

Ecclesiastes And Christian Living (Part Five): Comparisons

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In Ecclesiastes 3, Solomon gives those of us whom God has called wondrous knowledge capable of filling our minds with great possibilities. In it, God confirms that these possibilities can be fulfilled because He, from His sovereign position on high, is overseeing our preparations for His Kingdom. He controls time and events, doing it in such a way as to create His purposes in us without denying us the use of our free-moral agency.

In this way, we bear some responsibility for making right choices, and thus we play a role in our preparations. We must make our choices by faith, voluntarily giving ourselves in submission to His will and way. He tests and proves the validity of our faith while creating circumstances for us to navigate through, overcoming the conditions that the trials present. He gives us gifts by means of His Spirit to enable us to make right choices and bring glory to Him as we grow and overcome.

However, by his use of the term “moreover” in Ecclesiastes 3:16, tied together with the phrase “under the sun,” Solomon signals a change of direction in his instruction: “Moreover I saw under the sun: In the place of judgment, wickedness was there; and in the place of righteousness, iniquity was there.” In other words, in places within a culture where godliness must prevail so that people can live a truly good quality of life, he instead found the grave impact of evil.

It is as if he has opened a door back to the harsh realities of this evil world, in which God has consigned us to live to prepare for His Kingdom. Living in this world while maintaining an “over the sun” way of life can be discouraging and difficult because its ever-present evil influences surround us, attempting to lure us into compromising with God’s ways.

Overall, however, Ecclesiastes 3 is a strong, positive reminder of God’s great gifting of us. In the face of everyday realities, though, we sometimes manage to forget to be thankful for that, allowing dangerous thoughts to arise that could motivate us back toward the world. Thus, Ecclesiastes 3:22 urges us to be content, exhorting us not to allow ourselves to be drawn into vanities, the often-attractive realities that the world holds out to us as invitations to rejoin it. Discouragement and a wandering mind go hand in hand.

God provides us with illustrations from others who have gone before us in this way of life to help us understand that what we must overcome is a common aspect of His way. I Kings 19:3-5 involves Elijah:

And when he saw that, he arose and ran for his life, and went to Beersheba which belongs to Judah, and left his servant there. But he himself went a day’s journey into the wilderness, and came and sat down under a broom tree. And he prayed that he might die, and said, “It is enough! Now, Lord, take my life, for I am no better than my fathers!” Then as he lay and slept under a broom tree, suddenly an angel touched him, and said to him, “Arise and eat.”

Jeremiah 20:14-18 is another vivid example of the pressure brought on God’s servants despite the wonderful gifts given to them. Jeremiah is the speaker:

Cursed be the day in which I was born! Let the day not be blessed in which my mother bore me! Let the man be cursed who brought news to my father, saying, “A male child has been born to you!” making him very glad. And let that man be like the cities which the Lord overthrew, and did not relent; let him hear the cry in the morning and the shouting at noon, because he did not kill me from the womb, that my mother might have been my grave, and her womb always enlarged with me. Why did I come forth from the womb to see labor and sorrow, that my days should be consumed with shame?

The pressures placed on us are no different in principle from what God put these men under. Their examples leave no doubt about their humanity. Their discouragement proves that, for a while, running back into the world seemed attractive to them too. Know this, however: His servants endured and overcame because of God’s patience, faithfulness, and power. Given all the depressing things that happen in this world, it is easy to think that we would be better off never having been called. But God reminds us that He is continuously judging those in the world as He oversees the purpose toward which He is guiding His servants.

Do we believe that in God’s promises we are given the certainty of salvation if we remain faithful? If we believe, it gives us hope and joy. It is when we doubt that the level of temptation to flee rises. Yet, unlike them, we know the rest of the story. God did not abandon them; they survived and will be in God’s Kingdom.

Ecclesiastes 3:22 is penetrating and fitting advice because we all have a tendency to let our minds drift. But nothing in the world can even begin to compare with having the assurance of eternal life in glory with God. Nothing can trump God’s promises never to leave nor forsake us.

We must learn to live each day by faith, patiently, contentedly accepting each day’s occurrences as they come, knowing we have been greatly blessed with something far more valuable than those in the world. Those in the world should be envying us!

Better off Dead or Never Born?

Solomon writes in Ecclesiastes 4:1-3:

Then I returned and considered all the oppression that is done under the sun: And look! The tears of the oppressed, but they have no comforter—on the side of their oppressors there was power, but they have no comforter. Therefore I praised the dead who were already dead, more than the living who are still alive. Yet, better than both is he who has never existed, who has not seen the evil work that is done under the sun.

Solomon brings his thoughts back to the present, marveling at the injustice occurring without anything being done about it by those in a position to turn these sad affairs in a right direction. We know why these evil things occur because God has shown us, but that is not Solomon’s interest at this juncture. His overall interest is still on the frustrating meaninglessness of life lived by the vast bulk of the citizenry. It so amazes him because, even all the way back then, the knowledge that would greatly improve people’s lives was readily available in God’s Word.

The head-shaking reality that disturbs Solomon continues to this day. To some degree, his mind is still on his disappointment over the evil “justice” system, what caused it, and possible solutions for it. Are we not experiencing similar problems? Where is God? In our culture it appears that almost nobody makes a sincere effort to seek God and His way.

This reality fills Solomon with a high degree of frustration because God gave Israel an adequate court system based on His own laws. Thus, he reaches the arresting conclusion that a person is better off dead because his struggles against what is occurring without change would be over. Better still, he says, is never to have been born!

Let’s review what God gave Israel regarding a court system:

Listen to my voice; I will give you counsel, and God will be with you: Stand before God for the people, so that you may bring the difficulties to God. And you shall teach them the statutes and the laws, and show them the way in which they must walk and the work they must do. Moreover you shall select from all the people able men, such as fear God, men of truth, hating covetousness, and place such over them to be rulers of thousands, rulers of hundreds, rulers of fifties, and rulers of tens. And let them judge the people at all times. Then it will be that every great matter they shall bring to you, but every small matter they themselves shall judge. So it will be easier for you, for they will bear the burden with you. (Exodus 18:19-22)

The overview is given in this simplified way to let us know that administration of their courts was well-organized. They began with an adequate system for spreading the workload so disputes could be settled quickly. This was implemented even before Israel reached Mount Sinai and the formal giving of God’s law. The context indicates a great deal of bickering among them. Verse 16 reveals that God’s laws were to be the basis for their judgments. It also suggests that some already had a considerable knowledge of God’s laws. Verse 21 sets the qualification standards for the judges, which are based in God’s character standards.

In Deuteronomy 1:9-18, Moses reiterates and further details what is given in Exodus 18, but now it is forty years later, during the last month of Israel’s journey as they prepared to enter the Promised Land.

As for Solomon, the Bible shows him to have been a good administrator, despite taxing the people heavily to pay for the massive building projects he initiated. Despite his leadership, his words point to a reality: It is impossible to guarantee the integrity of every officer of the kingdom.

Solomon apparently had gone into a courtroom to watch a trial. What he witnessed in the hall of so-called justice was exploitation and oppression, the pain and sorrow of the innocent, and the unconcern of those who could have brought comfort to them. What he saw so disturbed him that it led him to declare that it was better to be dead than alive and oppressed, and better yet, not to have been born. In such cases, an individual would never have to experience or even see this grasping, rapacious covetousness.

Edward Gibbon, the historian who authored *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, says about more modern times, “Political corruption is the most infallible symptom of constitutional liberty.” He means that, if a country has a constitution that guarantees freedom to obey, there is also freedom to

disobey. He implies that people, regardless of their office, selfishly disobey. This is exactly what we are experiencing in this nation today.

For the citizenry to obey a nation's constitution, it is required to believe firmly in it and to be disciplined in character. If the nation's people do not have these qualities, some will certainly be corrupt and disobey. This is exactly what the founders of the American Republic feared. John Adams, a foremost founder of this nation, wrote, "Our Constitution was made only for a moral and religious people. It is wholly inadequate to the government of any other."

The Skillful Worker

Ecclesiastes 4:4-8 records Solomon's analysis of four types of workers:

Again, I saw that for all toil and every skillful work a man is envied by his neighbor. This also is vanity and grasping for the wind. The fool folds his hands and consumes his own flesh. Better is a handful with quietness than both hands full, together with toil and grasping for the wind.

Then I returned, and I saw vanity under the sun: There is one alone, without companion: He has neither son nor brother. Yet there is no end to all his labors, nor is his eye satisfied with riches. But he never asks, "For whom do I toil and deprive myself of good?" This also is vanity and a grave misfortune.

Solomon appears to have disgustedly turned his attention from the corrupted halls of justice to the marketplace, watching and analyzing as people worked. Recall how those who work diligently are lauded throughout Proverbs and how Ecclesiastes 2 and 3 both extol work as a major gift of God. Solomon came away from this experience with assessments of four different kinds of workers. Understand that God chooses to illustrate His counsel by showing extremes; not everybody will fit one of them exactly. At the same time, we should be able to use the information to make necessary modifications to our approach to our own work.

The first he simply labels the "skillful" worker. This worker has not only mastered the techniques of his trade, but he is also unusually industrious in performing it. We might better call this person a skillful *workaholic*. The man's skill is laudable, but his productivity motivates others to envy rather than to admiration. Knowing human nature well, Solomon is motivated to think more deeply about what drives such a person to apply himself so intensely. This may be especially useful for us because it seems to apply well to life in an Israelite culture.

Verse 4 is translated to make it appear as though those watching this skillful worker envy his diligence. However, other versions change the direction of the translation, instead saying that the diligent worker labors as he does because he is driven by *his own* attitude. The *Jewish Publication Society*, the *New American Bible*, and the *Revised English Bible* all change the word "envy" to "rivalry." That is, people of this mindset perfect their skills and work industriously because of their competitive nature gone overboard.

They want to have more wealth as well as a greater reputation than others in their field of endeavor. This type is especially strongly driven to stay ahead of the competition. Some have analyzed that such workaholics see themselves in what may be called a "battle for bread"; their purpose in being skillful is less to produce a truly quality product than it is to get rich. Thus, the hands are truly

capable, which is admirable, but the heart is out of alignment with God. Solomon describes a law of nature, the survival-of-the-fittest attitude, applied to a person's trade. He concludes that this is detrimental, literally a sheer vanity that makes life meaningless.

He is describing something similar to American capitalism, which is productive but not perfect. This competitive approach to work was not part of God's original creation of mankind but a twist Satan has inserted as part of human nature. It is unbalanced in a number of ways, one of the more obvious being that such driven people ignore or submerge other important aspects of life like marriage and family. The worker may feel good about himself because he is providing well for his family, but he is blind to the fact that others are paying a severe price.

Covetousness, competition, envy, and jealousy are often linked. Competition is not evil in itself, but when being first is pursued at the expense of honesty, trouble will also be produced. We see this when some athletes break the rules by using drugs or when manufacturers cut back on the quality of a product. The world is full of Joneses to keep up with or excel.

The Lazybones

The second worker, described in verse 5, is at the other end of the work spectrum: He is the lazybones. As the book of Proverbs shows, Solomon has no sympathy for the lazy person. For instance, Proverbs 24:30-34 reveals a major flaw in the lazy worker's character:

I went by the field of the lazy man, and by the vineyard of the man devoid of understanding; and there it was, all overgrown with thorns; its surface was covered with nettles; its stone wall was broken down. When I saw it, I considered it well; I looked on it and received instruction: A little sleep, a little slumber, a little folding of the hands to rest; so shall your poverty come like a prowler, and your need like an armed man.

As he describes it, laziness is a slow, comfortable path to self-destruction. How does this apply to our relationship with God? Laziness toward the things of God will kill us through slow, spiritual suicide! It may be comfortable to "sleep in" or to justify not doing spiritual works, but what laziness produces is not pleasant to experience.

Solomon paints a picture of complacency, and its end is unwitting self-destruction. It reveals much deeper damage than simply wasting a person's material resources, for his idleness is eating away not only at what he has, but more importantly, at what he *is*. It erodes his self-control and grasp of reality.

Therefore, we must discipline ourselves to work through Bible study and obedience to build our relationship with God. What are we truly losing when we neglect this? What does it take to live comfortably? In this culture, it is money. But laziness produces poverty—that is its fruit whether it concerns material or spiritual things. Paul writes, "If anyone will not work, neither shall he eat" (II Thessalonians 3:10). Spiritually, then, we can take that to mean that he will not eat at God's table!

Comparing the first two men, Solomon shows the industrious man motivated by competition, while the lazy man is motivated by his desire for personal pleasure. In the end, both extremes are destructive vanities.

A More Balanced Approach

Ecclesiastes 4:6, without mentioning a specific worker that Solomon may have observed, presents us with a more balanced approach that we should strive for. Putting it simply, Solomon calls for contentment. One commentator calls this a picture of an “integrated” man; today, we might call him “balanced.” This person is productive in his labors, but he also carves out time for other important activities. He guards against being caught up in the rat race, finding time to balance his life through sharing himself with his family and other activities for their well-being.

Americans spend more time working than any other people in the industrialized world. We are part of an entire nation caught up in “getting” what we refer to as “the good life.” When a person’s heart is consumed with constant “doing” or “working,” chasing after whatever he wants out of life, true quietness is ignored, and life gradually becomes a battle to ensure that all of his time is spent simply in “activity.” But God says so simply what our aim should be: “Now godliness with contentment is great gain” (I Timothy 6:6). This is a choice we are free to make. Solomon is teaching that, to have truly good work habits, a person must also make the choices to exercise a measure of contentment to balance life.

The industrious man reveals that he thinks life’s sole purpose is material achievement. Meanwhile, the lazy person’s self-serving, pleasure-seeking goal results in slow suicide. The balanced worker deliberately makes choices to divide time and energies to include the well-being of others too. What is the lesson so far? We can take what we want from life, but we must pay for what we take.

The Most Flawed of All

Ecclesiastes 4:7-8 examines a fourth type of personality:

Then I returned, and I saw vanity under the sun: There is one alone, without companion: He has neither son nor brother. Yet there is no end to all his labors, nor is his eye satisfied with riches. But he never asks, “For whom do I toil and deprive myself of good?” This also is vanity and a grave misfortune.

This person may have neither the drive of the workaholic nor the pleasure-seeking aims of a lazy man, but he shows no evidence of contentment either. As a person uncommitted to sharing his life with another, he is perhaps quite selfish. The description indicates that he wants to keep the produce of his labors for himself. He does not share them with a wife and family, and he has no partners or family to inherit what he leaves behind. The context also gives no indication that he enjoys the use of his profits. He simply works and exists.

Solomon’s final comment regarding this worker is intriguing: This situation is not only vanity but a grave misfortune. He seems to conclude that this is the most seriously flawed worker of them all. His description gives the impression of complete self-centeredness. Does anybody benefit from a life as devoted to the self as this worker is?

The New International Version translates what Solomon calls a “grave misfortune” as “a miserable business.” Ecclesiastes teaches us that work can be a God-given pleasure, but this description tells us that it will not be pleasing if we work only for self-centered purposes. It counsels us to ask ourselves, “For whom am I working?” God has worked from the foundation of the earth, but He is not consumed by it (John 5:17). God has given us work at least partly for us to learn not to be self-

centered, as well as to enable us to share life with others. God wants us to labor, to create wealth in the right spirit and for the right reasons. His counsel in this context is that a major reason is to create benefits for others.

Productivity and Safety Through Partnerships

Ecclesiastes 4:9-12 gives the impression that Solomon's experiences regarding the man who remained alone in his labors motivated him to think of the importance of friendship and the value of doing things within a partnership:

Two are better than one, because they have a good reward for their labor. For if they fall, one will lift up his companion. But woe to him who is alone when he falls, for he has no one to help him up. Again, if two lie down together they will keep warm; but how can one be warm alone? Though one may be overpowered by another, two can withstand him. And a threefold cord is not quickly broken.

A Jewish proverb says, "A friendless man is like a left hand bereft of the right." Consider how much having only one hand hinders productivity. When both hands are available, much more can be accomplished and every activity is easier. How much greater is the production of two people doing a task than if the labor is restricted to only one? Even when the two divide the profits, each receives a better return for his efforts than if each had worked alone.

The instruction moves on to contemplating that, if there is trouble along the way, two are more likely to come up with a solution than one working alone. If a person is working alone and falls, no one else is around to help him.

What happens when we stumble during our spiritual walk? Is it not good to have a friend off whom we can bounce things and from whom we can receive correction and encouragement in love? Galatians 6:1-2 addresses this issue: "Brethren, if a man is overtaken in any trespass, you who are spiritual restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness, considering yourself lest you also be tempted. Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ."

Ecclesiastes 4:11-12 seem to be calling to mind traveling by foot in ancient Israel where it might be cold during the winter months and perhaps dangerous to life and limb because of attacks by robbers. There is greater productivity, warmth, and security in numbers. II Samuel 21:15-17 recounts a time a younger man came to King David's aid when he was in need:

When the Philistines were at war again with Israel, David and his servants with him went down and fought against the Philistines; and David grew faint. Then Ishbi-Benob, who was one of the sons of the giant, the weight of whose bronze spear was three hundred shekels, who was bearing a new sword, thought he could kill David. But Abishai the son of Zeruiah came to his aid, and struck the Philistine and killed him. Then the men of David swore to him, saying, "You shall go out no more with us to battle, lest you quench the lamp of Israel."

Ecclesiastes 4:12 provides us with an example of a peculiarity of Hebrew writing that is seen in a number of places in the Old Testament. This literary device makes comparisons by using the term "better." He first uses "better" in verse 3, then again in verse 6, and finally in verse 9 as he reaches the section's conclusion. His overall point seems to be that in most cases more is better than less:

One cord may be easily broken; two would require greater strength; but three would be very difficult to break. One traveler might invite danger; two would add to both travelers' safety; but three travelers would fare even better.

What he has in mind is the matter of how unity adds to productivity, how safety is greatly increased, and how partnership with real friendship and thus greater unity makes an activity more immune to failure. Think of this as it applies to families. One person does not even qualify as a family. A husband and wife working in harmony can add immensely to each spouse's quality of life, and if Jesus Christ is the third Person in that group, the strength He contributes is immeasurably positive. Interestingly, families with many children seldom break up.

Obviously, throughout this chapter, Solomon is comparing choices that he believes we should make. In the next four-verse section, he makes another comparison, using "better" for a fourth time.

Pride, Political Instability, and Public Fickleness

He writes in Ecclesiastes 4:13-16:

Better a poor and wise youth than an old and foolish king who will be admonished no more. For he comes out of prison to be king, although he was poor in his kingdom. I saw all the living who walk under the sun; they were with the second youth who stands in his place. There was no end of all the people over whom he was made king; yet those who come afterward will not rejoice in him. Surely this also is vanity and grasping for the wind.

The story flow is translated in a choppy manner, but it goes like this: A young man born without wealth, who even spent time in prison, unexpectedly rises to power. As a young king, he listens well and rules well, but in old age, he becomes proud, losing his throne to a younger man. By this time, the kingdom was large and powerful, but Solomon forecasts that the new king's fame will not last long. He, too, can expect to lose his office, and the people who formerly cheered for him will cease appreciating him.

Solomon does not dwell on why the original king became hardened to his counselors' advice. Nevertheless, he closed his ears to their advice, and his rule ended in some degree of disgrace. Solomon gives the impression that he thought the original king foolish because he lost the support of those who originally helped him to power and the nation to prosperity.

The overall subjects of these four verses are a subtle warning about pride, and more obviously, the instability of political power and the fickleness of popularity. He makes the point in the last part of verse 16 that the younger man who replaced the original king will in turn discover history repeating itself, and his career will run much the same course as the man who preceded him. He will find that the time will come when the citizens no longer accept him either, and he will be removed from his leadership position and replaced by another.

Therefore, one must understand that public life contains a significant downside that can render life turbulent. Fame is fleeting, and everybody is expendable. A second, related lesson shows a cause of the instability: The public is fickle. Because of the self-centeredness of human nature, most people operate toward their leaders on the principle that "I believe you were good in the past, but what have you done for *me* lately?"

One of the items Solomon describes here touches to some degree on the frequent changes of leadership that our election system produces. Each administration begins with the citizens hopeful for its success, but by the time the next election occurs, those hopes are largely forgotten. Each election gives the citizenry an opportunity to express their accusations, creating, at times, significant emotional, social, and economic disturbances in the culture, as people vent their dissatisfaction with the current administration. During the next election, the nation endures the same process, but rarely does anything change for the better in its quality of life. Instead, history overwhelmingly shows that matters of quality of life, which involve morality to a significant degree, grow worse. The public quickly forgets that previous elections changed little or nothing.

Solomon may have had Joseph, son of Jacob, and his experiences in Egypt in mind as his illustration. One can draw parallels from elements of Joseph's life in Egypt, during which he spent time in prison (Genesis 41). At Pharaoh's command, he was released from prison and placed in authority over the entire nation (Genesis 41:37-46). He received great acclaim because of his leadership during the difficult circumstances of the famine. However, the final note of his story is what Solomon writes, "Yet those who come afterward will not rejoice in him." Moses states in Exodus 1:8, "Now there arose a new king over Egypt, who did not know Joseph." We know this affected the plight of the Israelites, or God would not have acknowledged it.

Ecclesiastes 4 provides a significant contrast to the uplifting and hopeful promises of chapter 3. It refocuses our attention on the fact that we live in an "under the sun" world. We must compare carefully and make our choices, understanding some of the pitfalls and difficulties those choices may entail. If we make the wrong ones, they will produce the vanities that Solomon so frequently cautions us about. As we will see, chapter 5 contains positive, spiritual advice for the sons of God.