Preparing to Teach Ecclesiastes Chapters 3 and 4

The first half of Ecclesiastes 3 is probably the most famous part of the book. The first 8 verses seem to be a poem about appropriate times as opposed to passing time. Verses 9-15 seem to provide commentary on the poem, leading many people to think that Qoheleth may have adapted or borrowed an existing work to teach his lesson in verses 9-15. Regardless of whether the poem was originally independent of the commentary, it fits together perfectly as a unity in its present configuration.

The eight verses of the poem were used by U.S. folk singer Pete Seeger in the 1960s as the basis for his song, “Turn, Turn, Turn.” It was recorded by folk singers, Judy Collins, The Lettermen, The Limelighters, and The Seekers, as well as a big rock hit from The Byrds in 1965 and a gospel version by Nina Simone at a later date. I bring this up because most interpreters look at these eight verses as saying that there is an inevitable cycle to life that there is nothing humans can do about. The chorus which he added to the verses in Ecclesiastes emphasized this: “To everything, turn, turn, turn, there is a season, turn, turn, turn, and a time for every purpose under heaven.” The classic German movie star, Marlene Dietrich, even did a version of this called “Glaub! Glaub! Glaub!” but the translation is more like *Fur alles Tun, Glaub, glaub, glaub, auf dieser Welt, Glaub, glaub, glaub, Kommt die Zeit, wenn es dem Himmel so gefallt* “For everything you do, turn, turn, turn, on this world, turn, turn, turn, comes the time, as heaven pleases.”

After the session, Brother Kong Zane reminded me of the song, “The Green Leaves of Summer.” This song, recorded in the early 1960s and used on the soundtrack of John Wayne’s *The Alamo* film, also echoes Ecclesiastes 3 in dealing with the seasons and circularity of life.

But if you stop with circularity, just the fact that life goes in cycles, you absolutely miss the point of submission where Qoheleth responds to God’s sovereignty and tells his readers what to do. Now, although it probably won’t mean anything to your students, I can’t talk about hit popular songs in the U.S. that were inspired by Ecclesiastes 3 without mentioning Paul Simon’s verse based on Ecclesiastes 3:11. He wrote a song about the way time keeps running away from human beings that I think Qoheleth would have really enjoyed. The final verse of “Slip, Sliding Away” reads:

*“God only knows
 And God has His plan;
 The information’s unavailable to
 the mortal man.
 We work our jobs; collect our pay;
 Believe we’re driving down life’s
 highway when, in fact,
 we’re slip, sliding
 away!”*

If, like these popular songs, we take the verses out of context, life seems pretty futile, doesn’t it? I doesn’t even sound like it should be in the Bible, does it? But let’s look at it from Qoheleth’s background. The wisdom tradition was very concerned about timing. Hear the wisdom of Proverbs 15:23 (HCSB):

**23**A man takes joy in giving an answer;
and a timely word—how good that is!

To the wisdom tradition, the essence of wisdom was knowing the right time to speak or act. So, Qoheleth is affirming this right from the beginning of Chapter 3. This wasn’t unique to Israel. The whole world thought that there was a best time to marry, a best time to build a house, a best time to go to war, etc. What Qoheleth is going to indicate that is different is that one cannot go to the astrologer, the seer, the priest, to read signs and portents. The timing is in God’s hand. That should sound familiar to us because Jesus said in John 7:6 (HCSB):

**6**Jesus told them, “My time has not yet arrived, but your time is always at hand.”

He used similar wording many times, but in this case, He didn’t want to make the trip to Jerusalem for the Sukkoth/Tabernacles festival because He knew the bloodthirsty fanatics would want to kill Him and that He still had to build the foundation before that could happen. In His prayer life, He was always communicating with the Father to keep that channel of communication open so that His will and the Father’s will was one. If we read Qoheleth without understanding that he accepted God’s good timing and God’s providence, we are misreading it.

I like the way this chapter is presented in a classic Old Testament Survey book.

**Theme: God is in control of all events (3:1-11)
Conclusion: Enjoy life now as God gives it (3:12-15)**

**Theme: Humans have a limited lifespan (3:16-21)
Conclusion: Enjoy life now as God gives it (3:22)**

[Adapted from LaSor, William S. (et. al.), *Old Testament Survey: The Message, Form, and Background of the Old Testament: Second Edition* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1996), p. 502.]

**Of the Season and the Time (v. 1)**

So, enough general observations, let’s look at the text in detail. Verse 1 reads: “For everything, there is a window of opportunity [lit. “season”] and an appropriate time for every consideration [business, pleasure, activity] under heaven [lit. “heavens”].” [PJT] There are several key words here. First, “season” is an Aramaic word that doesn’t show up in Hebrew until during or after the Exile. Most importantly it ““…is always used of a predetermined or appointed time.” [Seow, Choon-Leong, *The Anchor Bible: Ecclesiastes: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (New York: Doubleday and Company, 1997), p. 159.]

Second, “time” is parallel to “season” so it also means a specific time, a best time, an appropriate time rather than the flow of time [Crenshaw, James, *The Old Testament Library: Ecclesiastes* (Philadelphia, PA: The Westminster Press, 1987), p. 92.] In the Hebrew, the word sometimes means chronological time, but by its use in parallel, we are reminded that it is a best time. The Greek translation of the Old Testament, the Septuagint (LXX) translates it as καίρος as opposed to the word from which we get chronological. This word is used 40 times in Ecclesiastes and, after this verse, 28 times in this poem [Rad, Gerhard von, *Wisdom in Israel* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1972), p. 264n3.] In fact, one scholar has suggested that “time” was also placed second to be closer to the 28 times it is used in 3:2-8 [Longman, Tremper III, *The New International Commentary on the Old Testament: The Book of Ecclesiastes* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1998), p. 114.]

So, this very first verse indicates that God has set up an established order while implying that humanity’s job is to fit into it. Fitting into the order at the optimal time will be shown to be more complicated than it initially sounds, but the bottom line declaration is that God has ordered things in a good way (as we know from Genesis 1). In fact, while one could argue that “under the heavens” is just another phrase for “on earth,” the reality that God’s throne is in heaven (or the heavens) should indicate that all of these activities are taking place on God’s watch.

**Opposites or Continua (vv. 2-8)**

Most interpreters simply see these as 14 opposite pairs with the first pair (v. 2) dealing with the beginning and ending of human life and the last (v. 8) dealing with the establishment or securing of kingdoms in war and peace. As a result, the series is enveloped in ultimacy [Brown, William P., *Ecclesiastes: Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), p. 40; Crenshaw calls it a ring pattern or a closed structure, p. 93.]. One has nothing to say about when one will be born and very little to say about when one will day. Again, the individual doesn’t have a lot to say about war and peace. The other opposites (the technical term is “merism” when one pairs opposites for literary reasons) seem to be matters that an individual can have control over.

The Hebrew reads: ***2) A time for birthing and a time for dying.* [PJT]** Grammatically, it isn’t about “being born;” it’s about the time of giving birth. Today, we can artificially induce labor, but unless there’s a compelling reason, we usually wait for the time of giving birth, even today. The wise person doesn’t rush a woman in labor to give birth. For the most part, it’s out of the mother’s control and the nascent child’s control. Of course, in Hosea 13, the prophet does share God’s frustration with Ephraim by claiming in Hosea 13:13 (HCSB):

**13**Labor pains come on him.
He is not a wise son;
when the time comes,
he will not be born.

It would be pretty fruitless for a child to fight against the birth contractions, wouldn’t it? And sometimes, human beings fruitlessly try to hold back from what God has established. Similarly, as human beings, there are a few things we can do to reduce the odds of dying too soon, but there’s no guarantee being healthy would keep us from an accident, an epidemic, or an act of violence. So, there we have it. There are optimal times for the beginnings and endings of human life, but nothing much to be done about it. All the more reason to follow the prescription of Qoheleth in the latter part of the chapter.

One question to be answered if whether these are opposites or parts of a circular continua. For individuals, since Christians and Jews don’t believe in reincarnation, birth and death cannot be circular. However, for families and populations, birthing and dying do reflect a generational cycle which is inevitable. At the same time, the closing doublet of war and peace seems to be an inevitable cycle—especially in light of Jesus’ warning that before the end of human history, there would be wars and rumors of wars (Matthew 24:6-7). In between, planting and uprooting are both parts of preparing a field. While love and hate provide a spectrum of human emotions. So, we seem to have what happens outside the individual at the extremities of the poem with matters where the individual might take some initiative on the inside.

But let’s get back to verse 2. Uprooting is done before planting and planting is done before harvesting and uprooting. I know that there is a Canaanite inscription where the verb translated as “uprooting” refers to harvesting. In that way both sides of this couplet would be strictly positive. But in the Hebrew Bible, the root is used in Zephaniah 2:4 for the annihilation of the Philistine city of Ekron in God’s judgment. And the same root is used in Joshua for hamstringing livestock as part of warfare. So, we do have either two opposites or the full circle of clearing the field to make room for the next crop. Planting may be a metaphorical parallel to birth and uprooting may be a parallel to death.

Certainly, killing and healing are opposites. The Hebrew word for “killing” that is used here is the same one used for Cain killing Abel in Genesis 4:8. It is a common verb for killing in war and massacres associated with raids. It is used when killing in holy war and defending oneself, as well. There are times when violence is necessary, but there are times when healing is necessary. Since healing brings restoration of health and killing ends life, it would be pretty hard to see these as a continuum.

But I want you to see something else. The word that is used for healing here is also used in the prophets for the healing of nations. We see this in Isaiah 19:22 when the prophet says that God will strike down Egypt and then heal Egypt. We see it in Hosea 6:1 when God says that if the people will come back to God, God will heal them. So, this couplet of violence and healing might be implying God’s judgment, as well as what human beings do.

And speaking of preparing the ground, it is good to get rid of old construction and rubble before one attempts new construction—otherwise, the new will always be constrained by the old. This might be considered to be a nice verse describing the need for repentance, even though I don’t believe that’s what Qoheleth had in mind. Still, it expresses a truth, both physically and spiritually.

But as for my question about the relationship of the verses, I like seeing the connection of verses 2-4 as so:

2) A time for birthing and a time for dying
 A time for planting and a time for uprooting planting

4) A time to cry and a time to laugh
 A time for lamenting and a time for skipping [joyfully]

3) A time for killing and a time for healing
 A time for breaking down and a time for constructing

5) A time to throw out stones and a time to gather stones
 A time to embrace and a time to hold back embracing

6) A time to search out and a time to lose
 A time to keep and a time to throw out

8) A time for loving and a time for hating
 A time for warfare and a time for peace

7) A time to rip apart and a time to sew together
 A time for silence and a time to speak [out]

Even at this point, I’d like to introduce three positive lessons.

1. Things are constantly changing so we shouldn’t get bored or stuck in our ways
2. Time is always FOR something; it is never neutral. [Wright, Christopher J. H., *Hearing the Message of Ecclesiastes: Questioning Faith in a Baffling World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2023), p. 31.]
3. “The various actions named are carried out apparently at man’s volition—all but the first. The times of his birth and death are not his to decide, and this gives the clue to Qoheleth’s meaning. Just as surely as birth and death, so all other events and human actions take place when and as God deems them fitting.” [Scott, R. B. Y., *The Way of Wisdom in the Old Testament* (New York: Macmillan and Company, 1971), p. 180.]

**Reaching Conclusions (vv. 9-11)**

At this point, I would call my students attention to verses 9-10. Verse 9 repeats the question from Ecclesiastes 1:3 and, once again, expects a negative answer. There is no advantage, no edge, in what we are forced to do. But what is the difference between work as stewardship and accomplishment and work as toil or affliction? Can you identify the different tasks in your life between meaningful work and toil? Have you ever asked God to help you make your work meaningful? If not, I urge you to do so.

The 20th century theologian, Paul Tillich, preached a chapel sermon on this text and made the following observation which builds on Ecclesiastes but actually moves beyond it to a more New Testament understanding. “Everything is timed by an eternal law which is above time. We are not able to penetrate into the meaning of this timing. For *us*, it is mystery and what we see is vanity and frustration. …[Yet] God’s timing breaks into our human timing. Something new appears…” [Tillich, Paul, “The Right Time” in *The New Being* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1955), pp. 163, 165.]

“Out of these two facts—says our text—man’s *where* and man’s *what*, his nature and his position, there rises a mist of perplexity and darkness that wraps the whole course of the divine actions —unless, indeed, we have reached that central height of vision which this Book of Ecclesiastes puts forth as the conclusion…‘Fear God, and keep His commandments.’” [Maclaren,
Alexander, *Expositions of Holy Scripture Volume III* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1942), p. 336.]

For me, saying that eternity is in the human heart and that we can’t access it (at least without help) is much like admitting that, despite the fact that God is absolute Truth, the truth that humans can process will almost always be relative. Why? It’s because we can’t know all there is of God, so we can’t know all of absolute Truth. If we can’t know all of absolute Truth, we have to hold our knowledge as relative.

Nonetheless, there is a positive aspect to this. I liked the observation from the great German Old Testament scholar who wrote, “The concern of these sentences is, in the last resort, not a theoretical or a theological one, but an explicitly pastoral one. They are addressed to men who cannot see their way in the chaos of events. The teacher admits to them that it is actually impossible for men to qualify events in any fundamental way as if on an objective scale of values. One can—and this is a profound piece of wisdom—understand them only from the point of view of the respective times which God has set for them. But—and the instruction insists on this—the divine decrees are good and right in their time. [Rad, Gerhard von, *Wisdom in Israel* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1972), p. 265.]

“Human beings are endowed with the facility to step back from immediate situations and particular events that vie for their attention to catch a glimpse of the totality of existence, including their own. Such is the mark of self-consciousness. Yet they remain ignorant of any purposeful providence that underlies the totality, …Human beings, in short, are caught between self-transcendence and stifling ignorance. They are both in time and out of time.” [Brown, William P., *Ecclesiastes*, p. 43.] Naturally, we’re talking about our human selves when we are not illuminated by the Holy Spirit.

I liked Christopher J. H. Wright’s comparison of our perspective in this regard to that of a tapestry. I have adapted his points in the presentation to read:

1. We observe the wonder and beauty of God’s accomplishment from within time [“tapestry”]
2. We sense, with human intuition, the transcendent reality God has placed in our mental/spiritual DNA.
3. Our knowledge is finite and bounded.
We see the pattern, but we can’t
 see beyond our scene.
 [adapted from Wright, Christopher
 J. H. *Hearing the Message of
 Ecclesiastes: Questioning Faith in a
 Baffling World*, p. 34.]

**Going Beyond OUR Limits (vv. 12-15)**

Now, we’ve talked about the limits of what WE know. I believe verses 12-15 are talking about matters as God knows them. I’m going to quote from Robert Alter’s translation of these verses so that I don’t get bogged down in the details.

*12) I know that there is nothing good in it but to be merry and to partake of good things in his life.*

*13) And also, every man who eats and drinks and enjoys good things in all his toil—this is a gift from God.*

*14) I know whatever God does will be forever. One cannot add to it and one cannot take away from it. And God has also acted so that they fear Him.*

*15) That which was already has been, and what is to be already has been, and God seeks out the pursued.*

[Alter, Robert (trans.), *The Wisdom Books: A Translation with Commentary: Job, Proverbs, and Ecclesiastes* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2010), p. 356.]

What Alter translates as nothing good in it should still be recognizable as the “nothing is better” form that we saw in Ecclesiastes 2:24 and will see again in 3:22 and 8:15. Remember what we learned last time: Each time “nothing better” is used in Ecclesiastes, it “…is followed by a clause which makes specific reference to the God-givenness of the human situation.” [Ogden, Graham S. “Qoheleth’s Use of the ‘Nothing is Better’ Form” in *Journal of Biblical Literature* 98/3 (September, 1979), p. 341.]

In this case, surviving and enjoying life is to be considered a gift from God in verse 13. As Dr. Ogden went on to say, “Only God knows all, and despite man’s intense and prolonged efforts to come to a fuller understanding of life, such is not available to him in absolute terms. What he can do, however, is to affirm life and seek the pleasure which God provides.” (Ogden, p. 341)

But if we are to get the most out of life, we need to key in on the last phrase of verse 14. Fear of God is more than just being afraid, though there should be a healthy “fear” involved in that without God’s goodness, life and death would be horrifying. But fear also involves awe and respect, both the “Wow!” factor and that “What did I do to be part of this?” factor. We see this theme of “fearing the Lord” in both the Wisdom Books and in Deuteronomy. Here’s a quick list:

1. Proverbs 1:7, 2:5, 3:7, 8:13, 9:10, 14:26, 15:16, 19:23, 23:17, 31:30
2. Job 1:1, 8; 2:3; 28:28
3. Deuteronomy 5:29, 6:2, 10:12, 13:4, 14:23; 17:18-19

“It means not only that we should respect God’s ‘Goodness’ and take him seriously; it also includes recognizing God’s redeeming grace (in the exodus), trusting God’s providence, obeying God’s commands, and reflecting God’s character.” [Wright, Christopher J. H., *Hearing*, p. 36.] Or as another expositor noted: “What then is humanity’s role? As in Qoheleth’s previous reflections, people are not so much the shapers as the recipients of life.” [Brown, William P., *Ecclesiastes*, p. 43.]

I also think we should find the latter part of verse 15 to be encouraging. Some interpreters think that when God seeks out the “pursued” that it means God chasing down the events in history that the winds of time try to drive away [Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes*, p. 100; Longman, *Ecclesiastes*, p. 124; Peterson, Wayne H. “Ecclesiastes” in Allen, Clifton J. (ed.) *The Broadman Bible Commentary: Volume 5: Proverbs-Isaiah* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1971), p. 113; Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, pp. 163.] They see this as being consistent with the idea of the circular nature of history and nothing new under the sun.

But I am going to go out on a limb and disagree with my former professor, Dr. Peterson, and these esteemed scholars. I want to note that pursuing seems to suggest hunting something down. Some early versions of the Bible in other languages had the idea of God chasing down those very things that humans were pursuing in vain. That’s possible, but doesn’t seem likely to me. If so, it’s somewhat as William Brown states it that Qoheleth is highlighting God’s activity over against human activity, so: “Only God successfully seeks out and apprehends whatever is sought (by God or human being).” [Brown, William P. *Ecclesiastes*, p. 46.]

In this sense, one of those things sought might be justice. Qoheleth is indicating that God is in charge. I believe God is pursuing the oppressors and wrongdoers here as a lead-in to the next section which finishes this chapter and takes us into Chapter 4. “It might look as if history is just one big repetition of the same old thing. But the last line injects a fundamental element of biblical faith. The God of biblical faith is the judge of all the earth who will do what is right. …The past lies open before God, and there will be a ‘putting right.’” [Wright, Christopher J. H., *Hearing*, p. 37.]

**The Major Problem in Human History (3:16-4:3)**

On my slide for verse 16, I took several liberties. First of all, Herod’s Palace and Herod’s Temple both came well after Qoheleth would have written. Second, I used a place of secular justice and a place of religious righteousness to represent both places described in verse 16. Of course, as my late professor and many other interpreters have treated this, “righteousness” often means “justice” in Hebrew and these two places are in parallel. They may mean the same [Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes*, p. 101, Longerman, *Ecclesiastes,* pp. 126-127, Peterson, *Ecclesiastes*, p. 114, and Wright, *Hearing*, p. 39.], meaning merely the law court. I chose to treat it as the law court for secular purposes and the temple for religious purposes because the verse sounds to me as if Qoheleth observed injustice “…comparable to corruption in the court of law and depravity in the soul of society.” [Brown, William P., *Ecclesiastes*, p. 46.]

Regardless as to whether Qoheleth merely had the law court in mind or a more corrupt society overall, the solution to the injustice is to be found in verse 17: “I reasoned that God will judge the righteous and the wicked, because there is a time for everything and concerning every deed there.” [Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes*, p. 101]. Why is this necessary? It’s because the same wickedness is found throughout the legal system or in both secular and religious legal systems.

Some scholars think verse 17 is too optimistic for Qoheleth and that some later pious editor might have added it. I rather agree with this sentiment: “The suitability of God’s timing, though mysterious in nature, provides sufficient warrant for Qoheleth to express hope that judgment will ultimately befall the wicked and vindicate the righteous.” [Brown, William P. *Ecclesiastes*, p. 46.] One of the classic commentators on this passage has suggested: “The sinner’s ‘time’ of his unrighteous ‘work’ is short. God also has His ‘time’ and “work’ of judgment; and meanwhile, is overruling, for good at last, what seems to be dark.” [Fausset, A. R., “Ecclesiastes” in Jamieson, Robert (et. al., eds.) *A Critical and Experimental Commentary: Volume III: Job-Isaiah* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1967 (original, 1866)), p. 522.] So, v. 17 is the ultimate solution to the problem introduced in verse 16 and leads us into the very ironic proof where Qoheleth uses our very mortality against us.

I liked James Crenshaw’s translation of verse 18 because, where many scholars think the repeated phrase was a scribe’s mistake, Crenshaw takes the repetition as I do—as emphasis. So, he emphasizes it as “…they are really beasts.” ***18) I reasoned about humankind that God is testing them and showing them that they are really beasts.***[Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes,* p. 101.] But how are they like the beasts. My former Old Testament professor (during my Master of Divinity program) offered a helpful list of ways in which this applied.

1. We share the same fate—death (v. 19a)
2. We share the same breath— רוח (wind, spirit) (v. 19b)
3. We both decompose (v. 20)
4. Do either have a spirit (רוח) that goes on? (v. 21)
[Negative answer expected here in that we can’t PROVE, but
 Positive answer given in Ecclesiastes 12:7]

[Peterson, Wayne H. “Ecclesiastes” in Allen, Clifton J. (ed.), *The Broadman Bible Commentary: Volume 5: Ecclesiastes- Isaiah* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1971), p. 114.]

This question which Qoheleth doesn’t answer now (but does at the end of the book) leads us to consideration of what we can do NOW. That is addressed in verse 22. I translated it as follows: ***22) And I have seen that there is nothing better than humankind [lit. “the Adam”] being happy in his accomplishments BECAUSE this is his portion. Who can bring them to see how it will be after them?* [PJT]**

Since we can’t see clearly what life will be after death, Qoheleth insists that what we get to accomplish is our God-given gift (portion). This word for portion is often translated as reward (Rankin, O. S., *The Interpreter’s Bible: Volume 5: Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs, Isaiah, Jeremiah* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1956), p. 53.], but despite Qoheleth’s apparent “tunnel vision” focus, we are also reminded that it is just the reward for this life [Fausset, A. R., *Ecclesiastes*, p. 523.]

It is probably more helpful to follow Robert Alter’s idea of “share” for this [Alter, Robert, *Wisdom*, p. 357.] That is more what I meant by “portion” and Christopher Wright meant by describing it as: “our duty, our allotted function in life.” (Wright, *Hearing*, p. 49) I take comfort in this, as does Choon-Leong Seow: “The portion conveys both the sense of the limitations and the
possibilities of life.” [Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, p. 176.]

**Life Isn’t Always Good (4:1-3)**

Even after expressing the admonition that one should do what one can to fulfill one’s role in life, Qoheleth insists that (as President Jimmy Carter once said after cutting abortion funding), “Life is not fair.” In these three verses, Qoheleth addresses the issue of oppression in three ways. At this point, he is not addressing what God might do about the oppression or overtly saying what we should do about it [Alter, Robert, Wisdom, p. 358n1.]. However, while he starts out with detached observation, he is compassionately affected by the sorrows of the oppressed [Longerman, *Ecclesiastes*, p. 133, Wright, *Hearing*, p. 40.]. He states what he sees from a feeling of helplessness.

Since he repeats the idea of oppression three times in verse 1, we would do well to consider how he uses it.

1. The verse’s first use of oppression is that human evil is a reality with which we must struggle. In fact, the very wording in the Hebrew grammar suggests that this is an evil which recurs over and over.
2. Next, the second use of oppression emphasizes the plight of the victims by describing their tears and the fact that there is no one to console them. Since Qoheleth repeats the fact that there is none to console them twice in this one verse, the implication may be that the reader/hearer should be prepared to console those who are victims. Note that consolation in the Hebrew also has the idea of doing something about it, trying to fix the problem. It seems to be the lack of this problem-solver/comforter that leads to the Job-like frustration of verses 2-3.
3. The third use of the idea points the fingers in accusation at the oppressors who hold the reins of power. This disparity expresses the social polarity that exists in most societies.

[I am indebted to James Crenshaw for the original insight here—Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes*, p. 105.]

**Why Work? (4:4-12)**

I really like the way Douglas Miller tied this section about work to the section on oppression. He wrote: “Those who might help the ones ‘with no one to comfort them’ (4:1) are busy toiling in competition with others. They do not help those in need, and in regard to their own benefit, accomplish nothing either.” [Miller, Douglas B. *Symbol and Rhetoric in Ecclesiastes: The Place of Hebel in Qohelet’s Work* (Atlanta, Society of Biblical Literature, 2002), p. 116]. It seems appropriate. When we are so busy envying what those around us have or focusing on what we can accomplish to advance our ambition, we tend not to notice the hardships that others are experiencing. Just the fact that verse 4’s caustic observation about envy follows right on the heels of these verses about oppression should warn us not to get caught up in things or status. Remember that “possessions” tend to “possess” their “possessors.”

Verse 4 tells us not to allow envy (I added ambition into this because we often envy other people’s status or position, as well as their possessions) to turn work into empty striving. But working too hard for the wrong reasons isn’t the only pitfall around work. “Fools fold their hands, and ruin themselves” [Wright, *Hearing*, p. 56.] is the easy way to translate verse 5, but it literally says to eat one’s flesh. We could indulge ourselves so much and try to accomplish so little that we would end up imploding upon ourselves and consuming our resources like living off our own fat. So, verse 5 warns us not to become idle (fold our hands) and devour ourselves (the verb is often used for cannibalism as in Micah 3:3 and Isaiah 49:26 [Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes*, p. 108.] It means, of course, that idleness, laziness, and a lack of initiative is a way of “causing devastating harm to ourselves.” [Alter, *Wisdom*, p. 359.]

From the envious or ambitious workaholic of verse 4 and the Millenial or Generation Z [Oops! Boomer discrimination there!] … I mean, unambitious or lazy non-worker of verse 5, Qoheleth urges balance in verse 6. I call it a handful of tranquility versus two handfuls of drudgery or meaningless work. The literal word in the Hebrew is “rest,” but a lot of people think that rest means “doing nothing.” In reality, “rest” is the Hebrew root for Noah’s name in Genesis 6-9. Was Noah idle or inactive? No, he was active in saving the world. This verse doesn’t simply mean to take it easy, but it means to strike the best work-life balance and know the difference between meaningful and meaningless work.

Some scholars think that Qoheleth is contradicting himself with this verse because it seems so different from the previous verse [cited by Alter, *Wisdom*, p. 359n6], but others see it as the solution to the problems illuminated in verses 4 and 5. As the 19th century commentator put it, it is: “…the happy mean between ruinous indolence on the one hand (v. 5), and laborious acquisition of wealth, and with it envy, on the other (v. 4). [Fausset, *Ecclesiastes*, p. 523.] Certainly, the latter interpretation (with which I agree) is consistent with Proverbs 15:16 [HCSB: “Better a little with the fear of the LORD than great treasure with turmoil”], 16:8 [HCSB: “Better a little with righteousness than great income with injustice.”], and 17:1 [HCSB: “Better a dry crust with peace than a house full of feasting with strife.”] [cited by Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes,* p. 109, Fausset, *Ecclesiastes*, p. 523, Longman, *Ecclesiastes*, p. 138, Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, p. 188.]

Related to this theme, but not specifically resting on the same argument is Qoheleth’s condemnation of the miser-workaholic. In verses 7-8, there is a man who had no one. The early rabbis interpreted this type of solitary individual as being alone because they didn’t want to share any of their possessions (or, by extension, themselves) with anyone else [Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, p. 188]. Not only was he separate, cut off from people by his (or her) own choice, but he (or she) had no brother or son. This was important because, generally, only male relatives could inherit in a patriarchal society. So, the emphasis on no son or brother, the most logical heirs for this individual sets up the tragedy that will be spotlighted in verse 8 when the individual realizes he is gaining all this wealth with no one to give it to.

He (or she) asks the rhetorical question, “Who am I toiling (engaging in drudgery or unsatisfying work) for?” It is a rhetorical question, so the expected answer is that I’m not really working for anyone’s benefit. What a horrible realization that must have been. That’s why we read once again that this person’s entire life purpose has become a wisp, a gust of air, a breath, an emptiness, something absurd or topsy-turvy because such a life just doesn’t make sense.

So, after sharing about the futility of going it alone in destructive competition for no real gain, the teacher shares about the value of cooperation. The section beginning with verse 9 shares three examples from desert life which work on both the practical, physical level and also apply on the emotional and spiritual levels.

First, if two are traveling together and one falls, the other can pick them up. Just as in the physical world it is good to have a hiking or swimming buddy, so it is in one’s emotional life and in one’s spiritual life. I’m always saying that the Lord didn’t form the church so that we could have “Lone Ranger” or “Lone Wolf” Christians. We are intended to be part of the body of Christ. Part of the reason for that is to help picking each other up when we fall.

Second, if two are sleeping close together on a cold night, their body heat will help to warm each other [Peterson, *Ecclesiastes*, p. 115, Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, p. 189.]. There is a synergy that takes place when two are under the same cover. This would be particularly true when the two travelers/campers couldn’t build a fire for whatever reason. It is also true within our church fellowships that we sometimes warm each other emotionally and spiritually when our excitement or sense of what God is doing becomes contagious. I can remember times when I was relatively “cold” spiritually and someone “warmed” me with a testimony or just the expression on their face as they worshipped.

Third, there is a certain amount of safety in traveling with another or others. The roads in Israel (or throughout the ancient world) were not safe. Outlaws were commonplace enough that people didn’t usually travel by themselves. There was safety in numbers. As a result, this final example states that if one person is accosted, the other can fight off the bandit. Christopher Wright summarized this section with an African proverb that reminded me of my seminary colleague and neighbor: “If you want to go fast, go alone. But if you want to go far, go together.” [cited by Wright, *Hearing*, p. 59.]

Of course, if two are good, more are better. Most scholars agree that the reference to the cord bound of three cords is taken from one of the ancient Sumerian texts about Gilgamesh and Enkidu. As Enkidu is about to depart, he is told: “Stop, Enkidu. The second man will not die. The boat-in-tow will not sink. No man will cut the three-ply cord.” [cited in Longman, Ecclesiastes, p. 143, Seow, Ecclesiastes, p. 189.]

A Political Parable (4:13-16)

The “Better than” saying that begins this section seems clear, but when we try to tie down the details of the story that illustrates it, things get a little blurry. It’s better to be a poor but wise (lack personal resources but be willing to listen to others) up-and-comer than to be and old (well-established) and foolish (so proud one doesn’t listen to anyone else) ruler. Many commentators have tried to turn this into a historical reference: Jeroboam versus Rehoboam [Fausset, *Ecclesiastes*, p. 524.], or David vs. Saul, Joash vs. Amaziah, Cyrus vs. Astyges, Ptolemy Philopater vs. Antiochus Epiphanes, etc. [noted, but not accepted, by Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, p. 190.], but the simple verses here don’t allow us to specify particular persons.

It is better to see this as a parable about people rising to power. Although the youth with sense is to be preferred over the doddering authority figure, Qoheleth observes that people will lose confidence even in the new politician inevitably. So, this recurring cycle of the rise and fall of leadership will just keep continuing. [For those of us who are New Testament believers, we know that the cycle continues until God decides to break it once and for all in the coming of the Lord Jesus.] As Wright summarizes: “Political popularity can be a very fickle thing. You might as well go chasing after the wind.” [Wright, *Hearing*, p. 60.]

<https://youtu.be/UWiIo6tV20Q>