

Biblical Soul Care
Lesson 5
Ecclesiastes 3:16-4:16

Introduction: When we come to embrace God's sovereignty over our lives and the world; when we come to believe that every event is under His sovereign wisdom; when we come to believe that our calling is to enjoy this life as a gift and trust God in the mysteries, then we are immediately confronted by a multitude of issues that bring into question the beauty of God's plan and make it difficult to enjoy life as a gift. **Borgman**

In this section of Scripture we are looking at today, Solomon outlines these issues, confronts them realistically and truthfully, and frames them in the light of the truth that "God makes everything beautiful in its appropriate (**His**) time".

We also will see that Solomon sprinkles in some choice tidbits of practical wisdom to complement this book that is rich in reflective wisdom and a philosophical masterpiece.

Issue number one: Injustice seems to prevail from 3:16-22

¹⁶ Moreover, I saw under the sun that in the place of justice, even there was wickedness, and in the place of righteousness, even there was wickedness. ¹⁷ I said in my heart, God will judge the righteous and the wicked, for there is a time for every matter and for every work. ¹⁸ I said in my heart with regard to the children of man that God is testing them that they may see that they themselves are but beasts. ¹⁹ For what happens to the children of man and what happens to the beasts is the same; as one dies, so dies the other. They all have the same breath, and man has no advantage over the beasts, for all is vanity. ²⁰ All go to one place. All are from the dust, and to dust all return. ²¹ Who knows whether the spirit of man goes upward and the spirit of the beast goes down into the earth? ²² So I saw that there is nothing better than that a man should rejoice in his work, for that is his lot. Who can bring him to see what will be after him?

What did Solomon observe in life under the sun?

What activity of God do you see in these verses?

What conclusions did Solomon reach?

Does he have any exhortations for us?

Issue number two: Widespread oppression from 4:1-3

4 Again I saw all the oppressions that are done under the sun. And behold, the tears of the oppressed, and they had no one to comfort them! On the side of their oppressors there was power, and there was no one to comfort them. ² And I thought the dead who are already dead more fortunate than the living who are still alive. ³ But better than both is he who has not yet been and has not seen the evil deeds that are done under the sun.

What did Solomon observe in regards to oppression in life under the sun?

What is oppression?

What widespread oppressions do we observe in our world today?

Is there comfort for the oppressed? If so by whom, how and when?

Issue number three: The vanity of labor motivated by envy from 4:4-6

⁴ Then I saw that all toil and all skill in work come from a man's envy of his neighbor. This also is vanity and a striving after wind. ⁵ The fool folds his hands and eats his own flesh.

⁶ Better is a handful of quietness than two hands full of toil and a striving after wind.

What does Solomon observe and conclude in verse 4?

What conclusion or “proverb” does he give as an antidote for envy?

Can you think of other verses either from Proverbs or other Scripture that address envy?

Issue number four: The vanity of labor motivated by greed from 4:7-8

⁷ Again, I saw vanity under the sun: ⁸ one person who has no other, either son or brother, yet there is no end to all his toil, and his eyes are never satisfied with riches, so that he never asks, “For whom am I toiling and depriving myself of pleasure?” This also is vanity and an unhappy business.

What specific person does Solomon target in this section?

What is his conclusion?

What are other Scriptures that address the sin of greed?

The blessing of shared toil, companionship and friendship from 4:9-12

⁹Two are better than one because they have a good reward for their efforts. ¹⁰For if either falls, his companion can lift him up; but pity the one who falls without another to lift him up. ¹¹Also, if two lie down together, they can keep warm; but how can one person alone keep warm? ¹²And if someone overpowers one person, two can resist him. A cord of three strands is not easily broken. HCSB

What relationships are being commended in this passage?

How do these verses support and commend the creation mandate and marriage design?

Is it best and a blessing to live life in community? Does this section of Scripture push back against isolation and distance? Can you think of Scripture in which Solomon (or others) warned against isolation?

Issue number five: The vanity of popularity, power and pride contrasted with the blessing of the poor (unpopular, less powerful) and the wise man. 4:13-16

¹³Better was a poor and wise youth than an old and foolish king who no longer knew how to take advice. ¹⁴For he went from prison to the throne, though in his own kingdom he had been born poor. ¹⁵I saw all the living who move about under the sun, along with that youth who was to stand in the king's place. ¹⁶There was no end of all the people, all of whom he led. Yet those who come later will not rejoice in him. Surely this also is vanity and a striving after wind.

What Proverb (practical wisdom) does Solomon insert?

What does it mean to be admonished? Is this concept used in the New Testament?

What vanity or vanities does Solomon refer to in these verses?

Summary: We need to guard our hearts against these realities that threaten the enjoyment of the gift of this short life. They may be dark hues in His masterpiece, but the truth is that none of these challenges put a dent in God's beautiful plan. We should not ignore oppression or injustice. We should not tolerate envy, greed, or isolation. We should not be consumed in politics as if it were our only hope or only interest. Instead, we should receive rest and companionship as gifts from God's gracious hand. With grateful hearts, we should look to Him alone. As David said, "Some trust in chariots and some in horses, but we trust in the name of the LORD our God" (Psalm 20:7). Borgman

Helpful supporting material:

For issue number one, injustice:

The righteous man asks, "Will justice ever prevail?" Does not the presence of injustice and wickedness ruin God's plan to make everything beautiful? Does it not threaten my ability to enjoy the gift? In response, Qoheleth quickly reminds us that there will be payday someday (Eccl. 3:17). In Qoheleth's world, the pervasive view was that actions were punished or rewarded under the sun. Qoheleth's realism is not so naïve. People don't always get what they deserve now. But they will, one day. God will judge both the

righteous and the wicked. It is a part of His plan. In that sense, it is even a part of His plan to make everything beautiful in His time. Borgman

Injustice and death do not bring God's beauty into disrepute or derail our joy. Injustice should anger us. Wickedness should make us indignant. Neither is the way things ought to be. We should do what we can to fight against it. But man is a brute beast after the fall and man like the brute beast will die, and when he does, God will be waiting with perfect justice, in His time. God's justice is part of Him making all things beautiful in His time. In the meantime, don't lose sight of the gift. Borgman

Qoheleth's comparison to animals may seem unbiblical, like something an evolutionist would say. Doesn't the Bible say that we are only a little lower than the angels, with all the animals under our dominion (see Psalm 8)? Didn't God make us in His own image (see Genesis 1:27), and doesn't this distinguish us from every creature in the world? All of this is true, but Ecclesiastes is also true: men are beast. In saying this, the Preacher is not commenting on our biology but our destiny. He is making a specific comparison, as he goes on to explain: "For what happens to the children of man and what happens to the beast is the same; as one dies, so dies the other. They all have the same breath, and man has no advantage over the beast, for all is vanity. All go to one place. All are from the dust, and to dust all return" (Ecclesiastes 3:19-20). The Preacher's point is that people die, just like the animals. For all the differences between us, we do share this one thing in common: whether man or beast, we all meet the same fate, at least in regards to our physical bodies. Ryken

For the Blessing of companionship and friendship:

Companionship is also the gift of God, and it makes life and labor sweeter. Unless the benefits of hard work are shared with someone you love, toil has no gain. This famous passage (Ecclesiastes 4:9-12) appropriately read at weddings, is a picture of the comfort and strength of companionship in a harsh world. There is safety in companionship. There is better profit in companionship. There is warmth in companionship. A third cord is even better. The third cord is often thought to be another person, even the Lord Himself. It is noteworthy that Qoheleth does not label companionship as hebel. Friendship is invaluable. It is the antidote to the lonely life of the workaholic. Hugh Black summarizes the blessings of friendship, "To have a heart that we can trust, and into which we can pour our griefs, our doubts, and our fears, is already to take the edge from the grief, and the sting from doubt, and the shade from fear.... Joy also demands that its joy should be shared.... A simple generous friendship will thus add to the joy and will divide the sorrow." Borgman

