

WHAT'S GOING ON? ECCLESIASTES 3:16-4:6

Note: Marvin Gaye co-authored and sang a song that protested the social injustices going on in the 1970's. The name of the song was *What's Going On?* In Ecclesiastes 3:16-22 Solomon addresses the injustices he saw under the sun in a similar fashion.

INJUSTICE IN THE PLACE OF JUDGMENT (3:16)

And moreover I saw under the sun the place of judgment, *that wickedness was there; and the place of righteousness, that iniquity was there.* Solomon saw something under the sun that made him pause and ask, "What's going on?" Solomon's search for meaning in life took him to the justice system which only added to his hatred for life. All he found there was wickedness and iniquity. He saw corruption in the places where people were supposed to get a fair chance.

THERE IS A TIME AND SEASON FOR INJUSTICE (3:17)

I said in mine heart, God shall judge the righteous and the wicked: for *there is a time there for every purpose and for every work.* As much as we don't want to hear it, Solomon indicates there is a time and season for injustice. However, he does take us above the sun again for a brief moment to let us know that one day God will deal with injustice. It is hard for finite man to understand how millions of Jews were killed unjustly by Hitler or how many black men were lynched for no reason at all in America. The only way that any of it makes sense is that there is God who will **judge the righteous and the wicked.**

INJUSTICE DRAWS OUT THE BEAST IN MANKIND (3:18-21)

Injustice Puts Man and Beast on the Same Level (3:18-19)

I said in mine heart concerning the estate of the sons of men, that God might manifest them, and that they might see that they themselves are beasts. For that which befalleth the sons of men befalleth beasts; even one thing befalleth them: as the one dieth, so dieth the other; yea, they have all one breath; so that a man hath no preeminence above a beast: for all is vanity. According to Solomon, injustice is God's way of allowing man to see he is nothing but a **beast**. This does not mean that God is the creator of injustice, only that He permits it to run its course and, in the end, man sees that he is no better than an animal. Looking at life from a human perspective, both man and animals have **one breath**. From life under the sun man has the nature of an animal, thinks like an animal, acts like an animal and finally dies like an animal.

Injustice Leads to no Observable Distinct Destiny at Death (3:20-21)

All go unto one place; all are of the dust, and all turn to dust again. Who knoweth the spirit of man that goeth upward, and the spirit of the beast that goeth downward to the earth. Looking at the death of a human and the death of a beast, there is no observable

difference in their destinies. They both die, return to dust and their **spirit** (Hebrew *ruah* “breath”) either goes upward or downward. In these verses, Solomon is not making a case for the immortality of humans and the mortality of animals. In a sense he is merely thinking out loud and asking, “Who can be certain if the spirit of a man goeth upward to live forever and who knows if the spirit of a beast goes down into the ground and ceases to exist?”

SOLOMON’S ADVICE BASED ON INJUSTICE (3:22)

Wherefore I perceive that *there is nothing better, than that a man should rejoice in his own works; for that is his portion: for who shall bring him to see what shall be after him?*

Solomon will continue his discourse on injustice in Chapter Four but for now he says the best thing for man to do is take joy in his work, i.e., the fruit of his work. This makes sense if man does not know what the afterlife is going to be like **shall bring him to see what shall be after him.**

SOLOMON’S FOCUSES ON A SPECIFIC INJUSTICES (4:1-3)

The First Injustice: The Powerful Who Oppress the Powerless (4:1)

So I returned, and considered all the oppressions that are done under the sun: and behold the tears of such as were oppressed, and they had no comforter; and on the side of their oppressors there was power; but they had no comforter. Solomon picks up again his discourse of injustice. He looked at all the **oppressions that are done under the sun.** The Hebrew word for **oppressions** deals with the misuse of power by authority, especially in abusing those of lower status in life. Instead of dealing with injustice in general, he points to a specific situation. Solomon saw those who were **oppressed** crying out but they had no comforter, no one to show them compassion. The ones who were oppressing them had all the power but the ones who were being oppressed had no comforter.

Solomon Praises the Dead and the Unborn (4:2-3)

Wherefore I praised the dead which are already dead more than the living which are yet alive. Yea, better is he than both they, which hath not yet been, who hath not seen the evil work that is done under the sun. Solomon **praised** (congratulated NASB) the ones who had already died more than the ones who were still alive who had to deal with the oppressions on this earth (for examples of this see Jon. 4:3; 1 Kings 19:4). **Yea, better is he than both they, which hath not yet been, who hath not seen the evil work that is done under the sun.** Here he gives the highest congratulations to the person who has not yet been born. The living are currently experiencing injustice, the dead have already experienced injustice but injustice has not touched the unborn (for an example of this see Job 3:9-22; Jer. 20:14-18).

The Second Injustice: A Jealous Neighbor Who Sabotages Success (4:4)

Again, I considered all travail, and every right work, that for this a man is envied of his neighbour. This is also vanity and vexation of spirit. Solomon considered or examined all travail (Hebrew *amal* “work”) and every **right work** (achievement NIV). His examination led him to the conclusion **man is envied of his neighbour.** Whenever a person works hard and has

success, there is a **neighbor** who is jealous of his achievements. The **neighbor** could be a co-worker, church member, or one that resides in the neighborhood. Furthermore, this is not just a passive jealousy, it's an active one. It tries to out-do, it destroys reputations, it puts one down by unethical means, etc. We see this in today's dog-eat-dog world. People work hard and climb the ladder to success only to become a target to be shot at by someone wanting to take them down by whatever means necessary.

The Fool's Response to a Neighbor's Sabatage (4:5)

The fool foldeth his hands together, and eateth his own flesh. Solomon said, **The fool foldeth his hand together.** Qoheleth uses the phrase "folding hands together" as a word picture depicting laziness (Prov. 6:10; 24:33). In this verse the **fool foldeth his hands together** and **eats his own flesh.** The phrase **eateth his own flesh** pictures the fool's self-destruction. This verse pictures the results of a person who reacts foolishly to the words of the preceding verse. Instead of becoming successful and have it spoiled by a jealous person, this individual becomes lazy, has no success and self-destructs.

The Balance Between Striving for Success and Foolishness (4:6)

Better is an handful with quietness, than both the hands full with travail and vexation of spirit. It is better to have a **handful** (a little bit) with **quietness** (peace and rest) than have two full hands with frustration and striving after the wind. This verse directly addresses the fool's attitude about success in the previous verse. Even though success will draw out opposition for those who are jealous, one should not allow that to be a deterrent to working hard and achieving success. The bottom line is that one should work enough to take care of oneself, rest and enjoy life; while avoiding the stress of achieving success at any cost.