LESSON 4

When Your World Doesn't Make Sense

Ecclesiastes 3:16-4:16

In this lesson we learn that life's biggest problems are not ours to solve.

OUTLINE

Our local and global problems seem overwhelming, yet Solomon faced them as well. What do we do about sweeping injustice and various forms of oppression? Solomon says to stay focused on God who will ultimately balance the scales, right the wrongs, and erase inconsistencies.

I. The Problem of Faulty Justice
- A. What Solomon Saw
- B. What Solomon Said

II. The Problem of Fierce Oppression

III. The Problem of Financial Rivalry

IV. The Problem of Fractured Relationships
- A. Riches Over Relationships
- B. Relationships Over Riches

V. The Problem of Fickle Popularity

OVERVIEW

Sometimes in life we are guilty of not seeing the forest for the trees, of missing something that is as clear as the nose on our face. Solomon does not allow us to do that in his book called Ecclesiastes. He tells us exactly how things are in the plainest of language.

So far we've learned there is no real meaning in life apart from God. We've also learned that there is a time and season for everything, that God's plans are good, His purpose is clear, but His program is sometimes mysterious. In this lesson, we are going to discover five aspects of life with which Solomon struggled. He speaks plainly and honestly, four times saying, "I saw . . ." (3:16; 4:4, 7, 15).

Solomon is making observations about life and writing them down, calling them just as he sees them. Then he considers what he has observed: "I said in my heart . . . I perceived . . . I returned and considered." He is making observations and then pondering what he sees. His observations are an example of what is found in Ecclesiastes 12:11: "The words of the wise are like goads, and the words of scholars are like well-driven nails, given by one Shepherd."

A goad was a pointed stick that was used by a shepherd to keep sheep in line as they moved along a road. Solomon's questions and observations are like goads from God, the "one Shepherd," that He uses to move us along in life. The issues Solomon raises in this section are not easy ones, but they will force us out of our zone of comfort into the way of God's wisdom.

The Problem of Faulty Justice

Solomon's first goad has to do with faulty justice—a problem in our day as well as his.

What Solomon Saw

Solomon saw injustice in the tribunals of his day—the guilty went free and the innocent suffered unjustly. The rich could buy their freedom, the poor were abused by the system. If God is good, where is the justice?

What Solomon Said

Solomon has three observations to make about this lack of justice:

1. Judgment Is Coming

   Solomon believes a time is coming when "God shall judge the righteous and the wicked" (verse 17). Just because we don't see justice now doesn't mean it will never prevail (Ecclesiastes 8:6). The innocent will be recompensed and the guilty will be punished. The lack of judgment now encourages some to think they can get away with injustice (Ecclesiastes 8:11), but the day is coming when the scales will be balanced.

2. Death Is Certain

   Solomon's second point is that death is certain. Critics of the Bible love these verses because they think Solomon means that death is the last act—there's nothing after death. But that is not Solomon's point. He is saying that, while it appears the rich and powerful have the upper hand when it comes to justice, they will die just like the animals. They cannot escape death and the judgment that follows.

   Solomon is not talking about the spirit of man, but the body of man. Death is the great leveler for all living beings, man and animal. The privileged in this life have no privileges when it comes to death. All end up in the grave. There is a difference in man and animals, however. The spirit of man goes upward ("to God who gave it," Ecclesiastes 12:7) and the spirit of the animal goes down to the earth. Man is not just a higher form of animal, Solomon says. Though death is the constant for all, man returns to the God who made him.

3. Life Continues

   A third goad or nail Solomon drives home is that life goes on in spite of injustice. We are not to stop living life because we can't fix every injustice we see. Death and the judgment to follow will remedy what we can't change in this life. Between now and the judgment, we are to rejoice in our work and continue on with life (verse 22).

   Solomon reminds us again that the answers to the puzzles in life are not ours to figure out. We are to live and rejoice in the life God has given and trust Him for what we don't and can't know.

The Problem of Fierce Oppression

Faulty justice was Solomon's first question, and his second deals with fierce oppression. He sees the weak and helpless of the

world who are victimized by society. He sees their tears and lack of comfort. Who are the oppressed to turn to? Where is God in the lives of the oppressed?

Simon Weisenthal, a Holocaust survivor, wrote in his book about his experience that he stopped believing in God when he saw how his fellow Jews were tortured and oppressed in the concentration camps: "When I saw the oppression and the wickedness and the injustice of that, I couldn't comprehend it, and I turned from God." Solomon says, from a purely human perspective, the oppressed would be better off having never been born than to suffer evil and oppression in this world. Job expressed the same sentiment in the midst of his suffering (Job 3:3, 11).

Solomon's father, King David, wrestled with the world's inequities and found answers only when he "went into the sanctuary of God; then I understood . . ." (Psalm 73:17). Trying to understand the events of this world and the purposes of God with your own wisdom is fruitless. Only in the presence of God do we find relief for the tension we feel living with this life's unanswered questions. This is not a passive cop out. The passive approach would be to pretend problems don't exist, to deny reality. But God is the greatest reality we have, so we take real questions to a real God and leave them with Him.

The Problem of Financial Rivalry

Solomon's third goad deals with the envy and grasping for material advantage that goes on in this world. Greed and pride of possession were as common in his day as they are in ours. Men work not to meet their needs, but to be able to own something bigger and better than their neighbor, to be the envy of their friends. The search for power and financial advantage is as active on Main Street as it is on Wall Street—not to mention in the halls of government where power is king.

In verse 5 Solomon says, "The fool folds his hands and consumes his own flesh." Some people react negatively to the search for financial advantage and drop out of the system. That happened in America in the 1960s and 1970s. But Solomon says dropping out is not the answer any more than striving for advantage is. The hippies of the 1960s didn't find any answers, but they did consume a decade of their lives in futile efforts to reform a system they didn't like.

Solomon says there is a better way: "Better a handful with quietness than both hands full, together with toil and grasping for the wind" (verse 6). He's talking about balance. You don't have

to have it all, but you have to have some in order to live. So get "a handful" and leave the scraping and clawing, or the dropping out, to those on the extremes. The Bible is filled with admonitions to living in balance when it comes to material things (Proverbs 15:16; 16:8; 30:7-9; 1 Timothy 6:6-8).

The Problem of Fractured Relationships

Solomon's fourth goad has to do with fractured relationships—he sees many who are alone in the world.

Riches Over Relationships

Solomon sees people working themselves to death, toiling to amass more and more wealth. They have no friends or relatives with whom to share their wealth. They are like Charles Dickens' Scrooge character—alone in the world with only his money to keep him company.

Relationships Over Riches

In verses 9-12 Solomon warns against sacrificing relationships for riches. Relationships are always the priority. We aren't to use people to get things, we are to use things to encourage and minister to people. Money and materials are means to an end, not the end in themselves.

Solomon gives us four reasons why having friends is better than not having friends:

1. Two Are Better Than One for Working

   Sharing the burden of labor is always easier and more fun when you are working with another instead of by yourself. Synergy happens: The whole is greater than the sum of its parts. Two can accomplish more and share a greater reward than either could alone.

2. Two Are Better Than One for Walking

   Friends provide help in times of trouble. Being alone in dark and troubling times is discouraging. Friends can encourage us to continue on in the face of obstacles.

3. Two Are Better Than One for Warmth

   People in ancient times, sleeping in the open while traveling, would huddle together for warmth. But this is also a good word for marriage—a lifelong companion provides warmth in body, soul, and spirit.

4. Two Are Better Than One for Watch-Care

There is safety in numbers. This was definitely true in the physical world of biblical days when protection was an issue. But it can also be true in our day when we need protection spiritually and emotionally as well as physically.

In all four of these examples, Solomon is saying, "Don't destroy your relationships and the benefits of them for the sake of pursuing riches. You will regret it down the road when you find yourself alone."

The Problem of Fickle Popularity

There has been no small amount of discussion concerning the meaning of these verses. I believe Solomon is looking back in history to his own family in order to talk about fickle popularity. I believe the "old and foolish king" (verse 13) is Saul, the first king of Israel, who was selected by the people of Israel because of his charismatic personality. He started out with everything and ended up with nothing, consulting a witch instead of God (1 Samuel 28:7; 1 Chronicles 10:13).

Saul was replaced by a "poor and wise youth" (verse 13) whom I believe to be David, Solomon's father. Raised as a shepherd boy, David was anointed to replace Saul because of what God saw in his heart (1 Samuel 16:7). Solomon says that a shepherd boy, born in humble circumstances, is a better choice for king than an old and foolish man who refuses to submit to the Lord.

Who was the "second youth who stands in his place" (verse 15)? I believe Solomon is here referring to himself. He was crowned with great fanfare, and he ruled over a large nation. Yet "those who come afterward will not rejoice in him" (verse 16).

With these examples, Solomon is referring to the fickleness of popularity. Everyone loved Saul, then everyone loved David, then everyone loved him. The crowds sang about how "Saul has slain his thousands, and David his ten thousands" (1 Samuel 18:7). Then Solomon took the throne, and everyone hailed him as Israel's new king.

Popularity is fickle and fleeting and is not something to be depended on: "Surely this also is vanity and grasping for the wind" (verse 16). Solomon is warning against the inconsistencies of popularity. He doesn't understand it, but he realizes it is part of life in this world. It is not something that should ruin or wreck one's life. It is a fact of life that we live with. Ask yourself this: Who won

any number of awards last year? The Oscars? The Super Bowl? Baseball's MVP? Gold medals in the last Olympics?

Some people track those awards because it's their business or a personal interest, but most people don't know. We celebrate when they happen, then forget and move on to the next hot topic. That's just the way life is. Everyone has a short attention span when it comes to who's hot and who's not. And we should have a short attention span about our own popularity as well. Enjoy it while you can because it probably won't last long. Popularity should never become a goal for the person who wants to be consistently happy. People are fickle, but God is not. You can be popular with Him forever.

With all of these issues—faulty justice, fierce oppression, financial rivalry, fractured relationships, fierce popularity—Solomon is trying to turn us toward God. He is speaking with the wisdom of hindsight. He succumbed to the futility of dealing with some of these issues in his life, but he doesn't want his readers to. God is the only certainty in life. He knows the answers to all these issues even when we don't. To allow our lives to get derailed over issues we cannot fix or even understand is "vanity and grasping for the wind."

PERSONAL QUESTIONS

1. Why do you personally believe having friends is important?

   a. Read Ecclesiastes 4:9-12. Why is having friends better than not having friends according to Solomon? When have these reasons been true in your life?

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   b. Would you say your friends are worth more than gold? Explain.

2. What are the most serious injustices you see happening in your community, your nation, or the world?

a. Will they ever be totally eliminated?

b. How do you find a balance as a Christian between trying or not trying to correct something that you know will never be eliminated?

c. Why won't injustice and oppression ever be done away with in this world?

d. Although we know evil will always be prevalent, why should we continue to stand against it and not become indifferent to it?

e. What gives us hope for justice?

GROUP QUESTIONS

1. Describe the observations Solomon made about the justice system he saw, based on the following verses. Elaborate on each.

   a. Ecclesiastes 3:17

   b. Ecclesiastes 3:18-21

   c. Ecclesiastes 3:22

   d. Are these observations relevant in our time? Why?

2. What five goads does Solomon discuss? Elaborate on each one. Are these problems prevalent in our society today? Explain.

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3. Read Proverbs 30:7-9 and talk about the following questions:

   a. What does Agur ask of God concerning material possessions?

   b. How do you respond to his request? Would you pray the same prayer?

   c. For what are you striving materially in your life?

   d. How does this parallel Solomon's observations discussed in the lesson?

DID YOU KNOW?

We often speak of "man and the animals" but in truth, man is classed in the group *Mammalia* along with the brute beasts. If we want to draw broad distinctions, it should be between the animal kingdom and the plant kingdom. This is most clearly seen in Genesis 1:29-30 where the animal kingdom is given the plant kingdom for food. Yet there is a distinction between man and beasts, and that is the image of God (*imago Dei;* Genesis 1:26-27). Both beasts and man share "the breath of life" (Hebrew *nephesh;* Genesis 2:7; 7:15) but only man was selected of all the animals to bear the image of God.