

A TIME TO MOURN AND A TIME TO REJOICE

by Shawn D. Handran

For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, so that by steadfastness and by the encouragement of the scriptures we might have hope.¹

So writes the apostle Paul in a letter to Christians in Rome; speaking of the power and enduring witness that the Scriptures convey of God's revelation to and loving-kindness for His creation. Paul, a man of great learning and undoubtedly the most well-versed of the apostles in the Law, Prophets and Writings (the Hebrew Scriptures, or the Old Testament as we call it today), must certainly have had the little book written by *Qoheleth* in mind when he wrote to the believers in Rome. I would even venture to guess that such a great preacher and powerful evangelist as Paul sought insight, inspiration and guidance from the writings of *Qoheleth*, for *Qoheleth* is the Hebrew word for "preacher." Today, we no longer call this gem of the Hebrew Writings *Qoheleth*, but rather from the Greek and Latin form², *Ecclesiastes*, meaning "leader of an assembly"—or preacher, as we would say today.

What is it about *Ecclesiastes* that remains so powerful and moving today? I count it among my most treasured readings from the Bible—tears rolled down my cheeks as a relative read from *Ecclesiastes* at my Uncle Leo's funeral. I even concluded my doctoral dissertation (a thoroughly secular work) with the entire closing chapter of *Ecclesiastes*. Some commentators struggle in an attempt to reconcile its seemingly anomalous message of hopelessness with the diametrically opposite message of hope offered by the Good News of Jesus Christ. Other commentators observe the emotional effect that *Ecclesiastes* can evoke in the reader—I have even read of one commentator likening a reading of *Ecclesiastes* to "slipping into a warm bath."³ (I can relate to this commentator!) While I don't claim to fully understand the mind of God, let me offer this interpretation of why I believe *Ecclesiastes* remains so powerful to this day, or as Paul might say, why *Ecclesiastes* was written for our instruction, encouragement and hope.

Qoheleth does what any good preacher does—he shows the world as it is. The vivid imagery and poetry that he invokes about the pain, joy, sorrow, excitement, grief, mystery, injustice and vanity in life is something that we can all powerfully relate to—who on this Earth hasn't shared in some (or much) of the same experiences as *Qoheleth*? Very few can claim that they haven't engaged in empty pursuits that were attempts to find fulfillment and meaning in life, only to discover that what they were chasing did not quench their thirst after all.

Why would *Qoheleth* show us, remind us, impress upon us, time and again that everything is a "chasing after the wind" and utterly meaningless? The answer, and indeed the true genius of *Qoheleth*, lies in the concluding chapter:

Remember your creator in the days of your youth... The end of the matter; all has been heard. Revere God and keep his commandments, for that is the whole duty of everyone. For God will bring every deed into judgment, including every secret thing, whether good or evil.⁴

The genius of *Qoheleth* is that he seized us by the shirt and shook us—he intentionally led us down a path that we are inclined by our very nature to walk down. He stirred up in us the painful realization of our mortality, and not content to stop there, he heaped the toils and tribulations of life upon us as an unbearable and inescapable weight. It's no wonder that many people read *Ecclesiastes* and conclude that it is about hopelessness. Ah, but that was the hook! *Qoheleth* wants us to come to this place, for it is only in hopelessness that we can be reached—it is only when that towering barrier of self has been razed to the ground—when we realize that there is indeed hopelessness when we place our trust in ourselves instead of in God. Eleven long chapters of what it is like to live in the misplaced trust of self or some other manmade construct of so-called wisdom or enlightenment. But in only a few brief verses at the end of the book,

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Qoheleth says, "Gotcha! You were looking elsewhere for your hope—you should have been focusing on God all along!"

Paul is among the most exuberant authors of the Bible, and I think I can get a glimpse of why he repeatedly can't contain his joy in sharing the Good News of Jesus Christ: "Thanks be to God!"⁵ *Qoheleth* concludes with the promise of God's hope, but Paul was a Hebrew that actually lived to see the fulfillment of God's promises in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. He tells the believers in Rome:

*Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation will separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.*⁶

Thus, Paul and a long line of preachers, who learned their trade from a wise old preacher named *Qoheleth*, show us the world as it, tell us where to look, and then joyously proclaim the Good News: that Jesus Christ provides hope out of hopelessness by bringing us out of death and into eternal life.

Having taken care of the eternal, God also provides for the temporal—the here and now. He knows that there are times when we need comfort. And this I believe is what He wants us to hear:

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 break down and a time to build up

A time to weep and a time to laugh

A time to mourn and a time to dance

A time to throw away stones and a time to gather stones together

A time to embrace and a time to refrain from embracing

A time to seek and a time to lose

A time to keep and a time to throw away

A time to tear and a time to sew

A time to keep silence and a time to speak

A time to love and a time to hate

*A time for war and a time for peace*⁷

1 Romans 15:4

2 "The New Oxford Annotated Bible." Edited by Bruce M. Metzger and Roland E. Murphy, 841. New York: Oxford University Press, 1991.

3 Davis, Ellen F. "Getting Involved With God." 105. Boston: Cowley Publications, 2001.

4 Ecclesiastes 12:1, 13-14

5 Romans 7:25; 1 Corinthians 15:57; 2 Corinthians 2:14, 9:15

6 Romans 8:35, 37-39

7 Ecclesiastes 3:1-8



In memory of Leo, 1946-2005.