

Daily Bible Study

“A Crying Shame” Ecclesiastes 3:16-4:16

May 26– June 1, 2013

MONDAY –As we continue our study in the book of **Ecclesiastes** we take a little larger section as our text, **Ecclesiastes 3:16-4:16**. We mentioned last time that the circle of life ends kneeling before the feet of Jesus. What is in view in that statement is the final Judgment, the Day of The Lord. This is where Solomon opens in this week’s portion as he reminds us that God will judge men, judge us to be more specific. He learns that amid this “meaningless” life there are real people in real situations which reveal some painful facts such as life, death, time, eternity, and the final judgment. Remember it was this man who wrote, *“Do not boast about tomorrow, for you do not know what a day may bring forth” (Proverbs 27:1)*. He then takes an honest look at life *under the sun*, and sees tears of a people who have lost their way. He sees that a life lived without God brings exploitation, frustration, loneliness and disillusionment. Amid all the frivolity and the laughter are tears. Solomon will speak about some of the causes for tears in life. Anglican Bishop Phillips Brooks over a century ago, told students to read three “books”: the Book of Books, the Bible; the book of nature; and the book of mankind. The ivory tower investigator will never have a balanced view of his subject if he remains in his ivory tower. Learning and living must be brought together. And this is precisely what Solomon will do in our text. **Ecclesiastes 3:16-4:16**: *“Moreover I saw under the sun: In the place of judgment, Wickedness was there; And in the place of righteousness, Iniquity was there. I said in my heart, “God shall judge the righteous and the wicked, For there is a time there for every purpose and for every work.” I said in my heart, “Concerning the condition of the sons of men, God tests them, that they may see that they themselves are like animals.” For what happens to the sons of men also happens to animals; one thing befalls them: as one dies, so dies the other. Surely, they all have one breath; man has no advantage over animals, for all is vanity. All go to one place: all are from the dust, and all return to dust. Who knows the spirit of the sons of men, which goes upward, and the spirit of the animal, which goes down to the earth? So I perceived that nothing is better than that a man should rejoice in his own works, for that is his heritage. For who can bring him to see what will happen after him? 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 is 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. 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 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. 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. 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 born 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.”

Suggestion for Prayer: God, teach me this week from Sacred Scripture. Help me understand life is difficult and painful at times but You are always there and in control and working for the good of your people. Help me rest by repentance and faith in Jesus finished work in my behalf.

TUESDAY – **Ecclesiastes 3:16-22**: *“Moreover I saw under the sun: In the place of judgment, Wickedness was there; And in the place of righteousness, Iniquity was there. I said in my heart, “God shall judge the righteous and the wicked, For there is a time there for every purpose and for every work.” I said in my heart, “Concerning the condition of the sons of men, God tests them, that they may see that they themselves are like animals.” For what happens to the sons of men also happens to animals; one thing befalls them: as one dies, so dies the other. Surely, they all have one breath; man has no advantage over animals, for all is vanity. All go to one place: all are from the dust, and all return to dust. Who knows the spirit of the sons of men, which goes upward, and the spirit of the animal, which goes down to the earth? So I perceived that nothing is better than that a man should rejoice in his own works, for that is his heritage. For who can bring him to see what will happen after him?”* Solomon begins here speaking of a place where man is called to exercise a God like function; justice. He finds that in the court of law, where true judgment was called to prevail, there was wickedness. Why? Because man is a fallen sinner. True justice was not prevailing because true judgment cannot be made without *righteousness* but in its place was *iniquity*. The question is often asked how can God be in control when there is so much evil in our world; the wicked prospering in sin and the righteous suffering? Solomon learned God has a time for everything, including and is working out His eternal purposes in and through the deeds of men, even the deeds of the wicked (**Psalms 76:10**). Men will face the true righteous Judge. Man’s destiny is to face the judgment of God. We are called to make judgments all our lives as to another person’s character, abilities, actions, but our judgments will always be impaired in some way by our sin. Only God is the righteous judge who is *testing* man *that they may see that they themselves are like animals*. In the experiences of life, God is *testing* (the Hebrew word means “purify, polish, purge, cleanse, make bright, test, prove”). The Authorized Version translates the word manifests. God is revealing what man is really like and when man leaves God out of his life, he becomes like an animal. (**Psalms 32:9, 2 Peter 2:22**.) He lives like a beast and dies like a beast. Solomon is not saying there is no difference between men and animals. He merely states what they have in common; they both die and turn to dust (**Genesis 2:7, 3:19**). As we saw in our study of Mark, men are distinct from animals in that we are made in the image of

God. We will one day be resurrected and as believers receive glorified bodies suitable for eternity (**1 Corinthians 15:35-58**). Scripture says at death the spirit leaves the body (**James 2:26, Genesis 35:18, Luke 8:55**). Finally, **verse 21** tells us men and animals don't have the same experience at death although they both turn to dust after death. Man's spirit goes upward to God (**12:7**), while the spirit of a beast goes down to the earth (**Psalms 49:14**). He closes reminding us to rejoice... because God is sovereign and we can be at peace, satisfied in Him.

Suggestion for Prayer: Lord God, thank You for making me in Your image. Help me to understand what that means. You have given me so much and I will be accountable for it. Thank You that I will rise in body again one day to live eternally in the new heaven and earth.

WEDNESDAY – Ecclesiastes 4:1-6: “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 is 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. 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 a handful with quietness than both hands full, together with toil and grasping for the wind.” Solomon now goes to a courtroom if you will where he saw innocent people being oppressed by power hungry rulers. The victims cried tears but they did no good, they have no comforter. Nobody stood with them to comfort or assist them. Is Solomon a helpless bystander observing this exploitation of the weak by the powerful? Isn't Solomon the King? Can't he do something? This could be discussed at length but suffice to say, Solomon is a man who is in a position to do something but he has turned to other gods, and abandoned his responsibility God had given him as king of Israel (**1 Kings 11**). God has spoken His view on justice for the exploited in many places (**Psalms 12:5**). We know that where there is power there is the temptation for its misuse. Jesus even warned His apostles concerning this (**Mark 10:42-45**). Solomon is despairingly cynical in praising the dead who were already dead. He is saying to be dead or unborn is actually better off. As Solomon turns his attention to the workplace we will see that the gas on the fire so to speak for “finding earthly satisfaction” is envy and a lack of contentment. Ernest Lehman wrote a book entitled ‘The Sweet Smell of Success’. We love work, it's biblical, right? Millions of people, including Christians search for success in the workplace—but at what price? Our ambitions in work may seem legit to us, but they can easily be fed by our envy of others. We speak of ‘healthy competition’, but Solomon saw that all toil and all achievement spring from one person's envy (NIV). Scripture gives many instances of insatiable envy and those who have much but still crave more. IE: Ahab had a kingdom, but killed a man for a vineyard (**1 Kings 21**); Solomon's father David had many wives and concubines, yet stole another man's wife (**2 Samuel 11**). Then Solomon addresses the laziness and danger of not working in **vs. 5** comparing laziness to cannibalism. We find the balance in **vs. 6**. Fallen nature craves ‘just a little more’ but a handful with quietness is what God advises.

Suggestion for Prayer: God, help me pray for and seek justice. Help me also to not be fueled by envy but to not be lazy but work for Your glory and be content with the handful You provide.

THURSDAY – Ecclesiastes 4:7-12: “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. 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.” Now Solomon addresses the lonely man or we could make it sound more palatable and call Him the “independent” man. In the context we would have to say he is alone because he is consumed by his work and doesn't make or keep close relationships. There are those who have achieved many things and much “success” in life and in turn have lost everything important along the way such as their families and friendships. For who and what are you working? If your answer is **ANYTHING** but God and His glory, beloved your answer is wrong. We see the contrast of loneliness to true companionship in these verses as well as the genuine and real benefits and strength found in working partnerships and friendships. Read the text again and may God speak to your heart the importance, benefit, blessings, and safety found in close companionship. It goes without saying that only genuine brothers & sisters united together in Christ can really understand this and enjoy true fellowship.

Suggestion for Prayer: Father, save me from being the independent man; working alone at the high cost of not receiving the blessings and benefits of the companionship You here advise.

FRIDAY – 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 born 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.” We now have another “better” statement from Solomon as he tells a story (we will discuss more at length this Lord's Day) teaching us two principles; the instability of power and the fickleness of popularity. Wealth & position are no guarantee of success; poverty & seeming failure are no barriers to achievement but in all of it the key is God's wisdom. Success, power, advancement, and popularity are also fleeting. If you look here for satisfaction, you will be disillusioned. Oliver Cromwell once 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.” Is this not true of the crowds who cheered Jesus and then cried for his death days later (**Matthew 21:9, 27:22-23**)? Once again, Solomon drew the same conclusion: Surely this also is vanity and grasping for the wind.

Suggestion for Prayer: God, please help me understand it is folly to seek satisfaction from success and others accolades. Help me be truly satisfied with You alone & seek Your approval.