

Chapter 4: Vanity in Life and in Death

Ecclesiastes 3:16–4:16

As the Preacher continues his exploration of life under the sun, he turns next to evaluate core aspects of the original goodness of God's creation. God is a just and righteous God, so the Preacher seeks to see the extent of justice under the sun. God created work as a good activity for Adam to do, so the Preacher evaluates the goodness of work under the sun. God declared that it was not good for man to be alone (Gen. 2:18), and created for Adam a woman to be his companion, so the Preacher explores the value of companionship under the sun. As he does this, the Preacher's goal is to give proper perspective. On the one hand, these are truly good gifts from God under creation, and we should value them as such. On the other hand, though, we must know that *sin corrupts God's good gifts*.

Perspective for Justice (Eccl. 3:16–4:3)

In the previous section, the Preacher set our hope on an important fact: that, while we are prisoners of time, everything we experience comes as a part of the plan of our eternal God. God is the one who establishes times and seasons, and when he ordains whatsoever comes to pass, nothing can be added to his plan, nor taken away from it (Eccl. 3:14). In light of this fixed reality, the Preacher makes an observation about justice—the first of four observations he will make in this section (“I saw...”; Eccl. 3:16, 22; 4:4, 15). Under the sun (that is, in the course of the outworking of God's plan), wickedness displaces justice and righteousness in this world (3:16). Specifically, the language of “the place of justice” and “the place of righteousness” has to do with the place of *public* justice—that is, the courts where matters of justice and righteousness are considered.¹ This is a general observation that is true in all times, in every form of government, and under all leadership.² Of course, this statement is all the more striking when we remember that Solomon, as king, is acknowledging that wickedness displaced justice and righteousness in *his* public courts.³

As the Preacher evaluates this, he reminds himself (“I said in my heart”) of two important considerations. First, he reminds himself that God will ultimately judge the righteous and the wicked, “for there is a time for every matter and for every work” (3:17)—that is, just as there is a time appointed where wickedness is permitted to flourish, so there is a time appointed for a final judgment. Of course, this consideration raises a significant objection: In God's plan, why does he not see fit to administer justice *now*?⁴ The answer to this objection comes in the second consideration:

¹ Miller, *Ecclesiastes*, 74–75.

² Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, 36.

³ Shaw, *Ecclesiastes*, 54.

⁴ Kidner, *The Message of Ecclesiastes*, 42.

“with regard to the children of man God is testing them that they may see that they themselves are but beasts” (3:18). What a humbling statement! What, though, does the Preacher mean by this?

The important clarification comes in the next verse, where the Preacher draws a comparison between the similarity of death between humans and beasts: “as one dies, so dies the other. They have the same breath, and man has no advantage over the beasts, for all is vanity” (3:19). While other portions of Scripture—especially the creation accounts in Genesis 1–2, on which the Preacher is constantly reflecting—emphasize the unique human role of dominion over the animals, the Preacher reminds us that the unique status of human beings does not exempt us from dying.⁵ As a consideration regarding the injustice that persists in the world, the Preacher’s point is clear: we are not meant to live forever in this life under the sun, so we should not imagine that we can achieve perfect justice and righteousness during our lifetimes either. We suffer the same fate as do the animals: “All go to one place. All are from the dust, and to dust all return” (3:20). The original creation story may report the dominion that human beings have over animals, but it also records that human beings were created from the dust (Gen. 2:7) and that we will return to the dust at death (Gen. 3:19)—a point that Wisdom literature regularly reminds us (Job 10:9; 34:15; Ps. 104:29; 146:4).⁶

Still, this does not mean that human beings and animals experience the same fate *after* returning to the dust. The Preacher hints at this fact in v. 21: “Who knows whether the spirit of man goes upward and the spirit of the beast goes down into the earth?” This is a notoriously difficult verse to translate, since the exact same consonants could also be translated as, “Who knows the spirit of man *which* goes upward and the spirit of the beast *which* goes down into the earth.”⁷ Other commentators insist that this cannot possibly be the meaning of the verse, and opt for a translation along the lines of the ESV.⁸ The translation has some significance, in that it changes an implicit assertion (the spirit of man goes upward, while the spirit of the beast goes down into the earth) into an area of agnosticism. Some go so far as to argue from this agnosticism that the Preacher is not “consistently orthodox,”⁹ but that conclusion fundamentally misunderstands the larger context of Ecclesiastes.

Ultimately, the doctrine of the immortality of the human soul is not imperiled by this passage at all. Rather, Benjamin Shaw is surely correct when he argues that, even if this is a statement of agnosticism, the point is not that the Preacher is incapable of answering the question. Rather, the Preacher is evaluating this question based on the insufficient information that we can gather “under the sun”: “‘Who knows?’ Only God knows. As man surveys life under the sun, he cannot tell what happens to men or animals after they die. Does man’s spirit, his life, go up above? Do the spirits of animals go down below? No one seeing events under the sun can tell. The answer is a matter of revelation, not observation.”¹⁰ The Preacher, however, identifies the limitation of what he can observe with a second statement of what “I saw.” Namely, the Preacher sees that there is nothing better under the sun than to rejoice in our work, even in spite of injustice and unrighteousness in the

⁵ Miller, *Ecclesiastes*, 75.

⁶ Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, 37.

⁷ cf. Eaton, *Ecclesiastes*, 101; Kaiser, *Coping with Change*, 109–10.

⁸ cf. Garrett, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*, 303–04.

⁹ cf. Longman, *The Book of Ecclesiastes*, 131.

¹⁰ Shaw, *Ecclesiastes*, 50.

world (3:22a). From our vantage point, it is impossible to see what will take place after we are gone (3:22b), and we should not burden ourselves to seek out more than that.

The Vanity of Life Under Oppression (Eccl. 4:1–3)

In Ecclesiastes 4:1, the notes “all the oppressions that are done under the sun.”¹¹ With horror, he beholds the tears of the oppressed, and the absence of anyone to comfort them. Conversely, he recognizes the power that their oppressors hold, but again—there is no one to comfort the oppressed (4:1). Both this section and the next section deal with the need for companionship, and the repetition of “no one to comfort them” has to do with the bitter isolation of those who suffer under oppression.¹² The Preacher does not immediately condemn this oppression as evil,¹³ but he does not need to do so. Its evil is self-apparent.

Instead of addressing the evil of oppression, the Preacher grapples with whether life is worth living in light of the oppression we will encounter. First, he states that those who are already dead are more fortunate than those who are still alive (4:2). This is not a blanket statement, for the Preacher will later say that the lowly who live are better off than the high and mighty who are now dead (Eccl. 9:4–5).¹⁴ In our passage, the Preacher is saying that the dead are better off than the living who suffer helplessly under oppression. Second, the Preacher states that better off still are those who have not yet been born to see the “evil deeds that are done under the sun” (4:3). Here we find the Preacher’s condemnation of these deeds of oppression as foul and evil.¹⁵ Moreover, the conclusion that it would be better not to have been born is common in a wide range of extra biblical wisdom literature (e.g., Herodotus, Theognis, Sophocles, Cicero, and Buddhism),¹⁶ as well as in other places in the Bible (e.g., Job. 3:3–5; Jer. 20:18).¹⁷

The connections of this point with other literature is consistent with the Preacher’s perspective as one who speaks from observation of all that is “under the sun”—he is giving us God’s inspired Word, but it is God’s inspired Word from the perspective of earth, not heaven. Even in our own day, oppression marks a constant struggle for power. Walter Kaiser is wise when he writes, “The problem of the oppressor and the oppressed in the history of mankind inevitably turned on the struggle of the strong over the weak; the strong who were able to impose their will over others....Without a God to answer to, humanists and secularists have little or no motivation to act righteously or to abstain from wickedness—especially if by that evil they can get their own way. As a result, the only outlook on life for such materialists is one of cynical resignation (vv. 2–3).”¹⁸ This constant power struggle never satisfies anyone. It only leads to despair and a hatred of life itself.

¹¹ The ESV’s “I saw” is literally, “I returned.”

¹² Eaton, *Ecclesiastes*, 105.

¹³ Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, 37–38.

¹⁴ Murphy, 38.

¹⁵ Miller, *Ecclesiastes*, 83.

¹⁶ Eaton, *Ecclesiastes*, 106.

¹⁷ Longman, *The Book of Ecclesiastes*, 135.

¹⁸ Kaiser, *Coping with Change*, 111.

Perspective for Work (Eccl. 4:4–6)

Moreover, the Preacher notes how much vanity is bound up in the work that we do. In Ecclesiastes 4:4, we have a third evaluation (“I saw”), where the Preacher identifies vanity in the envy associated with our work: “Then I saw that all toil and all skill in work come from a man’s envy of his neighbor” (4:4). This verse can be interpreted in two ways. As Doug Miller observes, this can mean either (1) that we work because of envying our neighbor, or (2) the toil and skill of our neighbor leads us to envy what they have done. Most translations (including the ESV) have adopted the first interpretation, but it is possible that both are true, in a endless cycle of envy producing work, and work producing more envy.¹⁹ In this vein, Derek Kidner writes, “all too much of our hard work and high endeavour is mixed with the craving to outshine or not to be outshone. Even in friendly rivalry this may play a larger part than we think—for we can bear to be outclassed for some of the time and by some people, but not too regularly or too profoundly.”²⁰ Charles Bridges, who takes the second interpretation, writes, “This is truly a fiendish passion—hating good for goodness sake.”²¹

Regardless, the Preacher next identifies a false solution to this dilemma of envy: “The fool folds his hands and eats his own flesh” (4:5). Rather than entering the fray of envy, the fool stays out of the arena altogether, folding his hands with ease.²² While the fool is not consumed with envy, he ends up consuming *himself* through his sloth, destroying himself by his laziness.²³ Charles Bridges wisely writes, “A life of ease can never be a life of happiness, or the pathway to heaven. Trifling indulgences greatly enervate the soul.”²⁴

How, then, should we approach our work, if we are neither to toil to outstrip our neighbor, nor to settle back in ease? The apparent solution comes in v. 6: “Better is a handful of quietness than two hands full of toil and a striving after wind.” The ideal is not to chase after *two* handfuls (which is toil and a striving after the wind), but not to go without any handful at all. Rather, one should pursue what is needed—one handful—and they should do this in a manner marked by “quietness” rather than envy.²⁵

Perspective for Companionship (Eccl. 4:7–16)

In the next section, the Preacher returns to the vanity he observes under the sun.²⁶ This whole section is connected by a repetition of the word “two/second” in Hebrew.²⁷ Our English Bibles, however, translate the repeated word “two/second” with a variety of different words. To their credit,

¹⁹ Miller, *Ecclesiastes*, 83–84.

²⁰ Kidner, *The Message of Ecclesiastes*, 45.

²¹ Bridges, *A Commentary on Ecclesiastes*, 83.

²² “The second little portrait (verse 5) shows the contrary extreme: the drop-out. He disdains these frantic rivalries.” (Kidner, *The Message of Ecclesiastes*, 46.)

²³ Miller, *Ecclesiastes*, 84.

²⁴ Bridges, *A Commentary on Ecclesiastes*, 86.

²⁵ Kidner, *The Message of Ecclesiastes*, 46.

²⁶ The ESV’s “I saw” is literally, “I returned.”

²⁷ Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, 41.

each word gives the specific sense of the word “two/second” in each context, but this comes at the detriment of obscuring the thread that connects the whole passage. First, the word “second” is translated as “other,” to describe the person who has no “second” person to serve as a companion: “one person has no *other* [lit., “second”], either son or brother” (4:8). While the lack of companionship is itself tragic, the Preacher has a more specific concern in mind. Such a person without any “second” may live his life only for himself. In doing so, he will never satisfy his cravings, since he will not only be seeking to meet his material needs, but also to fill the absence of companionship in his life. To try to fill such a gap with riches is an endless, futile pursuit, so that there is no end to his toil, and his eyes are never satisfied.

The Necessity of Having a Second (Eccl. 4:7–12)

Why cannot riches fill an absence of relationships in our lives? That answer is partially given in 4:9, the second use of the word “two”: “*Two* are better [טוֹבִים; *ṭōbīm*] than one, because they have a good reward for their toil.” This is a veiled allusion to Genesis 2:18, when the LORD God said that is was “not good [טוֹב; *ṭōb*] for man to be alone.” As Charles Bridges remarks, “If it was “not good” in Paradise, much less is it in a wilderness world.”²⁸ The word “better” appears frequently throughout the Wisdom literature to shape our evaluations of life, and “better” will come up several times in this chapter and the next (Eccl. 4:9, 13; 5:1, 5).²⁹

To reinforce the point of the need for a companion, the word “two/second” appears in three rapid proofs. First, the word “second” appears again in 4:10 as “another”: “For if they fall, one will lift up his fellow. But woe to him who is alone when he falls and has not *another* [lit., “a second”] to lift him up!” Second, 4:11 adds, “Again, if *two* lie together, they keep warm, but how can one keep warm alone?” Third, 4:12 concludes, “And though a man might prevail against one who is alone, *two* will withstand him—a threefold cord is not quickly broken.” Two is better than one, but three is better still.³⁰

The Vanity of Popularity (Eccl. 4:13–16)

Still, there are limits to the benefits that we can gain from others, as the Preacher demonstrates in the parable at the end of this chapter. The story begins as something that sounds like it confirms what the Preacher has been saying up to this point, albeit in a surprising way: “Better was a poor and wise youth than an old and foolish king who no longer knew how to take advice” (4:13). This sounds as though the Preacher is continuing to urge the value of having a “second,” illustrated by the condemnation of the old and foolish king who no longer could take advice from any “second.” Still, this is the point of surprise, since in the Old Testament, the old are considered to be more wise than the young by virtue of the collected wisdom of their years, where the young are typically foolish.³¹ Here, though, the reverse is true. Then, in 4:14, we see that this poor and wise youth comes to succeed the wise and foolish king, in a “rags to riches” story, moving from prison and poverty all the

²⁸ Bridges, *A Commentary on Ecclesiastes*, 90.

²⁹ Kidner, *The Message of Ecclesiastes*, 50.

³⁰ Garrett, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*, 308.

³¹ Eaton, *Ecclesiastes*, 110.

way up to the throne.³² Up to this point, the Preacher's point about the necessity of a "second" is reinforced.

The twist comes in 4:15–16a, and it is set off with a fourth use of "I saw": "I saw all the living who move about under the sun, along with *that* [lit., "the second"] youth who was to stand *in the king's place* [lit., "after him"]. There was no end of all the people, all of whom he led. Yet those who come later will not rejoice in him." The ESV translation gives one possibility of meaning, namely that a great number ("no end"; 4:16) of people of people were led by this poor and wise youth when he became king.³³ I am more persuaded, though, that the repetition of the word "second" in 4:15 speaks of a third ruler, succeeding both the old and foolish king *and* the poor and wise youth.³⁴ The point then seems to be that all must be replaced—the old and foolish, and the young and wise alike. Even the last one to succeed the first two, in spite of great his popularity, also eventually falls out of favor.³⁵

If this is the correct interpretation of this passage, then the "second" is no ally to the one who came before him, but someone who replaces them. Moreover, even the "second" loses his public appeal. Even if this is not the interpretation, the text is clear enough, as Derek Kidner writes: "This paragraph has its obscurities, but it portrays something familiar enough in public life: the short-lived popularity of the great."³⁶ Or, as Walter Kaiser has it, "How fickle people are! Today's hero is tomorrow's bum."³⁷ The Preacher's final evaluation is apt: "Surely this also is vanity and a striving after wind" (4:16b).

Discussion Questions

- 1) To what degree does the Preacher find justice in this world, under the sun (3:16)? Why are even the public courts for justice not capable of establishing true justice in this world? Why does God delay his bringing of final justice until some time in the future (3:17)? What is God's testing of us meant to accomplish (3:18)? In what important way, though, are human beings different from the beasts (3:21)? Even so, what should we expect regarding oppression in the world (4:1–3)?
- 2) What motivation does the Preacher identify behind our reasons for working so hard (4:4)? As you think about your own work, how does the "craving to outshine or not to be outshone" (Kidner) affect your own motivations and approach? Why, though, is laziness and sloth a false solution to the vicious competition of the world (4:5)? What does the Preacher recommend as a good approach to work in this world under the sun (4:6)? How does that address your own work ethic?
- 3) For the person who does not have "a second," how might the absence of companionship drive him or her to workaholism (4:7–8)? Why does the Preacher think that "two" are better than one

³² Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, 42.

³³ For a number of interpretive options, see Miller, *Ecclesiastes*, 86–87.

³⁴ Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, 42–43.

³⁵ Longman, *The Book of Ecclesiastes*, 147.

³⁶ Kidner, *The Message of Ecclesiastes*, 51.

³⁷ Kaiser, *Coping with Change*, 113.

(4:9–12)? Who are the companions in your life? In an age of individualism, have you been tempted to try to live apart from the companionship of others? In a digital age, have you been tempted to neglect direct, personal interaction? How does the Preacher's wisdom address these issues?

4) What are the limitations to companionship—at least, in the sense of power over people, and popularity (4:13–16)? Why should we be suspicious of the fickleness of the approval of the crowd? What is the difference between seeking companionship and seeking to be popular? Why does the Preacher commend to us the one, and warn us away from the other? Are you more tempted to neglect companionship, or to seek popularity? What sticks out to you from this section?