

Ecclesiastes 3:4

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

A time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance;

Analysis

The emotional antitheses—weeping/laughing, mourning/dancing—acknowledge the full spectrum of legitimate human emotion within God's providence. Hebrew 'bakah' (weep) and 'sachaq' (laugh) aren't superficial expressions but deep emotional responses to life's joys and sorrows. The pairing of mourning and dancing evokes funeral and wedding celebrations, the two most significant communal gatherings in ancient Israel. Ecclesiastes affirms that both grief and joy have their proper time—neither perpetual mourning nor constant celebration reflects reality. Christians live in the 'already/not yet' tension: mourning sin and suffering while rejoicing in redemption, awaiting the time when 'God shall wipe away all tears' (Revelation 21:4).

Historical Context

Ancient Israelite culture had formalized expressions of grief (tearing garments, wearing sackcloth) and joy (dancing, feasting). Professional mourners were hired for funerals (Jeremiah 9:17-18), while weddings featured days-long celebrations with music and dancing. Jesus's ministry embodied this rhythm: He wept at Lazarus's tomb yet celebrated at the wedding in Cana. He was criticized for both fasting (John's disciples' practice) and feasting (eating with tax collectors). The early church balanced rejoicing in salvation with groaning for creation's redemption (Romans 8:22-23), demonstrating wisdom's proper emotional range.

Related Passages

Revelation 20:12 — Judgment according to deeds

Matthew 25:31 — Final judgment

Study Questions

1. Are you avoiding necessary grief by pursuing constant distraction and entertainment, or wallowing in sorrow while neglecting legitimate joy?
2. How does knowing that both weeping and laughter have their appointed times help you embrace your current emotional season without shame?

Interlinear Text

רְקָדֵן: וְעַתָּה לְבִפְתּוֹת וְעַתָּה לְשֹׁחֵן וְעַתָּה סְפִידָה וְעַתָּה רְקָדֵן
A time to weep A time to laugh A time to mourn A time to dance
H6256 H1058 H6256 H7832 H6256 H5594 H6256 H7540

Additional Cross-References

Romans 12:15 (Parallel theme): Rejoice with them that do rejoice, and weep with them that weep.

James 4:9 (Parallel theme): Be afflicted, and mourn, and weep: let your laughter be turned to mourning, and your joy to heaviness.

Psalms 30:5 (Parallel theme): For his anger endureth but a moment; in his favour is life: weeping may endure for a night, but joy cometh in the morning.

Exodus 15:20 (Parallel theme): And Miriam the prophetess, the sister of Aaron, took a timbrel in her hand; and all the women went out after her with timbrels and with dances.

Matthew 11:17 (Parallel theme): And saying, We have piped unto you, and ye have not danced; we have mourned unto you, and ye have not lamented.

2 Corinthians 7:10 (Parallel theme): For godly sorrow worketh repentance to salvation not to be repented of: but the sorrow of the world worketh death.

Luke 1:58 (Parallel theme): And her neighbours and her cousins heard how the Lord had shewed great mercy upon her; and they rejoiced with her.

Matthew 9:15 (Parallel theme): And Jesus said unto them, Can the children of the bridechamber mourn, as long as the bridegroom is with them? but the days will come, when the bridegroom shall be taken from them, and then shall they fast.

Genesis 21:6 (Parallel theme): And Sarah said, God hath made me to laugh, so that all that hear will laugh with me.

2 Samuel 6:16 (Parallel theme): And as the ark of the LORD came into the city of David, Michal Saul's daughter looked through a window, and saw king David leaping and dancing before the LORD; and she despised him in her heart.