

Ecclesiastes

More Life Under the Sun

Lesson #5 for February 3, 2007

Scripture: Ecclesiastes 4.

1. Let us begin by noting that with the beginning of Ecclesiastes 4, the book starts to sound more and more like Proverbs. Why do you think that is?
2. Read Ecclesiastes 4:1-3. Have you ever been inclined to think like that? Is there any sense in which it could be true? Are these the words of a depressed old man?
3. If your life is full of “keeping up with the Joneses” does it all seem futile at times?
4. What gives real meaning to your life?
5. What would lead Solomon to make the statements he does in Ecclesiastes 4:1-3? Are conditions in our world so bad that you wish you had never been born? Were there people working for Solomon who wished they had never been born? Is this chapter evidence that Solomon began to see life through the eyes of all the people under him?
6. In this chapter Solomon deals with oppression, the meaning of life, envy, the purpose of work, community and fellowship, and finally, the results of success. Do you agree with his conclusions?
7. As we know, Solomon was a powerful king. Why would he be complaining about oppression and injustice? Was he in any way responsible for causing those things?
8. What kinds of oppression do you see, experience or have to deal with in your life? Often we think of oppression in terms of rich versus poor, or political oppression. But what about abuse between husbands and wives, parents and children, even religious oppression or exploitation of others? What about employers and employees, even sexual harassment?
Could a person oppress another in one of these ways without even being aware of it?
9. Read Mark 10:43,44; 1 Corinthians 9:19; Philippians 2:3; 2 Timothy 2:24; 1 John 3:16; 4:11. These verses might be described in some ways as a Christian manifesto. Christ himself said that it is better to be a servant if you want to be great. Paul advised us to make ourselves slaves to others if we want to win them. He told us to consider others better than ourselves. Be kind, patient, and good to all. Give your life for others. John tells us to love others as God has loved you.
10. The well-known German philosopher Nietzsche wrote much in absolute opposition to these ideas. Nietzsche thought that Jews and Christians had turned the world on its head! He clearly believed that power and strength are what makes “right.” The one who is most powerful should rule the world. (Hitler read him often!) The weak should be destroyed or left behind! That was his conclusion from evolution. Which of these two paradigms seems to be predominant in our world?
11. Look around you in the world today. What do you see more often—power being abused or power being used properly? Are you ever inclined to abuse others by the use of the power which you have?
12. Read Galatians 6:2. What is implied by Paul’s statement that we should help carry one another’s burdens? Does that apply to family, friends, even strangers as well as our fellow Christians?

13. Even today there are places in the world where young children are forced to work long hours. Usually they get paid almost nothing. They miss an education and their lives often end very early. If you were to ask one of those children if he/she would have been better off if he/she had not been born, what do you think he/she would say?
14. In our world we see some incredible inequities. The rich and the powerful, sports figures, managers, and especially CEOs often are rewarded with millions of dollars for a relatively small amount of effort. Others work long hours at minimum wage. Is that fair? A recent report suggested that the employees of a certain investment firm were receiving an average of more than \$600,000 bonus each at the end of the year! Did they really earn that money?
15. Review in your mind the life of Mahatma Gandhi. Now read Ecclesiastes 4:6. Do you think Gandhi, a Hindu, will be in heaven? Did he capture in his own life the essential points in our lesson for this week? Why do you think the most powerful man in all of India spent time weaving cloth and raising his own garden?
16. Read again Ecclesiastes 4:2,3. Is Solomon suggesting suicide? "There is but one truly serious philosophical problem, and that is suicide. Judging whether life is or is not worth living amounts to answering the fundamental question of philosophy." -- Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays* (New York: Vintage Books, 1955), p.3. Did he get this from Shakespeare's *Hamlet*?
17. How would you answer the fundamental question: Is life worth it? Would your answer be different if you knew there was nothing beyond this life? Are you able to survive the vicissitudes of this life because of "pie in the sky, by and by"? Is human death the end or only the end of the beginning?
18. What things in your paradigm make life worth living?
19. Paul and others have used the illustration of a body with different parts as an illustration of the necessity of community and fellowship. It should be obvious to anyone who looks carefully at the church, or even a small portion of the church, that people have different talents. While it is true that the body can survive without some parts, it is still much better with all parts present. The body works best when each organ or each part works for the general good of all. Isn't this true also of the church?
20. What keeps us from living truly unselfish lives?
21. Read Ecclesiastes 4:4-6. Being very honest with yourself, how much of your life's time and effort are motivated by envy? How large a factor is "keeping up with the Joneses" in your life?
22. Was envy the original sin in heaven?

Satan was envious and jealous of Jesus Christ. Yet when all the angels bowed to Jesus to acknowledge His supremacy and high authority and rightful rule, Satan bowed with them; but his heart was filled with envy and hatred. -- Ellen G. White, *The Spirit of Prophecy*, vol. 1, p. 18.
23. Review briefly the stories of the Old Testament. How many stories can you think of that were affected by envy? Cain versus Abel. Jacob versus Esau. The sons of Jacob versus Joseph. Korah, Dathan and Abiram. What do we learn about envy from these stories?
24. What is it in someone's life that causes him/her to be an abuser of power? What is it that allows someone to be abused? Why do some people tolerate abuse? What types of abuse

are most prevalent in our society? Are there forms of abuse even in the church?

25. There is good evidence to suggest that most of the misery in our world is caused by selfishness. By contrast, we find that those who dedicate their lives to serving others are often the happiest, even though they may be poor and working under very difficult circumstances. In light of this contrast, ask yourself again what motivates you. Are there people around you who depend upon you for care and for service?
26. Read Matthew 25:31-46; Mark 10:45; Acts 2:43-45; Hebrews 13:1-3. Jesus makes the principal very clear in his parable. Those who are most godlike are those who are serving others. Think of the life of Jesus. Was it completely unselfish? Was there any sense in which he came to serve his own needs or the needs of his Father? If we want to be more godlike would we be more like Jesus? Satan wanted to be more godlike but what he wanted was God's power and authority!
27. Contrast the basic concepts of evolution with creation and Christianity. Are we just accidents of chance or are we brothers and sisters of Jesus Christ? Does our identity with Jesus have a major impact on how we look at others?
28. Solomon concludes Ecclesiastes 4 by discussing the advantages of living together in community. Clearly, we can accomplish more when we work together in cooperation than we can as single individuals.
29. Often it is stated, "I want nothing to do with organized religion." Why has organized religion gotten such a bad name? Do these people want *disorganized religion*?! Usually the truth behind the statement is that they are looking for an excuse to avoid the responsibilities and commitments and even the submission required of true Christians. They are afraid of being part of something bigger than themselves.
30. We might conclude the ideas presented in this lesson by suggesting that a meaningful life in Christ will always be more "other-centered" and less self-centered. Another way of stating this is "a meaningful life in Christ is one of worry-free humility and childlike trust in him." *Adult Teachers Sabbath School Bible Study Guide* p. 63. If we really take this approach to Christianity and try to experience it in our own lives, how would it affect us at work? How would it affect us at home? How would it affect us in our overtime work? How would it affect us in our attitude toward others?
31. Communities produce young people with goals and desires in their lives. Do the young people in your life have a clear concept of what they want in life? Did those goals come from you or did those young people see something in your life or the life of your community that they really want? Was it a result of true fellowship?
32. One of the reasons for having small groups in a Christian setting is to provide a sort of "home" for young people to experience true Christian fellowship. Is that possible in your church? Is it actually taking place?

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