

Ecclesiastes 3:5

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

A time to cast away stones, and a time to gather stones together; a time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing;

Analysis

This enigmatic verse pairs physical actions with emotional/relational ones. 'A time to cast away stones, and a time to gather stones together' likely refers to agricultural activity—clearing fields for planting or building stone walls, though some interpret it as ancient warfare (2 Kings 3:19, 25). The second pair—'a time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing'—addresses physical and emotional intimacy. The Hebrew 'chabaq' (חַבֵּךְ, embrace) can denote affection, marital intimacy, or supportive comfort. Wisdom recognizes that both closeness and distance have appropriate seasons: clinging perpetually prevents necessary separation, while constant distance prevents needed intimacy. This applies to marriage (1 Corinthians 7:5), friendships, and even our relationship with earthly possessions (holding loosely what God may call us to release). The verse teaches discernment in relationships and endeavors—knowing when to build up and when to clear away, when to draw near and when to step back.

Historical Context

In ancient agrarian Palestine, gathering and casting away stones were constant activities. Farmers cleared rocky fields for cultivation by casting stones to field edges or into piles. Builders gathered stones for construction. During warfare, conquering armies would ruin enemy land by casting stones onto fields (2 Kings 3:19, 25), while rebuilding required gathering stones. The embrace imagery resonates with ancient Near Eastern customs: greeting with embraces, mourning

by embracing the bereaved, and avoiding certain embraces during ritual purity requirements (Leviticus 15). The New Testament applies relational wisdom similarly: Jesus sent disciples out two-by-two (companionship) but also withdrew alone for prayer (solitude). Paul both worked closely with ministry partners and separated from them when necessary (Acts 15:36-41). Christian community requires both togetherness and appropriate boundaries.

Related Passages

Matthew 25:31 — Final judgment

Romans 2:1 — Judging others

Study Questions

1. What 'stones' in your life—projects, relationships, habits—might God be calling you to 'cast away' rather than continue gathering?
2. How do you discern the proper times for relational closeness versus healthy distance in your key relationships?

Interlinear Text

וְעַת אָבִן יִם כְּכָסִים לְפָשָׁל יָרֵן וְעַת
A time to cast away stones A time to gather stones A time
H6256 H7993 H68 H6256 H3664 H68 H6256

מִמְּבָקָן: לְרֹחֶק וְעַת מִמְּבָקָן:
from embracing A time to refrain from embracing
H2263 H6256 H7368 H2263

Additional Cross-References

2 Kings 3:25 (Parallel theme): And they beat down the cities, and on every good piece of land cast every man his stone, and filled it; and they stopped all the wells

of water, and felled all the good trees: only in Kir-haraseth left they the stones thereof; howbeit the slingers went about it, and smote it.

Joel 2:16 (Parallel theme): Gather the people, sanctify the congregation, assemble the elders, gather the children, and those that suck the breasts: let the bridegroom go forth of his chamber, and the bride out of her closet.

Joshua 10:27 (Parallel theme): And it came to pass at the time of the going down of the sun, that Joshua commanded, and they took them down off the trees, and cast them into the cave wherein they had been hid, and laid great stones in the cave's mouth, which remain until this very day.

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