace, and contentment are not found in the pleasures of this life. Solomon speaks from experience. He tried with all of his wealth, all of his power, all of his knowledge to find a lasting satisfaction in the things of this world, but each time he pulled up his bucket from the fountain of the world, it was empty. Cast your bucket into the fountain and well of Christ, who alone gives us peace, joy, and satisfaction, even in the most difficult times of life.

Solomon states that there is a divinely appointed time and season for everything that happens upon earth (Ecclesiastes 3:1). Nothing is without meaning and purpose in life, even if we cannot understand the specific reason God intends (even hurricanes, poverty, famines, wars, and death have a Divine purpose). For, dear ones, everything is ordained by God, and is used by God for His own holy purpose, and for the good and benefit of those who trust Him and love Him (Romans 8:28). Thus, our enjoyment of God and all that He gives us in this life is proportionate to our trust in Him as a loving heavenly Father, who makes no mistakes and who can do us no wrong. Where there is no trust in the Lord who makes all things beautiful in His time, there will be no joy in the Lord.

This Lord's Day we continue our study in Ecclesiastes by considering two more couplets in Chapter 3, which remind us not to place our hope in the constantly changing things of this life, but to place our hope in the Rock of our salvation, who never changes and who is from everlasting to everlasting. The main points from Ecclesiastes 3:5 are these: (1) God Has Ordained and Controls Times of Casting and of Gathering Stones (Ecclesiastes 3:5a); and (2) God Has Ordained and Controls Times of Embracing and of Refraining from

Embracing (Ecclesiastes 3:5b).

I. God Has Ordained and Controls Times of Casting and of Gathering Stones (Ecclesiastes 3:5a).

A. The language of “casting stones” may seem a little odd at first to the ears of those who live in the 21st century here in the Western world.

1. To what events in life does Solomon refer when he states that there is a “time to cast away stones?” There are several different events that I would mention from the Old Testament Scriptures to which Solomon may refer.

a. First, when a house in ancient Israel was found to have a plague among the stones of the house, God commanded the priest to take away the stones of the house and to cast them into an unclean place outside the city (Leviticus 14:40). The disease that was in the house had to be judged; and the stones of the house had to be removed, so as to prevent further spread of the plague.

b. A second event in which the casting of stones was used occurred when a victorious nation would cast stones both into wells, so that water could not be drawn, and onto fields of a defeated nation, so that crops could not be grown (2 Kings 3:19,25). There was nothing more important to the lives of those living in the ancient world than water and crops. To destroy both of these necessities was to hasten almost certainly dehydration and starvation.

c. A third use of casting stones in the Old Testament was in regard to capital punishment. For one of the ways in which God commanded that criminals (deserving of death) were to be executed in Israel was by means of casting stones at the criminal until he/she died (Leviticus 20:2). Interestingly, even God Himself is said to have cast stones (hailstones) upon His enemies, the Amorites (in Joshua 10:11).

2. Thus, the idea of “casting stones” always seems to be used in the Scripture in the sense of some act of judgment. When Solomon declares that there is “a time to cast away stones,” he means to convey that the varied seasons of judgment within the world are not accidental, but rather are all ordained by an all-wise God, who is absolutely holy and absolutely good.

a. When the Lord prophesied in Matthew 24:2 that not one stone in the temple of Jerusalem would be left in place, but that all of the stones would be cast down, Christ was declaring that judgment was just around the corner for Jerusalem. The reason we do not recognize these times of casting away stones as times of judgment appointed by God is because our eyes have become calloused with spiritual cataracts (Jeremiah 8:7).

b. Dear ones, just as the Scripture speaks of God casting down hailstones from heaven as an act of judgment (in Joshua 10:11), so the Bible speaks of God casting down the floods of water that encompassed the earth, destroying not simply a city with water or a region with water, but destroying the whole world with water (Genesis 6-7).

c. Consider the words that we find Job 37:13. There we also see that God sends destruction upon the earth in the form of rain (or flooding) for correction (as a rod). Isaiah clearly proclaims to God: “When thy judgments are in the earth [in other words, when thy stones are cast upon the earth—GLP], the inhabitants of the world will learn righteousness” (Isaiah 26:19).

d. Dear ones, do we attribute hurricanes and floods (and other natural disasters) to “mother nature”, or rather to the hand of Almighty God? Have we forgotten who appoints such natural disasters, and why He does so? The flood that destroyed the whole world at the time of Noah was not a freak act of nature, but demonstrated the righteousness of a holy God against a rebellious people, and at the same time, it demonstrated His mercy to Noah and those in the ark who were preserved. Can we not see that He is a just God if He appoints such demonstrations of His power for all men to be humbled before Him and to own

Him as the one true living God? Can we not see that He is a merciful God in that not all inhabitants of a city or nation are destroyed so that we might flee to Him for His mercy, not only to save us from hurricanes, but to save us from an even greater judgment on that final day? Do your eyes see God working in such appointed seasons? Rejoice and flee to Christ. Are your eyes blinded to such acts of God in history? Be humbled and flee to Christ. For, dear ones, the Lord is speaking and you are not listening. We will all listen on that final Day of Judgment. None then will be sleeping. None then will be ignoring God. Heed the voice of God in His Book of Nature, but most importantly, heed the voice of God in the gospel of salvation that is preached to you today. Why will you perish in the flood of everlasting judgment? Christ calls you to enter into the ark of His salvation from the righteous judgment that shall befall all those who rebel against Him. He calls you to flee to Him that you might have everlasting life, might enjoy a peace that passes all understanding, and might delight in contentment in every circumstance of life.

e. When we see such acts of God's judgment upon a city, or upon a nation wherein He casts down His stones from heaven, are we to look down our noses in pride at those who have directly suffered under these events? God forbid. The Lord Jesus clearly taught us how to view such events that might even seem accidental in the eyes of men (in Luke 13:1-5). When we see God casting down His stones in judgment upon the earth, it is not a time to be haughty or arrogant. It is a time to repent of our own sin. It is a time to consider how short life is and how certain death is. It is a time to consider what our own sins justly deserve before the all-penetrating eye of a holy God. It is a time to cast ourselves upon the living God and to receive by faith alone Jesus Christ and His righteousness. Only as we receive Christ by faith alone can we find an enduring satisfaction, a calm and peace in our soul that all is well, and a joy in the Lord that all things will work together for our good, even when those divinely appointed seasons occur in which God righteously casts down His stones upon the earth.

B. Solomon not only addresses "a time to cast away stones," but also declares that there is also "a time to gather stones together." If "to cast away stones" speaks of judgment upon the earth, then "to gather stones together" must speak of blessing upon the earth, which the Lord also appoints. Rather than man boasting proudly in his abilities, his discoveries, his resources, his ingenuity, his progress, and his greatness when times of prosperity come upon a land or people, man should also see that all such times of blessing and prosperity are divinely appointed by God as well. God is the One who justly deserves all praise for times of peace and times of prosperity in our lives. When we enjoy such blessings of God, it is easy to forget the One who has given them to us. Then when we have lost those blessings, we seldom forget to complain to God about His having taken them from us. If the Lord causes the grass to grow for cattle (according to Psalm 104:14), and feeds the birds of the air (according to Christ in Matthew 6:26), He is certainly the one who feeds us and provides for us moment by moment (Matthew 6:31-33). Just as we do not fail to call out to God when we are lacking, let us not fail to call out to Him in thanksgiving, when we have all our needs supplied. The Lord also appoints all such times of peace and prosperity as well.

II. God Has Ordained and Controls Times of Embracing and of Refraining from Embracing (Ecclesiastes 3:5b).

A. It is much easier to understand how God ordains and appoints times of "gathering stones" and times of "embracing", than it is to understand how God ordains and appoints times of "casting stones" and times of "refraining from embracing". For, dear ones, "times of embracing" speak of times in which we take great pleasure (and understandably so). When Solomon declares there is "a time to embrace," he means, there is a divinely appointed time to show affection and love. This embracing and showing affection is primarily found in the family and in the Church of Jesus Christ.

1. A husband and a wife are certainly to show such loving affection for one another, as we see by way of application in Song of Solomon 2:6. To embrace one in this way, who is not your husband or wife, is shown to be a moral evil in Proverbs 5:20. Such embraces of love and affection ought to be based upon a matrimonial covenant, and until such a covenant is made between a couple in the presence of God, such demonstrations of love and affection are contradictory. For such embraces ought not to be mere expressions of our sexual drive (which any dating teen may exhibit). Such unlawful embraces (and other sexual acts) by those who are not bound by matrimonial covenant are included in God's eternal decree, but they are contrary to God's revealed will for man, as found in Scripture. I believe that same affection you husbands showed to your wives during your honeymoon (or you wives showed to your husbands) should continue to be alive and well in your marriage. Where are the loving glances you once gave when your beloved was on the other side of the room talking with others? Where are the affectionate words of love that at one time you couldn't resist giving? Where are the tender kisses and embraces that once manifested your love? Have you left your first love (among those of the earth) to whom you bound yourself to love till death part you both? It is time to renew your covenant of love with your husband or wife, where that love has grown cold or even lukewarm. It is so easy to drift apart due to business, due to different goals, due to arguments, or due to unfaithfulness in our lives in various ways. If you have drifted—renew your covenant of love in your heart right now and practice it in your marriage.

2. Family members should also manifest that same affection displayed in embracing one another. Laban embraced Jacob, his nephew (Genesis 29:13). Esau embraced Jacob, his brother (Genesis 33:4). Jacob embraced Ephraim and Manasseh, his grandsons (Genesis 48:10). In fact, the act of giving birth to a child is actually spoken of as "embracing a child" in 2 Kings 4:16. Dear ones, affection in the marriage between a husband and wife should also have the effect of exhibiting affection between parents and children and between other family members as well. We may not all have the same comfort level in showing affection, but that should not prevent us from showing some degree of affection within our family. For families are bound together by not only duty, but most importantly by love and affection for one another. Families that spend more time fighting, quarreling, and saying ugly things to one another, have forgotten the importance of showing affection. A hug at the right time can melt a heart that is hard.

3. Fellow members of Christ's Church should also be those who know how to show affection one to another as did the Apostle Paul (Acts 20:1). Christians at that time even greeted one another with a holy kiss on the cheek (1 Thessalonians 5:26). Now I understand that one person may not feel as comfortable as the next person in showing Christian love and affection for one another (and such an embrace must be devoid of sexual desires or avoided altogether). However, we are a family—God's family. We are brothers and sisters in Christ. We are to care for one another when there is a need. We are to encourage one another when our sins overwhelm us and when our afflictions and trials discourage us. We are to defend one another when one of us is unjustly attacked. We are to love one another AS Christ has loved us. And dear ones, that is the example of love and affection in the church—the love of Christ for us who are undeserving of the least act of kindness and love. Christ, knowing the worst about us, added human nature to his Divine nature, and humbled Himself in suffering humiliation as no man has ever suffered. Being absolutely holy and without sin, He loved an ungodly bride, and suffered the just wrath and condemnation she deserved, in order to deliver her from sin and condemnation by His righteousness. This is the greatest love story ever told. And if you do not grasp that love story, you will never be able to love anyone else as you ought to love. The love we are commanded to have for one another is summarized in 1 Corinthians 13. Are you growing in expressing this kind of love for one another?

4. Dear ones, never forget that when you show such selfless love and affection for wife/husband, for child/parent, for beloved friends, for fellow members of the church, you are mirroring the love the Lord Jesus Christ has for you. If God did not give us such love for one another, we would surely

destroy one another in word and in deed. God Himself appoints all times of embracing and showing affection. Have you thanked Him recently for all those appointed times?

B. Solomon concludes this couplet by stating as well that there is “a time to refrain from embracing.” The Hebrew word used here actually means “to be distant.” Not only is there a divinely appointed time to embrace and to show affection, there is also a divinely appointed time to be distant and not to embrace. The reason for being distant may be due to various reasons. I will mention at least two reasons.

1. There may be a time not to embrace, perhaps due to travel or employment, which take a husband away from his wife or a wife away from her husband. But there should always be a coming back together with renewed love and affection. That absence from one another should not push a husband and wife apart from one another (and into the arms of another), but should make one’s heart long all the more to be with the one who is loved.

2. There may also be a time not to embrace, perhaps due to sin and unfaithfulness, wherein that sin separates one from another, so that there is a barrier to the close communion and fellowship they had previously enjoyed. This may happen in any relationship. If you have offended someone else by your sin, it is your duty to humbly go to them, to confess your sin in sorrow, and to seek the forgiveness of the one offended, in order that that sin may not make you distant any longer (Matthew 5:23-24). If someone has offended you, it is also your duty to go to them, and to humbly explain to them the offense committed, praying that God might work repentance in that one, so that you can forgive the offense committed against you (Matthew 18:15). Where offenses are not confessed and repented of, but rather obstinately continued in, there will be a further distancing by a faithful church, where ultimately excommunication occurs (according to Christ in Matthew 18:17-18). However, it must always be understood that this distancing ourselves from one who is excommunicated is not so as to be cruel, not so as to show our hatred for that brother or sister in Christ, but is, in fact, to show Christ’s loving correction to those brothers or sisters who are obstinate in sin. But when one confesses his sin, repents of it, he is to be joyfully received by the church, just as the prodigal son was joyfully received by his father when he repented of his sin (Luke 15:10-24). For, dear ones, Jesus said that there is more joy in heaven over one sinner that is restored than over the 99 that never wandered away. These times of distancing ourselves from others are also times appointed by God for His glory and for the good of His people. It should be painful to us and we should sorrow when there is such a necessary distancing from one whom we love. It should hurt. There should not be celebration, but mourning in our hearts over the effects of sin. We should be humbled over such appointed times in which we must refrain from embracing others, and not filled with pride in our souls that we are not that kind of a sinner. We should hope in the Lord that He would in His kind mercy restore our fallen brethren to us. Is this your hope? Is this you desire? Is this your prayer? Only this hope in the Lord will bring a lasting joy, peace, and contentment, as we yet await that time to embrace that loved one once again.

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