

Ecclesiastes
"Not Fair!" - 4:1-16

I. Introduction

- A. All of us, if we are honest, have difficulty understanding and responding to God's ways properly.
 - 1. The problem: injustice in this life. Sol. believes God will eventually "balance" the scales of justice, & use injustice for His own purposes.
 - 2. "If judgment instantly followed every sin, there would be no scope for free-will, faith, or perseverance of saints in spite of difficulties."
- B. When Solomon first examined life "under the sun," his viewpoint was detached and philosophical (1:4-11).
 - 1. His initial conclusion: life was meaningless and monotonous. But then he considers the question a second time.
 - 2. Going to where people really lived, he discovers life is not that simple. After seeing real people in real situations, the king had to deal with some painful facts: life and death, time and eternity, and the final judgment of God on all who live on the earth.
- C. In this chapter, Solomon records his observations after visiting four different locations & watching people go through a variety of experiences. His conclusion: life is anything but monotonous because we have no idea what problems may arise on any given day.

II. Not Fair! - 4:1-16

- A. Solomon Looks in the Courtroom - vv 1-3.
 - 1. "Politics" has been defined - somewhat cynically - as "the conduct of public affairs for private advantage."
 - a) Israel had a God's-Law based judicial system. But it could still be corrupted by humanity - like any other gift God had given them.
 - b) Moses warned officials to judge honestly and fairly, while he and the psalmists lashed out against social injustice.
 - c) Solomon was a wise and just king, but it was impossible for him to guarantee the integrity of every officer in the government.
 - 2. Solomon went to a legal proceeding, and there he saw innocent people being oppressed by power-hungry officials.
 - a) The victims wept, but their tears did no good. Nobody stood with them to comfort or assist them.
 - b) Why? The oppressors had all the power, and their victims were helpless to protest or ask for a fair settlement.
 - 3. The king witnesses three tragedies in the courtroom:
 - a) (1) Oppression and exploitation in the halls of justice, (2) Pain and sorrow in the lives of innocent people, and (3) Unconcern on the part of those who could have brought comfort.
 - b) So devastated was Solomon by what he saw he decided it was better to be dead and free than alive and oppressed. In fact, he concludes, one was better off never having been born at all! Then one would never have to see the evil works of sinful man.
 - 4. Why didn't Solomon (the wisest king ever) do something about this injustice?
 - a) He couldn't do much to solve the problem. If he interfered with his government and reorganized things, he'd create new problems and reveal more corruption. Its doubtful this (or any other) government could ever be completely free of corruption!
 - b) This is not to suggest he (or we) should ignore it. As Christian citizens, we must pray for all in authority (1 Tim. 2:1-6) and do what we can to see just laws are passed and fairly enforced. But it's doubtful a huge administrative body like the one in our nation (or Israel) will ever be free of corruption, as sinful men and women will always occupy the seats of power.
- B. Solomon Looks in the Marketplace - vv 4-8.
 - 1. Disgusted with what he saw in the courts, he goes to the marketplace. We might find four different types of workers in the workplace:
 - a) The industrious, but **envious** worker - v 4.
 - (1) Its natural to first find a hard-working, high-achieving laborer. This person was not only busy, but skillful in their work and competent in all they did. They were likely masters of the techniques of their trade.
 - (2) He might ask such a person, "What about your heart?" and be disappointed by the answer. The only reason they perfected their skills & worked hard at their jobs was to jealously compete with others & enviously make more money than their neighbors!
 - (3) God didn't put "envy" into us; it's the result of sin. We want what others have & we want to go beyond that & have even more!
 - b) The idle, but **lazy** worker - v 5.
 - (1) The next worker one might encounter in the workplace is one with no ambition at all. Perhaps Solomon could learn about life by examining the opposite of the industrious one, the way scientists study cold to better understand heat.
 - (2) He learns laziness is a slow path to self-destruction. It may be nice to sleep in, but it's un-nice to not have money to buy things!
 - (3) The industrious person = motivated by competition & caught in the rush of life. There's **no** room for leisure time! The idle person = motivated by pleasure, headed for ruin. There's **no** room for work! Is there a middle way between the 2 he asks?
 - c) The integrated, but **unmotivated** worker - v 6.
 - (1) Here's one whose life seems balanced at first glance: productive in work, but careful to take time to "recharge". They choose not to run in the "rat race," but still get caught up in trying to find meaning in what they do - but there is none! Vanity! Smoke!
 - (2) Paul's instructions about money/work in 1 Tim. 6:6 is good here: "...godliness with contentment is great gain." We need both!

(3) The industrious person thinks money brings peace, but then has no time to enjoy it. The idle person thinks doing nothing brings peace, but life only brings destruction. The integrated person can enjoy both labor & the fruit of their labor but cannot find any worthwhile meaning to the work they do - apart from God.

d) The independent, but **unfulfilled** worker - vv 7-8.

(1) Finally, we might see a solitary person, hard at work. Solomon asks some questions. He discovers the person had no one to help in their business, nor did this person seem to want help, but were also never content with what they gained from their work. Why? They had no time to enjoy it! If they died, there was no family to inherit the wealth. All this labor was in vain!

(2) Socrates said, "*The unexamined life is not worth living.*" But the independent worker never stops long enough to ask, "*For whom am I working so hard? Why am I robbing myself of the enjoyments of life just to gain more money?*" The industrious one provided employment, the idle man enjoyed leisure, but the independent one helps neither the economy or themselves!

(3) His conclusion (v 8b) "*This is meaningless & miserable!*" is that reached by all who work for any reason apart from gratitude and glory for the God who created us and the skills to work. God **wants** us to work, but in the **right** spirit for the **right** reasons!

C. Solomon Looks on the Highway - vv 9-12.

1. His experience with the independent worker leads to him considering the importance of friendship & the value of people doing things together. The Jewish proverb, "*A friendless man is like the left hand without the right*" may be in his mind. "Two are better than one..."

a) "*Two are better than one*" when it comes to working - v 9. Two workers get more done! Even if they divide the profits, they get a better return for their efforts than if they work alone. Plus, it's easier to do hard jobs together because one can encourage the other.

b) "*Two are better than one*" when it comes to walking - v 10. Roads and paths in Palestine were not paved or leveled & there were many hidden rocks in the fields (remember the angel who tripped with a basketful of rocks?) Even experienced travelers might stumble, fall, break a bone, or fall into a hidden pit. How wonderful to have anyone who can help you either physically or spiritually!

c) "*Two are better than one*" when it comes to warming - v 11. Two travelers camping out, or staying in the courtyard of an inn, would feel the cold night & need each other for warmth & comfort. To be "warm alone" meant to carry extra blankets and add to your load.

d) "*Two are better than one*" when it comes to caring - v 12. "*Though one may be over-powered, two can defend themselves.*" It was dangerous for anyone to travel alone, day or night; so most traveled in groups for both fellowship and personal safety.

2. Solomon started with one (v. 8), moved to two (v. 9), and finishes with three (v. 12). This is typical of other Hebrew literature. One cord could be easily broken; two would require more effort; but three woven together were nearly impossible to pull apart or break.

D. Solomon Looks in the Palace - vv 13-16.

1. This is his 4th "better" statement (vv. 3, 6, 9). It points out 2 truths: the instability of political power and the fickleness of popularity.

a) The king in the story once listened to his counselors and ruled wisely. But as he got old, he **stopped** listening. The problem: more than pride or senility. Maybe surrounded by a collection of flatterers & isolated from reality, he took all the flattery he could get.

b) This can happen to **any** leader who is more concerned about themselves than about their God-given kingdom, nation or people.

c) There is a **hero** in the story, a wise youth who is in prison. Perhaps he was there because somebody in the court lied about him. (See Joseph in Genesis 39). He gets out of prison and becomes king. Everyone rejoices the nation finally has wise leadership!

(1) Consider what this says. The young man was poor, but became rich. The old king was rich, but his lack of wisdom made him poor. The young man who was in prison took the throne. The old king was imprisoned by his foolishness and lost his throne.

(2) Moral: *Wealth & position don't guarantee success, but poverty and failure are not barriers either.* The key = wisdom!

2. The story continues: ...the young man got out of prison and took the throne because of popular demand. "*I have seen all the living under the sun throng to the side of the second lad who replaces him.*" It looked like the new young king had it made, but his popularity didn't last. As often happens in our world, "*the younger generation grew up and rejected him!*"

III. Conclusion

A. No matter where Solomon went, no matter what aspect of life he studied, he learned important lessons from the Lord in chs. 3 and 4.

1. When he looked up, he saw God was in control of life and balanced its varied experiences (3:1-8).

2. When he looked within, he saw mankind was made for eternity and God would make all things beautiful in their time (3:9-14).

3. When he looked ahead, he saw the last enemy, death (3:15-22).

4. Then as he looked around (4:1-16), he sees life is complex, difficult, and not easy to explain. One thing is sure: No matter where you look, you see trials and problems and people who could use some encouragement.

B. The chapter emphasizes balance in life. It's good to have the things that money can buy, provided you don't lose what money can't buy. What's it really costing you to get what's important to you? Are you sacrificing the permanent to get your hands on the temporary?

C. To quote Jesus' words: "*For what shall it profit a man, if he gains the whole world, and loses his own soul? Or what shall a man give in exchange for his soul?*" (Mark 8:36-37). Good question, right?