



Around the Word
Bible Study
 Trinity, 2015

Contentment
Ecclesiastes 3:16-4:6

Overview

Author: King Solomon

Date: c 931 BC (end of Solomon's reign)

Purpose: to reveal the vaporous nature of life without God; to instruct us to use what we have been given in thanksgiving to God; to encourage enjoyment of and contentment with present blessings.

Outline:

I. 1-2 Solomon's Quest for Wisdom

II. 3:1-12:8 Pearls of Wisdom

A. 3:16-22: Justice & Injustice

B. 4:1-6: Various Evils

III. 12:9-14 Postscript

(Adapted from James Bollhagen. *Ecclesiastes*. Concordia Commentary. St. Louis: CPH, 2011)

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Opening: Psalm 103

¹Bless the LORD, | O my soul,*
 and all that is within me, bless his | holy name!

²**Bless the LORD, | O my soul,*
 and forget not all his | benefits,**

³who forgives all your in- | iquity,*
 who heals all your dis- | eases,

⁴**who redeems your life | from the pit,*
 who crowns you with steadfast love
 and | mercy,**

⁵who satisfies | you with good*
 so that your youth is renewed like the | eagle's.

⁶**The LORD works | righteousness*
 and justice for all who | are oppressed.**

⁷He made known his ways to | Moses,*
 his acts to the people of | Israel.

⁸**The LORD is merciful and | gracious,*
 slow to anger and abounding in | steadfast
 love.**

⁹He will not | always chide,*
 nor will he keep his anger for- | ever.

¹⁰**He does not deal with us according | to our
 sins,*
 nor repay us according to our in- | iquities.**

¹¹For as high as the heavens are a- | bove the
 earth,*
 so great is his steadfast love toward those
 who | fear him;

¹²**as far as the east is | from the west,*
 so far does he remove our transgres- | sions
 from us.**

¹³As a father shows compassion to his | children,*
 so the LORD shows compassion to those
 who | fear him.

¹⁴**For he | knows our frame;*
 he remembers that | we are dust.**

¹⁵As for man, his days | are like grass;*
 he flourishes like a flower | of the field;

¹⁶**for the wind passes over it, and | it is gone,*
 and its place knows | it no more.**

¹⁷But the steadfast love of the LORD is from
 everlasting to everlasting on those who | fear
 him,*

and his righteousness to children's | children,
¹⁸**to those who keep his | covenant*
 and remember to do his com- | mandments.**

¹⁹The LORD has established his throne in the |
 heavens,*
 and his kingdom rules | over all.

²⁰**Bless the LORD, O you his | angels,*
 you mighty ones who do his word,
 obeying the voice | of his word!**

²¹Bless the LORD, | all his hosts,*

his ministers, who | do his will!

²²**Bless the LORD, all his works,
 in all places of his do- | minion.*
 Bless the LORD, | O my soul!
 Glory be to the Father and | to the Son*
 and to the Holy | Spirit;
 as it was in the be- | ginning,*
 is now, and will be forever. | Amen.**

Read Ecclesiastes 3:16-4:6

3:16: Wickedness in the place of justice

Here Solomon laments the fact that wickedness is often found even in those places where you would expect to find justice and righteousness. Where is this especially true, according to Isaiah 5:1-7? Can such wickedness be found even in the Church? See 1 Corinthians 5:1-8.

While not denying that we should work toward justice and righteousness, Solomon is nevertheless realistic about what we can achieve by our efforts. As Luther observes, Solomon has no utopian delusions: "The malice of men is so great that you cannot set them all straight. Therefore Solomon wants to say: "If someone torments himself here in order to set them all straight, he will have nothing but affliction and sorrow. Therefore one must commit it to God," (AE 15:57).

What do the following texts teach about justice and righteousness? Jeremiah 33:15; Isaiah 1:27; 56:1.

What do Psalm 37:5, Proverbs 16:3, and John 15:5 teach about the relationship between our plans, efforts, and their outcome? Pay careful attention to who is doing the acting in Psalm 37:5 and the passive voice (or divine passive) in Proverbs 16:3 ("your plans will be established", not "you will establish your plans").

3:18: "God is testing them... "

Why does God test us, according to Malachi 3:1-3 give Why is this testing important? See Matthew 3:12.

3:18-19: Man & Beast

In what sense are we worse off than the beasts? See Isaiah 1:2-3. Notice what imagery Scripture uses to describe recalcitrant sinners in 1 Corinthians 15:32 and Titus 1:12.

Remember, Solomon is talking about life "under the sun." To live purely for the things of this world, to avoid communion with Christ, is to live as the beasts. Fellowship with God and the Church is an essential

human need. See Colossians 1:9, 1 John 1:3–7, Acts 2:42, and John 17:20–23.

Shenoute: “Why did he write, “What advantage does man have over beast?” Perceive now what had happened. Understand now the scorn toward us when he saw that humanity had recognized gods other than the Lord God alone and had not obeyed this utterance, “No foreign god shall be in your midst, nor shall you worship a strange god,” (Psalm 81:9). Then when he saw humanity had acted wickedly by [doing] what is contrary to nature, with abominable deeds, with pernicious deeds that no one should be able to mention [and] to which no one should be able to listen, he said this. For if a person does not recognize his value, not only is he reckoned with the beast but the beast is more esteemed than he, when it is said, “An ox knows its owner, and the ass its master’s crib,” (Isaiah 1:3) (ACCS IX:232).

While man & beast appear to have the same fate “under the sun”, there are important differences; see Genesis 1:27–28, 2:7.

Luther: “To have a happy heart and to rejoice in present things with the fear of God is not a thing of the world but a gift of God. It comes from heaven, from beyond the sun. But being afflicted with these things means being no different from the beasts,” (AE 15:58).

3:21: Heaven or hell?

While Solomon says that we cannot see where man and beast go after death, this passage nevertheless affirms that Old Testament Christians had the hope of eternal life; compare also Ecclesiastes 12:7.

4:1: “I saw all the oppressions that are done under the sun”

See Psalm 73. If we were to judge by sight, what conclusions would we draw about God?

4:1: “They had no one to comfort them”

In Ecclesiastes 4:9–12, Solomon will affirm the value of togetherness. Jesus, on the other hand, suffered in isolation; see Matthew 26:31–46, 56, 69–75; 27:46.

Despite the fact that we continue to forsake Jesus with every sinful thought, word, and action, what promises does He make us? See Deuteronomy 31:6, Matthew 28:20, Isaiah 40:1–2, and John 14:26. How is our Lord’s promise in John 14:26 fulfilled? See Ezekiel 36:25–26 and Acts 2:38–39.

What positive function does our own suffering accomplish? See 2 Corinthians 1:3–7; 12:1–10.

4:3: Not being is better than being

Again, Solomon’s comments relate to life “under the sun”; that is to say, apart from Christ. How does St. Paul agree in 1 Corinthians 15:19?

Luther: “Those who have been condemned and who have suffered calamity feel and judge the way Solomon is speaking in this passage, for they would certainly prefer not to be rather than to be continually tormented this way; and this would simply be better for them. Therefore he says correctly here: “If you consider the misery of human afflictions and if you look only at this life, you will think that the dead are more fortunate than the living,” (AE 15:63).

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Compare Job’s misery in Job 3. Job’s wife wanted him to curse God (Job 2:9); what did Job curse instead? Typically the birth of a child is a joyful occasion. How does Job describe the day of his birth? For similar laments, see Jeremiah 20:14–18 and 2 Corinthians 1:8. How should Christians respond to suffering? See Lamentations 3:1–33.

What is the Christian attitude toward life and death? See Philippians 2:21–24.

4:4: Envy

What do Genesis 4:1–8 and Matthew 20:1–16 teach about jealousy?

Basil the Great: “Wise, therefore, was he who forbids us even to dine in company with an envious person, and in mentioning this companionship at table, he implies a reference to all other social contacts as well. Just as we are careful to keep material which is easily inflammable as far away as possible from fire, so we must refrain insofar as we can from contracting friendships in circles of which envious persons are members... In short, as the red blight is a common pest to corn, so envy is the plague of friendship,” (ACCS IX:234).

4:4: “This also is vanity”

Luther counsels us to expect the worst and enjoy what we do have: “In short, anyone who wants to live quietly should put the proposition to himself that in the world he will see nothing but vanity. He should not be sad if something evil happens, but he should rather be happy with the good things that are present. If you are thrust into the obligation of having to help make things better, do what is permissible, and God will do what He wills. But if you want to go beyond this and mingle with the world, straighten every curve, cure every evil, and throw Satan out of the world, you will cause yourself nothing but labor and

sorrow,” (AE 15:65).

4:5: “The fool folds his hands and eats his own flesh”

What, according to Proverbs 6:10–11, will happen to the lazy? Notice the energy required of the ideal wife according to Solomon in Proverbs 31:10–31. What does St. Paul teach about work in 2 Thessalonians 3:6–13?

4:6: “Better is a handful of quietness than two hands full of toil”

For related ideas, see Proverbs 15:16, 1 Timothy 6:6–10, and 1 Corinthians 7:20–24.

Closing: Rejoice, Ye Christians, Loudly (LSB, 897; st. 3)

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