

Book:	<i>Ecclesiastes</i>
Series:	<i>Two Ways to Live: Under the Sun or In the Fear of God</i>
Lesson 6:	<i>The Futility of Life, Part 5</i>
Text:	<i>Ecclesiastes 3:16-4:16</i>
Date:	<i>Sunday, February 17, 2013</i>

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Next Lesson:	<i>Ecclesiastes 5:10-17; 6:1-9</i>



TEACHING TIP

We'll take two weeks on this lesson, so divide it up however you deem best. I'd encourage you to listen to Alistair Begg's message over 4:1-16, available here – <http://bit.ly/XAAqRo>. He'll help you flesh this lesson out further with personal illustrations, colloquial experiences, and cultural expressions.

Just a reminder of our current context: we're "exploring the darkness" of chapters 1-6, considering this theme—**life merely lived "under the sun" is futile**. In these chapters, this sobering reality is driven home by:

- the ceaseless cycle of existence (1:1-11)
- the emptiness of pleasure (2:1-11)
- the limitations of wisdom (1:12-18; 2:12-17)
- the frustrations of labor (2:18-26)
- the elusiveness of life (3:1-15)
- the bitterness of misfortune (3:16-4:16)
- the disappointment of wealth (5:10-17; 6:1-9)
- the finiteness of humanity (6:10-12)

*Colonial Hills
Baptist Church*

Key



= Teacher Information



= Discussion Starter

INTRODUCTION

Thousands of years ago, Job nailed it on the head: “man is born unto trouble as the sparks fly upward” (Job 5:7) and again “man that is born of a woman is of few days and full of trouble” (Job 14:1). Life “under the sun” is harsh and the bitterness of misfortune befalls us all. This is simply expressed in our exclamations “That’s terrible!” and “How unfortunate!” etc. Because our plans are burdensome while God’s are blurred, even wise believers experience tragedy, and the honest secularist can only respond with despair. Solomon plays that role in Ecclesiastes 3:16-4:16. His quest for significance “under the sun” hits a brick wall here, as he encounters over and over again the harsh and bitter misfortunes of life. This morning, we’ll analyze a few of those “bricks.”

DEATH (3:18-22)

In the movie *The Thin Red Line* (which I know nothing about), Private Witt expresses, “I’ve heard people talk about immortality, but I ain’t seen it.”

From a secular perspective, death reduces our entire existence and significance to the same level as the animals (v. 18). Since we experience their same fate, we have no ultimate advantage over them—our accomplishments, earnings, and treasures are ripped away from us, and in the grave we look just like our pets (v. 19).

Humans are made of the same stuff as the animals and both decompose into the same material (v. 20). So, from this merely secular perspective, the animal rights activists make sense, and the evolutionists merely provide us with a rational cause for this morbid reality.

The seeker “under the sun” cannot know scientifically, historically, or observationally if his spirit goes anywhere after death. Indeed, while he senses that he has an immaterial part to himself (because of God’s placing of “eternity” in his heart—3:11), his observation of life argues against it. As death is “it” for the animal, he is left to

consider that it may be “it” for him, too (v. 21). Thus, in the grand scheme of things there is “no preeminence” or no advantage for the human over the animal (v. 19).

Solomon’s counsel, then, is to make the most of life, because you don’t know when your number will be called and your time is up (v. 22).¹

Application: As believers, we can find ourselves reading right through this passage even as we read hope right into it. We are wise, however, to consider where we used to be—“having no hope and without God in the world” (Ephesians 2:12)—and to honestly evaluate that “under the sun” perspective. We would be forced to come to the same morbid conclusion as Solomon does here. He’s the former secularist, talking like his former self, appealing to those who agree with his conclusions, that they also may “feel after God” (17:27) and come out of the fog.




How can this passage and the themes of this book be used in personal evangelism and conversation? *We can use these themes of life’s harshness, which every person can relate to, to create a sense of need within the heart of a lost person. Alistair Begg does this excellently in each of his sermons through this book. Consider, in particular, his sermon over this passage, available here – <http://bit.ly/XAAqRo>.*

Transition: Closely related to Solomon’s first point of discussion is his second. The bitterness of misfortune is discovered first in death and secondly in oppression.


OPPRESSION (3:16-18; 4:1-3)


In the very place of justice, fairness, equity, and righteousness Solomon found wickedness dwelling (3:16). This is true today, too, of life “under the sun.” We all have “seen” it (i.e., “returned and considered” is literally “I turned again and saw”).

 Leaving aside for a moment the atrocious oppression recorded in history or in today’s world news, where do we see such oppression today much closer to home? In twenty-first century America, we discover the comfortless oppressed and the powerful oppressor (cf. 4:1) in our national judicial system, local town meetings, and in a variety of other political and educational arenas. Furthermore, we witness it in the favoritism of parents and in the authoritarianism of a corporate leader. For other examples from the Old Testament, follow this footnote.²

In this disturbing discovery, Solomon brings God to bear just long enough to be encouraged by one ray of true light—that is, there is a time, in God’s beautiful and appointed plans (cf. 3:1, 11), for vindication (3:17). However, it is not his purpose here to solve the problem, but only to exacerbate it. Therefore, in 3:18 he relates how, in the eyes of the one living “under the sun,” this oppression merely lowers our race to the level of the animal kingdom in which the strong prevail and the weak are used and abused by the strong.³ And this is, indeed, exactly what we witness—the oppressed are in tears at their plight (cf. Psalm 119:136; Acts 8:2), without a comforter (2x), and the oppressors have all the power (4:1).

So, from Solomon’s perspective “under the sun,” the dead are more fortunate than the living and even praiseworthy; and yet, the unborn, and thus inexperienced, are better off than both (4:2-3). Indeed, it is this very conclusion that has driven some to take their own lives.

 **Application:** Does God care about oppression? What is His attitude towards it? (cf. Isaiah 10:1-3; Hab. 2:6-14; James 5:1-6)? *open discussion*

 Does God forget us in the midst of oppression, frustration, loneliness and disillusionment (cf. 2 Kings 20:5; Psalm 30:5; Luke 7:11-17; John 20:11-18; Revelation 7:17)? *open discussion*

Transition: Life merely lived “under the sun” is futile and the harness of existence proves that. Life’s misfortunes are a brick wall blocking our search for satisfaction. Individual “bricks” are being considered here—first, death; second, oppression; now third, restlessness.

RESTLESSNESS (4:4-8)

In these next several verses, Solomon returns to the theme of labor (i.e., “travail” is the word for business). The harsh reality of life is that man must work, for he must live. And to the one “under the sun,” that labor—even if it is “right” or skillful—produces only restlessness, as we saw in 2:18-26 (i.e., “The Frustrations of Labor”). Solomon looks at three attitudes (“familiar extremes”)⁴ discovered in the workplace, all of which betray this sense of restlessness.

1. *Rivalry (v. 4).*

Solomon looks first at the Fortune Five Hundred companies and at the Who’s Who lists; there, he witnesses only envy, rivalry, and brutal competition. Eaton comments, “The ancient world too had its international tensions, labor disputes and class conflict.”⁵ The underlying attitude of envy and jealousy⁶ is a strong motivator, for it achieves “right (lit. skillful) works.”

Illustration: In one *Peanuts* comic strip, the following conversation takes place:⁷

Sally: “Wake up, big brother.”


Charlie Brown: “Wake up?! Wake up?! Why are you waking me up?”

Sally: “I thought you might like to get an early start.”

Charlie Brown: “For what? I’m not going anywhere...”

Sally: “That’s too bad...you could have been the first one there.”


Indeed, such “rushing around with no apparent purpose” is a good summary of life’s competitiveness. Solomon wonders here what is, in the long run, the profit for these competitors and concludes “nothing,” except the exhaustion of trying to capture the wind.⁸

 What is the difference between “being driven” and envy or rivalry? *open discussion (cf. verses 9-12; also cf. Proverbs 6:34; 14:30)*

2. Laziness (v. 5).

On the other end of the spectrum is the drop-out (i.e., “fool”). He doesn’t join the jealous rivalry (and probably sees himself above it or trying escape from it), but neither does he enjoy its material earnings. In fact, not only does he squander any potential income, but he ends up “eating his own flesh”—“self-cannibalism.”⁹ Kidner explains:

He is given his real name, the fool, for his inertia is an equal and opposite error to theirs. He is the picture of complacency and unwitting self-destruction, for this comment on him points out a deeper damage than the wasting of his capital. His idleness eats away not only what he has but what he is: eroding his self-control, his grasp of reality, his capacity for care and, in the end, his self-respect.¹⁰


 In what ways might we discover these first two attitudes coexisting in the same home? *(1) We find rivalry in the father who is often away from home, driven by the competition at work, and even at home is engulfed in his assignments; we find laziness in his teenage son, who bitterly refuses the envy labor of his father, and his dad cannot understand his seeming apathy towards life and concern only with injustice. (2) This coexistence may also be found in the competition and envy of both working parents and in the laziness of the children who are never disciplined by mom and dad and taught what is the healthy balance of verse 6. (3) open discussion*

3. Independence (vv. 7-8).

A third attitude found in the world of business is the spirit of independence. Solomon describes the workaholic loner—he lives in a big house, surrounded by all the latest toys, but there is only one place set at the table and only one toothbrush in the bathroom and only one pair of shoes by the door. He has no “second” (i.e., dependent)—no child or siblings with which to share and enjoy the fruit of his labor, no companion or partner from which to receive appreciation and congratulation for all that he has accomplished. Yet, this doesn’t cause him to slow down; instead, undistracted by family, he works long and hard hours and amasses great wealth. On the flip side, unblessed by family, it is all work and no play for him. Because there are no relationships, companions, or playmates, his great wealth rings hollow (cf. Psalm 39:6) and he is not “satisfied.”

Illustration: Ebenezer Scrooge is the classic illustration of such a miser. A large estate with quiet halls haunts this individual, and any seeming happiness is a mask that covers a rotting spirit. “Eternity in his heart” has not found complement in this purposeless, time-driven toil.

The restlessness of his body and soul is discovered in his question, “For whom do I labor and bereave [i.e., deprive] my soul of good [i.e., pleasure]?”¹¹ Again, in light of this quest for significance, fulfillment, and meaning, only one label is fitting for this depressing scene: “vanity” (2x) and “sore travail.”¹²

 Where do we see this attitude in today’s world? (1) *People are getting married older, which allows them to get established and thus distracted by a prosperous career, until they are described by these verses;* (2) *A young man’s immediate wealth causes him to have no shortage of friends until their freeloading lifestyle causes him to drive them away and he’s left alone with his riches;* (3) *open discussion*

Application: Solomon actually recommends a fourth attitude in verse 6—contentment. This is an alternative to the rivalry of verse 4 and the laziness of verse 5. Solomon advocates a wise balance between work and rest—“Better is [one] handful with quietness than both the hands full with travail and vexation of spirit.”¹³ Neither the man of competition nor irresponsibility achieves this balance, and so they experience only toil and a chasing after wind. The contrasting wise individual works hard, but modestly, so that he may enjoy some peace of body and mind. He understands that oftentimes more is less and less is more, and so he practices the simple wisdom of less toil in order to enjoy more rest.

Transition: Our previous point provides a natural transition into our next point as they began the theme of aloneness. Life’s misfortunes include death, oppression, restlessness, and now loneliness.


LONELINESS (4:9-12)


Here Solomon simply states an equation— $2 > 1$. However, this is more than just a numeric fact; it’s a truth for life!

Two people can reap more than one and thus enjoy a greater profit. We know this economically as it’s cheaper to live as a couple than individually, and yet this very reality has driven some into the mindset of verse 4.

In verses 10-12, Solomon simply proves his equation. When one falls, his companion can help him up (**Illustrate** colloquially—v. 10). When they are both cold, they can warm each other (**Illustrate** colloquially—v. 11). When they are attacked, together they can withstand the assailant (**Illustrate** colloquially—v. 12). Alone, however, a man remains fallen down (v. 10), cold (v. 11), and overpowered (v. 12).

Illustration: I watched a show recently in which some goofy mechanics lifted a car by crane, attached only with dozens of rubber bands. One rubber band would obviously have been insufficient; but a “threefold cord is not quickly broken.”

 It is interesting that after the contrast of “one” versus “two,” Solomon throws in this bit about a “threefold cord.” What are some situations in life in which not only are two better than one, but three are better than two? *Dad, mom, child; legislative, judicial, executive; open discussion*

 **Application:** How has companionship mitigated the misfortunes of life for you? *open discussion*

Transition: A final aspect of life’s harsh misfortunes (i.e., a final “brick” in the immovable wall of “trials and tribulations”) is discovered in disloyalty. Within the isolation of leadership, the futility of life merely lived “under the sun” is poignantly felt.

DISLOYALTY (4:13-16)

Verses 13-16 continue this theme of loneliness by considering the isolation of leadership. Solomon writes here about the tension between tradition and revolution. Verse 14 describes a youth who comes out of prison and poverty to dethrone the “old and foolish king” of verse 13.¹⁴ Since he is a relatively “wise” youth (cf. Psalm 119:100) who is willing to listen to admonition, a trait that his crusty and arrogant predecessor no longer possesses (v. 13; cf. Job 12:20; Proverbs 26:12), his poverty is overlooked and even glorified by those who would make him king, and the masses follow after him (v. 15-16a).¹⁵ Nevertheless, no sooner has his reign commenced than the seeds of revolution are sown again, for “they also that come after shall not rejoice in him” (v. 16).

Illustration: Oliver Cromwell, who took the British throne away from Charles I and established the Commonwealth, said to a friend, “Do not trust to the cheering, for those persons would shout as much if you and I were going to be hanged.”¹⁶

While sweet succession has certainly been known, history is replete with examples of such disloyalty and revolution, even following long and prosperous reigns. This is true in the political arena, corporate world, and athletic management.

Illustration: In 2007, I traveled to Israel and saw the massive Tel of Megiddo on our first day. A Tel is a mound under which an ancient site has been buried. Megiddo had been buried 25 times. Throughout history many battles have been fought in the Jezreel Valley in front of this city. Armies have been destroyed, inhabitants wiped out, the city buried, and then rebuilt again. All 25 of those layers lie buried beneath a great mound of earth. While much of this destruction was due to foreign conquest, it still serves as a fitting reminder of the transience of political power and the danger of disloyalty.

Application: It is this very human disloyalty that played a part in one of the most significant revolutions in history. Eaton succinctly reviews it: “People are fickle and may cast their palms before a new arrival, only to cry ‘Crucify him!’ a few days later.”¹⁷ Over

this problem of disloyalty and its potentially devastating consequences, Solomon cries, “This also is vanity and vexation of spirit” (v. 16).

CONCLUSION

Life is harsh and misfortune is bitter. Is there any alleviation? Is there an escape from this trouble and sorrow? Yes, and its name is Jesus! Jesus is the good Shepherd and kind Savior who alone can smooth the rough places and straighten that which is crooked.



How does Jesus confront all these harsh misfortunes? See the following outline and verses.

1. The problem of death – Jesus is the Resurrection and the Life (John 11:25-27; 1 Corinthians 15:12-58).
2. The problem of oppression – Jesus is the Comforter (Isaiah 25:8; Malachi 4:2; Matthew 12:19-20; John 14:16; 2 Corinthians 1:3-5; Hebrews 4:15).
3. The problem of restlessness – Jesus is the Rest-giver (Matthew 11:28-30).
4. The problem of loneliness – Jesus is the Friend (Proverbs 18:24; John 15:15; Galatians 4:4-7).
5. The problem of disloyalty – Jesus is the King (Psalm 11:7; 103:19; Jeremiah 23:5; Matthew 19:28; Hebrews 1:8; Revelation 2:27).

Life is harsh, but in Jesus there is hope!

*Come, we that love the Lord, and let our joys be known;
Join in a song with sweet accord, and thus surround the throne.*

*Let those refuse to sing that never knew our God;
But children of the heavenly king may speak their joys abroad.*

*The men of grace have found glory begun below;
Celestial fruits on earthly ground from faith and hope may grow.*

*Then let our songs abound, and every tear be dry;
We're marching through Emmanuel's ground to fairer worlds on high.*

ENDNOTES

¹ “A popular alternative to leaps of faith when confronted by the uncertainties surrounding life after death has been to seek to live life simply in the light of the reality that can indeed be seen—the reality of death. A well-known slogan associated with this way of looking at the world is *carpe diem*, a Latin phrase translated as ‘seize the day.’ Although it is an ancient saying, it has been given wider currency than it perhaps would otherwise have had in modern times by the movie *Dead Poets Society*, in which the comedian and actor Robin Williams plays the role of a new teacher at a traditional private school. In an important scene early in the movie, he gathers his pupils around a cabinet in the school hallway that displays photographs of sporting heroes and trophies from the past, many of them now dead. Inviting his students to imagine what these ancient heroes, whose moment of glory has passed, would have to say to them, he moves among them whispering *carpe diem*. The scene is thus set for the remainder of the movie, in which the boys set out to squeeze all the life out of their schooldays that they can, with humorous and ultimately tragic consequences” (Iain Provan, *Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*, The NIV Application Commentary [Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2001], 98-99).

² The Old Testament records the oppression of people by a king (Proverbs 28:16), of a servant by his master (Deuteronomy 24:14), and of the poor by the affluent (Proverbs 22:16; Amos 4:1), the bureaucratic (Ecclesiastes 5:8), or even by others who are poor (Proverbs 28:3). Furthermore, we discover high interest rates (Ezekiel 22:12, 29), corrupt weights and measures (Hosea 12:7), and oppressive estate agents (Micah 2:2).

³ NET Bible—“I also thought to myself, ‘It is for the sake of people, so God can clearly show them that they are like animals.’” ESV—“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.”

⁴ Derek Kidner, *The Wisdom of Proverbs, Job, & Ecclesiastes* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1985), 45.

⁵ Michael A. Eaton, vol. 18, *Ecclesiastes: An Introduction and Commentary*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1983), 106.

⁶ “The precise thought is not that work causes rivalry...but that it stems from rivalry” (Eaton, 107).

⁷ *Peanuts*, in *Vancouver Sun*, August 16, 1999.

⁸ “This is one more depressing aspect of life ‘under the sun’ for it means man’s efforts are damaged at every stage. If his toil originates in ambition (4:4), if its progress is liable to be inhibited by folly (2:19, 21), if its results may be nil (1:3; 5:15), any hope of gain can come only from God (3:13; 5:18f.). Admittedly the Preacher is generalizing, and a different perspective will come later (9:10); but the fullest outlook is reserved for later days (cf. 1 Cor. 10:31; Eph. 6:5–8; Col. 3:22f.)” (Ibid.).

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Kidner., 46.

¹¹ In the Hebrew, it is unclear whether he asks this question to himself (KJV, ESV, NASB) or actually never stops to ask it (NET, NIV). “The point is not that he never asks the question (av, rsv), but that he finds no answer” (Eaton, 108).

¹² This phrase is translated in a variety of ways: YLT “sad travail”; Douay “grievous vexation”; RSV, NRSV, NJPS, NASB “unhappy business”; NEB, Moffatt “sorry business”; NIV “miserable business”; NAB “worthless task”; NASB “grievous task”; MLB “sorry situation”; NLT “depressing”; NET “burdensome task” or “rotten business.”

¹³ “The two words for *hand* differ in the Hebrew; the second refers to hands cupped to take as much as possible (cf. Exod. 9:8)” (Eaton, 107).

¹⁴ Whereas the KJV is confusing in this section, the NKJV provides much better clarity.

¹⁵ It is not clear whether “the second child” or “the second youth” in verse 15 refers to the young man who succeeds the old king or a second youthful successor.

¹⁶ Warren W. Wiersbe, *Be Satisfied*, “Be” Commentary Series (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1996), 19.

¹⁷ Eaton, 111.