

SCRIPTURE CLASSICS

For
Everything
There Is *a*
Season

✧ *Ecclesiastes 3:1–8* ✧



ALICE CAMILLE

Living with Christ Books



*In thanksgiving for memorable evenings
of conversation with
Megan E. Reilly, Neal P. Fox, David Alex
Mély, Sabil Luthra, and Patrick Heck—
the Brown University brain trust and,
very possibly, the hope of the world*

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Blame it on The Byrds. They're the folk-rock group who put "Turn! Turn! Turn! (To Everything There Is a Season)" on the charts in late 1965. This made Ecclesiastes Chapter 3 the rare bit of Scripture to burrow deep into the popular consciousness. The Byrds didn't write the song. They generously attributed it to King Solomon of the Bible, claiming it as the #1 hit with the oldest lyrics in the U.S. The song was actually composed by Pete Seeger in the 1950s and recorded a few times before The Byrds got hold of it—and by at least thirty other artists to date, including Judy Collins, Marlene Dietrich, and Dolly Parton. Seeger himself gave away forty-five percent of the royalties, reckoning he deserved credit only for the score and six impassioned words added after the stanza concerning a time for peace: "I swear it's not too late."

These six words by Seeger would point the song squarely into the eyeteeth of the Vietnam War, which was escalating when The Byrds launched their recording. “Turn! Turn! Turn!” became an anthem of the peace movement—which would have been a great surprise to the original author of the text.

So here’s the grace, and the dilemma, in undertaking a spiritual exploration of Ecclesiastes 3. Is it possible to get past our singsong acquaintance with this text to grasp it in a new light? Our familiarity with these phrases is as inevitable as it may prove to be inaccurate, or at least inadequate. Now, I’m a Seeger fan; I’d welcome this song at my funeral. But Seeger’s reading of the text isn’t the only message to be gleaned. And The Byrds’ reassuring, almost merry, rendering of the passage misses the author’s intent by a mile.

Maybe we can cut a deal at the outset of this book. Let’s surrender artistic license to songwriters (and other preachers) to incorporate Scripture into a thesis with its own moral integrity. Scripture is fluid enough to contain multitudes of meanings and to support truth seekers in every

generation and context. “Turn! Turn! Turn!” gets a high five for a job well done and mission accomplished. But let’s move on to what the writer of Ecclesiastes is getting at.

OUR CURIOUS GUIDE, QOHELETH

The Book of Ecclesiastes was composed between the third and second centuries BC. King Solomon is an improbable author, having lived centuries earlier. While references to “King David’s son” appear in the first two chapters, they quickly disappear as the writer develops his philosophical argument. This doesn’t imply that the tribute to King Solomon is a scheme perpetrated by a writer bent on deceiving us. Much Wisdom literature in the Bible is attributed to Solomon, considered the wisest king ever. This literary homage can be compared with that of modern screenwriters who extend the adventures of Sherlock Holmes to admit new episodes that were clearly not composed by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, who died in 1930. We all know Conan Doyle didn’t write this new stuff. But the fun is in pretending that Sherlock Holmes and Dr. Watson go on forever with new villains to foil

and crimes to solve. In a similar way, for Wisdom writers, Solomon rules and philosophizes on.

So who did write Ecclesiastes? As with many biblical works, we don't have a name, but we do have a profile. This period of history saw Greece in charge of the region in and around Israel. Greek influence pervaded every aspect of life, and the impact of the Greek philosophical tradition was felt by scholars of Israel. The final centuries before the time of Jesus fostered wisdom texts as teacherly as Ecclesiastes and Sirach; as adventuresome as Tobit and Judith; as well as the shining literary highlight of the Book of Wisdom.

The writer of Ecclesiastes presents himself simply as Qoheleth (koe-HELL-eth), which means "the assembler." Either this fellow called assemblies to gather, or he gathered and assembled ideas.

The claim that Solomon authored Ecclesiastes, then, is for The Byrds. The band is probably safe in claiming their hit song as having the oldest lyrics in the U.S., nonetheless. Wrong author, and six or seven centuries later than suggested, it still beats most chart-topping tunes by a couple solid millennia.

WHAT'S THE MESSAGE?

Scholars distill Qoheleth's message to a single question posed in chapter one: What are earthly projects worth at the end of a lifetime? Qoheleth frames his reply with shocking brevity: nothing! The Hebrew word employed repeatedly in the book is *hebel*, usually translated "vanity" or "emptiness." *The Jewish Study Bible* renders *hebel* as futility. The ever-jaunty *Message Bible* prefers smoke. As in: everything you care about right now is bound to go up in it.

We may feel just a little offended at this idea. Are our sometimes heroic investments in family life nothing? Could our efforts at becoming educated, thoughtful, informed citizens be an utter waste of time? Is human labor and community-building, politics and nation-building, religion, commerce, art, and love just "chasing after wind"? If the work of our hands across a lifetime is an empty pursuit, would we do just as well burrowing into the couch and binge-watching our shows?

If you feel dismayed at the suggestion, then you're right where Qoheleth expects his audience to be. He's an old fellow who's worked hard and

built an empire of sorts: family, possessions, land, reputation, and career. But more than an acquirer of property and a proud résumé, Qoheleth has been diligent with self-development too. He's learned, cultured, and evolved. He's done his "inner work." He's taken the spiritual quest. Yet at the tail end of a long life, he's in the metaphysical accounting room wondering if he'll come up far shorter than he imagined possible.

What makes Qoheleth unusual is that he shares his midnight anxiety with us—and in the Bible, no less! We're accustomed to turning to religion for absolutes and assurances, guidelines to safeguard us from precisely the sort of self-doubt plaguing Qoheleth. We don't want to come to the end of rigorous years to wonder if we missed the boat and squandered our "one wild and precious life," in poet Mary Oliver's phrase. Qoheleth offers his experience as a flashing neon warning for the rest of us. Turn, turn, turn, indeed!

Some readers find in Qoheleth's questioning a weakness in faith that skates the perimeters of atheism and undermines the God-fearing. Early rabbis agreed, arguing that Ecclesiastes didn't

belong among the sacred writings, since reading it “did not make the hands clean.” Qoheleth’s is a testimony soiled by the inconvenient truths of real life. But he never claims to be a prophet or rabbi. Rather, Qoheleth is a thinker and seeker. As such, he’s one of the most modern characters to be found in the Old Testament. Like many at home in our pews today—and others who’ve relinquished their seats as well—Qoheleth is a “searching believer.” He’s not content to squat comfortably on tradition like a hen on an egg. He must crack the egg and examine its contents, demanding that received dogma jibe with his lived experience. He won’t accept hearsay religion. And he’s not going to pretend for you, either. For that, some of us might be grateful.

HOW TO READ ECCLESIASTES

This much is true: some of what passes for religious commitment in this world is lacey pious veneer over vanity and emptiness. If we want to go deeper, and to mean what we say in our creeds, we may have to be a shade more honest with God and ourselves—an undertaking

both difficult and dangerous. We have to make a clear-eyed tally of our genuine, comprehensive net worth, as Qoheleth does, hopefully at an earlier stage of life than he did. This volume of the Scripture Classics series will be especially helpful for those who identify as searching believers: devoted but not self-deceived, lovers of God who are likewise lovers of truth even when inconvenient. Ecclesiastes 3 bears a message not just for faithful churchgoers but also for those who view themselves as “the loyal opposition”: perched in the pew by the door, perhaps, or already seeking answers elsewhere. Qoheleth is the patron saint of adolescents who won’t go to Mass anymore without a better reason than the ones they’ve heard so far. Qoheleth is a friend to the person unwelcome in the communion line because of personal experience that doesn’t match delivered teaching. Qoheleth is in conversation with young adults pretty convinced that reality is more complicated than what traditional religious answers acknowledge. Reading Qoheleth affirms those who feel burned by institutions whose authority has been mishandled. For the searching believ-

er, and for the Qoheleth in all of us, a surprising biblical companion emerges to wade with us through the mess and muddle that is life.

Who's in Charge?

FOR EVERYTHING THERE IS A SEASON,
AND A TIME FOR EVERY MATTER UNDER HEAVEN.

Time is the stuff of which our days are made. While we have time, every possibility under heaven remains true for us. When we run out of time, it's as if the stars fall from the sky and the world ends. Since time is crucial to our being, it's important to come to terms with it. What does it mean to say there's time enough for everything? Is it good news—or the worst possible news—that everything has its season?

When I was growing up, my mother watched the soap opera *Days of Our Lives*. At the start of

each episode, one of the better known actors, Macdonald Carey, intoned a solemn voice-over: “Like sands through the hourglass, so are the days of our lives.” By the standards of daytime television, that declaration seemed ponderous. There goes time, slipping through our fingers despite all attempts to hang onto a grain of it.

The thesis of Ecclesiastes may well be contained in a one-line voice-over written for daytime TV. This is Qoheleth’s piercing cry: Time rushes by, and all it holds is vanity! His word for vanity, repeated thirty-eight times across the book, is more akin to vapor or breeze. Time is a breeze that murmurs gently through our rooms, rustling the curtains as it passes in one window and out another. We enjoy its caress even as it moves beyond us, and nothing we can do will hold it back.

This is a confounding situation for us mortals bound to time’s non-negotiability. It’s why we often hear this poem in Ecclesiastes as a soothing counterpoint to our anxiety about time. There’s time enough for everything, we console ourselves. All is in its proper place and finds its due season.

Regrettably, that's not what the passage says. The implication is that everything happens when its time arrives: hinting at an unseen calendar that we can only guess at. It doesn't describe an abundance of time, or promise its trustworthiness. Only that the control of time's flow isn't in our hands.

What's more, there's going to be time for everything—not just what we want but all the things we surely don't want. Ecclesiastes 3 is a seven-couplet poem about life's polarities, *all* of which will have their season, like it or not. Its logic rests on the creation story of Genesis in which day follows night, dry land balances water, and female complements male. Once sin enters the world, the final polarity snaps into place as evil counters good. The poem in Ecclesiastes describes the consequences of those dual realities.

While we seek comfort for our anxiety regarding the jagged aspects of time, the polarities logged in this poem are morally neutral statements. Time makes room for fourteen pairs of elements, twenty-eight items altogether. In Hebrew numerology, multiples of seven are shorthand for totality. We're given to understand that time will

contain every-thing—a statement of fact, not a consolation.

SURFING THE POLARITIES

We consider this first couplet with eyes wide open and the pitiless facts on the table. Time isn't a basket for everything we hope to collect. And there are no guarantees time will progress in orderly fashion with all unfolding as it should. Every-thing will have its time: from birth and death to war and peace. We are forewarned.

A short session of primal screaming is not out of order here. Most of us would prefer a little more control over what happens in time. We'd like our days to resemble the organized dream closets we see in catalogs, with neat cubbies and dividers containing the chaos and making sense of everything inside. Life, Qoheleth assures us, won't be like that. Stay tuned for the wonderful and the terrible, despite your best efforts to engage one side of experience only and to fortify yourself against the possibility of the other.

My friend Mike did everything humanly possible to have a benign experience of life. You

won't meet a humbler, kinder man, one more sincere and hardworking. Yet Mike's years in the seminary did not end with ordination. His later marriage to a woman he adored ended sadly in divorce. Mike hoped next to be the best possible father to his daughter. But Lucy was a girl determined not to be parented.

By the time she reached her teens, Lucy seemed hell-bent on self-destruction. She ran with the wrong crowd and had epic shouting matches with both parents. Mike dreaded what else Lucy was doing that he didn't know about. What scared him most, as it does most parents of ungovernable daughters, was that Lucy might become pregnant and drop out of school. This was the worst-case scenario, the one devil under heaven her father hoped to spare her. Mike spent every waking hour trying to think of a way to rescue his poor child from a deepening downward spiral toward chaos.

Mike is such a mild and courteous man that I knew he was desperate when he admitted that, short of breaking a chair over his daughter, he didn't know how to stop her from doing what she

was determined to do. The worst-case scenario arrived like sands through the hourglass: Lucy showed up at home pregnant and miserable. Her father's nightmare had materialized. All that was left to Mike was his response.

There are many ways a bad situation can get worse. Some parents will scream and yell and blame. Some throw the girl out of the house and say: *It's your mess. Deal with it.* Others—even Catholic parents I've known, to be honest—drive their teenager straight to an abortion clinic. But Mike says an angel took his hand and held his tongue. First he cried with Lucy at her news. Then he agreed to support her through this crisis. That decision provided his daughter with the needed security to stay at home and finish high school. As months passed, Mike observed with amazement how this greatly feared pregnancy and birth changed his daughter—for the better. Lucy was transformed from an uncontrollable terror of a girl into a caring and responsible mother. When the worst possible thing Mike could imagine actually happened to his daughter, it turned out to be the hour of her salvation.

Years later, Lucy herself admits that the birth of her beautiful daughter saved her life. The crowd she'd traveled with was rough and dangerous. Her life had become a car with no brakes, and she'd already covered her eyes expecting the crash. A teenage pregnancy could have been that fatal collision. It might have set her on a relentless spiral of poverty, lost chances, and despair. Her father's decision to love and not to punish was crucial. It provided Lucy with the brakes to slow down, consider her course, and choose another direction.

Can a teen pregnancy (which is, on the spectrum of life's polarities, a bad thing) provide a salvific outcome (a good thing)? Our Christmas story doesn't disprove this notion. It certainly changed Lucy, Mike, and everyone affected by their story. Lucy was rescued from her fatal attractions. Mike got to be the best possible father for his daughter—through the worst-case scenario of his dreams for her. When parents express anxiety about the choices their teenagers are making, I now invite them to concentrate less on what their kids might do—since no one has yet devised a way to force a burgeoning adult—and

more on what they as parents will do, no matter what their offspring might choose.

LOSING CONTROL

We don't control the pendulum swings of reality. We're not in control of more than ourselves—and often, not even that. Loss of control is generally viewed as a bad thing. Certainly it can be. Outside of an amusement park ride or a skydiving lesson, freefall experiences are often negative. I want to be in charge of my life. I want to be the governor of my time and decision making, my finances and property, my emotions and relationships. If I'm honest, I admit I want things to go my way as much as possible. Having my agenda met is basically what I mean by having life under control.

How much time do I actually have this type of control? It breaks down with alarming frequency. I want to maintain my weight. Then I cross paths with an open bag of potato chips. I mean to be the very soul of kindness—until a neighbor's ceaselessly barking dog ignites the violence in my heart. I plan on accomplishing chores, only to en-

gage a painful shoulder that curbs my ability to do much of anything. Projects and deadlines loom on the calendar. Then an old friend drops into town and scatters my productivity to the winds.

And these are tiny slips of the hand at the controls. Bad news, loss of employment, sickness, tragedy, or grieving a death can derail years of our lives and often does. We're as influenced by what happens during seasons of no control as we are the product of our choices and intentions.

Jesuit spiritual director Bernie Owens notes that God works with what IS. The Potter works the clay in hand, not some ideal of the clay. If time includes everything possible along its spectrum, then whatever arrives is something God can use and needn't go to waste. We may choose to discard some experiences as worthless, unacceptable, unredeemable. But surrendering precisely such events to God's purposes might be a more valuable decision.

Christian faith, after all, requires us to do the same with our most despicable deeds and darkest passions: to give our "sins," by any other name, to God. It's a terrifying thought, since religious

training teaches us to present the exact opposite: only our most shiny prayers and virtuous acts. We dread that God might guess, much less lay claim to, our other, deplorable side. Yet the theology of forgiveness, central to our faith, insists we bring our sins forward. The Potter wants the deformed clay back, to make something useful from it, that nothing may be wasted.

The cross staked at the center of our religion pins the polarities of human experience together, birth and death, violence and peace, so that even the worst elements of our history can be redeemed. The longer we withhold the stinking rotten parts and bring only the best face to church, the longer the world remains in tatters.

It can still be unsettling that God wants our garbage more than our piety. Anne Lamott, author of *Plan B: Further Thoughts on Faith*, admits to being shaken when her pastor preached that Jesus loves the worst person in history so much that he would have died just for him. Anne declares, “This drives me crazy, that God seems to have no taste, and no standards. Yet on most days, this is what gives some of us hope.”

If there's hope for us where we are, trapped inside the hourglass, it's this. Everything can happen, and will happen—and everything can also be redeemed. Time is a problem you and I can't solve. We have to live with it, trusting that God is the Lord of history and that God holds the solution to every problem in time.



Eternal God, we live under the shadow of time and its uncertainty. We hope for happiness and dread the approach of suffering. Give us grace, moment by moment, to be the person we desire to be, especially in the hour we fear most. Drive us to seek forgiveness for the harm we do so that your will may be done, on earth as in heaven. Amen.