

Ecclesiastes

Lesson 3 (3:16-4:16)

1. Justice, Life, and Death (3:16-22).

- a. The Preacher turns his heart to understand justice to see if satisfaction can be found on that pursuit.
- b. He first considered the earthly system of justice for men.
 - i. As king, he had great power over the judicial process in Israel.
 - ii. However, both in Israel and in other nations, the Preacher independently observed that the institution of human justice was a shameful place of wickedness.
 - iii. Solomon did not adjudicate all legal matters in Israel and was able to discern that wicked men rule over others, and they corrupt the judicial process.
 - iv. This includes the priesthood and the leadership structure within each tribal unit.
 - v. Of course, Israel was not alone in allowing wickedness to corrupt the systems of justice. Other nations were as bad or worse than Israel in failing to bring true justice.
- c. Sinful men brought wickedness and iniquity into every aspect of the judicial system, though some were worse than others.
- d. Ultimate justice, however, was not corrupted forever. The Preacher understood in his heart that God would serve as the final judge over the righteous and the wicked.
- e. While not stated, the Preacher seems to rightly conclude that God's justice system is free from all corruption.
- f. There is (or will be) a time when perfect justice will be adjudicated for every purpose and every work of men.
 - i. God not only knows what was done, but He also knows the motivations of men's hearts for the things they do.
 - ii. No action taken by man can be hidden from God, who is all-knowing and who demands an account of every deed.
- g. God tests and purifies men to warn them about death and their future appointment with Him to receive His righteous judgment for their deeds.
 - i. The word for "test" relates to purification, such as how fire reveals impurities in fine metals.
 - ii. These refining tests are used to show men that just as animals die in the fallen world, so every man will likewise die.
 - iii. Once a man dies, he will stand before God's throne of judgment (Heb. 9:27).
 - iv. Surely both man and animals have one breath of life, and no man can escape the inevitable death that has been appointed for them.
 - v. The Preacher denounces any hope of avoiding death for no man can avoid facing death, and likewise their final judgment before God.
 - vi. Both men and animals return to the dust from which all were formed (Gen. 2).
 - vii. However, the spirit of men goes upward to heaven at death, while the spirit of animals goes down to the earth.
 1. This is poetic language that may or may not mean that animals will populate the heavenly realm.

2. Rather than providing an answer to that question, it seems more likely that the Preacher is describing that every man will be brought to God's throne of judgment in heaven after death.
 3. Conversely, animals have no such appointment before God. The righteous Judge will not call the souls/spirits of animals to stand before the throne of judgment, for they already live according to the standards of conduct He established in the fallen world.
- h. The Preacher's conclusion: a man should rejoice in his own works that establish his heritage. Once dead, he will have no understanding of what became of his legacy.

2. Oppression is heartbreaking (4:1-3).

- a. The Preacher considered all of the oppression that is done under the sun.
- b. Those who are oppressed can only shed tears over their condition.
- c. From the Preacher's perspective, those who are oppressed have no one to comfort them.
- d. While Solomon does not mention God in this section, it cannot be denied that God gives comfort to those who are mistreated and abused.
 - i. Isa. 61:1-3
 - ii. Ps. 34:18; 9:9
 - iii. Matt. 5:4
 - iv. 2 Cor. 1:3-4
- e. The Preacher observes that in these relationships, it is the oppressor who wields the power.
- f. This observation appears to break the heart of the Preacher, who draws dark conclusions about the problem of oppression (because he forgot to look to God for answers).
 - i. He praised those who had died because their oppression ceased when they died.
 - ii. Those who remain alive are vulnerable to oppression; therefore, this must mean it is better to be dead than to be alive (not true).
 - iii. The Preacher then engages in hyperbole by claiming that it is better never to be born, thus guaranteeing that such a potential person could never see the widespread evil that is done under the sun.
- g. These are isolated comments in a moment of despair and must never be taken as biblical doctrine of life and death.
- h. Had the Preacher sought God in this moment of wrestling with evil, he would have had a better understanding of how God brings good things to the righteous even if they suffer.

3. Unnecessary toil is vanity (4:4-8).

- a. The Preacher observed and evaluated the work done by men.
- b. Hard work and professional skills are good for men, but they do not provide genuine satisfaction in life.
- c. Men who are skilled and blessed with abundant financial resources are envied rather than esteemed by their neighbors.
- d. Finding vocational balance is a futile objective (the Preacher's pessimistic view).
 - i. A lazy man is mocked and despised for his lack of effort.
 - ii. An industrious man is envied for the things he has worked hard to obtain.
 - iii. Rare is the man who is neither despised nor envied for the things he has worked for.

- e. Pursuing work and professional skills is vanity; balance seems impossible to the Preacher.
- f. The fool folds his hands in laziness and cannot provide for his own needs and thus cannot be truly satisfied with his approach to life.
- g. The Preacher's advice is to have a balance between slothfulness and greed.
 - i. The lazy man has nothing in his hand and cannot provide for his needs.
 - ii. The one who has both of his hands filled by his hard work cannot use all that he has worked for, thereby proving he worked too much for no reason.
 - iii. Therefore, it is better to have a single handful of food and to live a quiet, patient life than to be perpetual in lack or perpetual work beyond what is prudent.
- h. The folly of the excessive worker.
 - i. He is isolated and has no companions.
 - ii. He has no family (sons or brothers), for he is consumed by his work.
 - iii. There is never an end to all of his labor.
 - iv. His eye is never satisfied by what he possesses.
 - v. He never asks himself if his toil is depriving himself of the good things in life.
- i. The mentality of attempting to find satisfaction through hard work or material wealth is vanity and a grave misfortune (evil task).

4. Companionship is not vanity (4:9-12).

- a. Two are better than one.
 - i. Two people working together are rewarded compared to each working alone.
 - ii. Two men working together can accomplish more than each can accomplish separately.
 - iii. If one man should fall, his companion will be there to lift him back up.
 - iv. But woe to him who falls when he is alone, for he has no one to help him.
 - v. The decision to have the help of a companion must be made before encountering trouble; it may be too late once trouble comes.
- b. Two people can lie down together to keep warm.
- c. A person who sleeps alone cannot benefit from the warmth generated by another person.
- d. One enemy may be able to overpower a man, but it is unlikely that a single enemy can overpower two people at the same time (principle, not promise).
- e. Just as a threefold cord is stronger than the individual cords are in isolation, three or more companions offer greater strength and power than one individual can achieve on his own.
- f. As king, Solomon may have had close advisors, but he may not have had any true companions to rebuke him for his ungodly conduct (pagan wives and idolatry).
- g. Here, the Preacher acknowledges the value of companionship and perhaps laments that he did not have such relationships in his life.

5. It's lonely at the top (4:13-16).

- a. As an old man, the Preacher fondly remembers his time as a youth before he became king.
- b. He concludes that it was better to be poor with some wisdom than to be an arrogant king.
- c. As king, Solomon would not allow anyone to admonish him, and he took no advice from others. He now realizes that this was to his own harm.

- d. He describes his ascent to the throne as if he had come out of prison. The power and freedom he had as king were unparalleled compared to all the others he knew.
- e. Even being raised as a royal descendant of David was not at all like the experience he had as king with seemingly limitless power.
- f. The king is aware of those who desire to take his throne when he is gone. They are not impressed with the man, but with the power and prestige his position would offer them.
- g. The king rules over countless people in his nation, but his subjects do not rejoice over what the king has achieved.
- h. This insight seems potentially prophetic. The most glorious king in Israel's history received little recognition from those he ruled over. Likewise, Jesus was rejected by Israel and despised by those whom He has ultimate authority over.